



THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE CALENDAR 2019

CENTENNIAL OF THE GREAT LABOUR REVOLT OF 1919

JANUARY

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FEBRUARY

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CENTENNIAL OF THE GREAT LABOUR REVOLT OF 1919

World War One, marked by 60,000 soldiers' deaths in a Canadian population of 7.2 million, was over. But returning soldiers and military support workers, as well as working men and women who had remained on the home front, faced bleak futures. A murderous flu epidemic killed almost as many Canadians in 1919 as died in the war and the dead were disproportionately people from working-class neighbourhoods. The federal government dramatically reduced orders from shipyards and munitions factories that boosted wartime employment. The owners had made fortunes while workers barely survived in the face of wartime inflation. The war over, neither employers nor the government accepted any obligation to create work for either wartime workers or returning soldiers and nurses. Those in work struggled to pay for rent and food because governments still ignored inflation and rejected social assistance for those unable to afford necessities.

During World War I, workers took advantage of low unemployment to fight for better wages and greater control in workplaces. The sympathy strike, an idea earlier associated with the radical Industrial Workers of the World, gained acceptance in many mainstream trade unions, usually among the members first who persuaded their leaders that it was the most effective way to fight recalcitrant employers. The idea of sympathy strikes, also called general strikes, was that all workers, regardless of vocation or place of employment, would go on strike to support workers facing an unreasonable employer. That would force other employers to pressure that employer to concede workers' demands. Many socialist workers believed that general strikes would gradually teach the working class that they could run society without an employing class. Many employers agreed that that was the message of a general strike and they were determined to use state repression to crush general strikes and punish their leaders. During 1919, as a general strike in Winnipeg spread to many places across the country, including Vancouver, Saskatoon, Edmonton, Calgary, and almost every coal mine in Alberta, the battle between employers and workers became a test of wills. While the employers, with state support, were the winners in the short-term, workers gained an appreciation of their potential power and extracted concessions from employers.



PRELUDE TO 1919

MOUNTAIN PARK MINERS ON STRIKE
HELP WITH HARVEST IN CASTOR AREA, 1927

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, CL 315

In September 1918, after the federal government announced back-to-work legislation for Calgary freight handlers, half the city's unionized workers obeyed a call for a general strike from the Trades and Labour Council. The federal government quickly made concessions to the freight handlers. In October, Edmonton's Trades and Labour Council ensured a labour settlement by endorsing a sympathy strike with members of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees. Eight months earlier, a dispute between the Edmonton firefighters and the city council over the city naming an outsider as the new fire chief caused a strike of the firefighters. The firefighters won their battle after 17 locals voted to support them in a general strike. Led by Alberta miners, the Alberta Federation of Labour convention in January, 1919, proclaimed "full accord and sympathy with the aims and purposes of the Russian and German revolutions."

JANUARY 2019

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New Year's Day

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A REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT EMERGES

CONSTRUCTION CREW AT FABYAN RAILWAY STATION (NEAR WAINWRIGHT) IN THE 1920S

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 17622

By the time World War I ended, workers in European countries that participated in the slaughter increasingly viewed the war as having been no more than a battle among rival capitalists for control over Asia and Africa. The Russian Revolution encouraged workers' and peasants' revolts across the world, placing both capitalism and colonialism under threat. Established elites, in turn, responded by using force against revolutionary and reformist organizations alike. In Italy, the capitalists and aristocrats sponsored a bloody fascist dictatorship to end democracy as workers used the ballot box and trade union struggles to fight oppression. Canadian workers became part of an international movement against the unfairness of the capitalist economic system. A state crackdown on labour and political radicals in 1917 and 1918 contributed to worker militancy already evident thanks to wartime inflation which governments refused to end through legislation to punish profiteers.

FEBRUARY 2019

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Valentine's Day

Family Day



THE ONE BIG UNION ENDORSED

Wartime successes of the sympathy strike tactic promoted the idea of replacing a fragmented and largely craft-based trade union movement with "one big union." If all workers belonged to the same union, it was argued, every strike would become a general strike. The unity of the working class would cause the capitalist system to collapse. The Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, the major federation of trade unions, denounced the one big union concept which would destroy their organizations and remove employment from existing trade union leaders. But in western Canada, many rank-and-file unionists embraced the concept. The Western Labour Conference in March 1919 called for creation of One Big Union and proclaimed "its full acceptance of this principle of 'Proletarian Dictatorship' as being absolute and efficient for the transformation of capitalist private property to public or communal wealth."

MISS FAGAN, SCHOOL TEACHER
IN CASTOR, ALBERTA, CA. 1920

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 13379

MARCH 2019

SUN

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					International Women's Day	
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St Patrick's Day						
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SIDES ARE TAKEN ON THE OBU

CONSTRUCTION OF OIL WELL BY
PETROLEUM WORKERS IN FORT MCMURRAY
AREA IN THE EARLY 1920S

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 2354

The OBU resolution at the Western Labour Conference created friction within the Alberta labour movement. Miners endorsed the OBU by 95 percent in plebiscites among 6500 unionized Alberta miners. But the votes of non-miners were almost evenly split, with 1633 voting to join the OBU and 1611 to remain in their existing unions. The Edmonton Labour Council expelled pro-OBU locals and its newspaper, the Edmonton Free Press, condemned all radicalism. While the opponents of radicalism emphasized working for legislative changes by forming labour parties, OBU supporters scoffed at reliance on legislatures where farm voters dominated and were largely hostile to labour's goals. Employer intransigence during a period when both unemployment and prices were rising inspired underdogs across the globe, and kept the OBU idea alive in Canada.

APRIL 2019

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Good Friday

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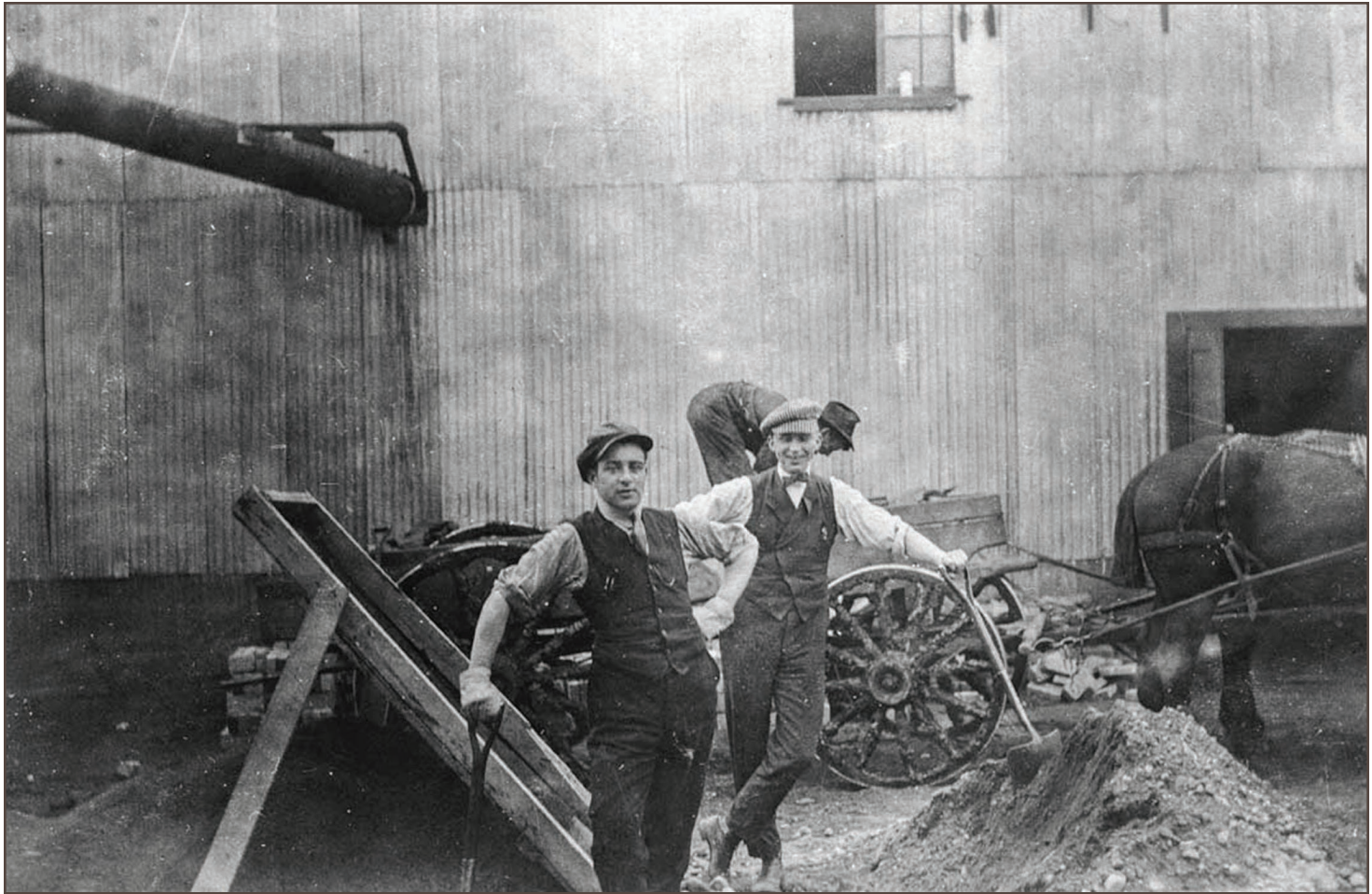
Easter Sunday

Easter Monday

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GENERAL STRIKES SPREAD ACROSS CANADA

SCABS DO MANUAL LABOUR,
DURING NORDEGG MINE STRIKE

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 10199

Winnipeg metal workers and construction workers alike demanded sectoral bargaining with employers who flatly refused. 35,000 Winnipeg workers, only a third of them unionized, responded on May 15 to a call from the metal and construction workers for a general sympathetic strike. Soon, workers across Canada struck in solidarity with Winnipeg workers, convinced that a victory for Winnipeg workers would produce victories nationally. In Edmonton and Calgary, strikes lasted from May 26 to June 15 with 2,000 Edmonton workers and 1,500 Calgary workers on strike in cities with populations of 66,000 and 75,000 respectively. Lethbridge and Medicine Hat unionists voted to strike but union leaders proved unwilling to act. All miners in the vast District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America, which included all Alberta coal miners, struck in sympathy with striking District 18 miners on the BC side of the Crow's Nest Pass who had been denied enough work hours to subsist. UMWA opposition strengthened miner determination to join the OBU.

MAY 2019

SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT

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Mother's Day						
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	Victoria Day					
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VIOLENCE IS USED TO BREAK THE WINNIPEG STRIKE

ALBERTA FOUNDRY AND MACHINE,
MEDICINE HAT, JUNE 5, 1919

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 10585

While the urban strikes in Alberta demonstrated considerable worker solidarity, they did not extend to non-union workers. Edmonton's civic workers returned to work early in June after the city threatened to fire all of them. By contrast, in Winnipeg, city workers, buoyed by support from a united working class, defied threats from the city. Even essential services in that city could be performed only after the Strike Committee provided written authorization. That caused strike opponents to claim that the city had been "Bolshevized." The federal and provincial authorities, encouraged by Winnipeg elites, increasingly militarized their opposition to the strikes. On June 17 they arrested the major strike leaders and on June 21 (Bloody Saturday) they violently broke up a pro-strike rally, murdering two strikers. The Strike Committee called off the strike on June 26. The general strikes in Edmonton and Calgary ended one day earlier.

JUNE 2019

SUN MON TUE WED THU FRI SAT

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Father's Day					National Indigenous Peoples Day	
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THE MEN IN JAIL

Throughout Canada unionists rallied to demand unsuccessfully that charges against individuals arrested for “sedition” during the Winnipeg Strike be dropped. “Sedition” turned calls for radical change into a crime. Those charged included Alderman John Queen, business agent for the Western Labor News, whose conviction would help make him mayor of Winnipeg; machinist and OBU organizer R. B. Russell, also convicted, for whom a Winnipeg vocational high school was named in 1966; and A.A. Heaps, found not guilty and later a long-time Winnipeg North MP. J.S. Woodsworth had already been released when it was established that his “seditious” quotations in the Western Labor News came from the Bible. He became Labour MP for Winnipeg North Centre in 1921 and first leader of the Co-Operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1932. That party was the predecessor of today’s New Democratic Party.

EMMA WOLF, TELEPHONE OPERATOR,
ON THE SWITCHBOARD AT THE MILLET
TELEPHONE OFFICE, JULY, 1919

JULY 2019

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Canada Day

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THE MINERS' CONTINUED FIGHT

MEN WORKING ON THE RAILWAY,
DATE AND PLACE UNKNOWN

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 10966

Alberta miners maintained their strike almost to the end of August, raising issues of pay and safety while insisting that they wanted to be represented by the OBU. The companies hired thugs to beat up miners, receiving aid from the newly formed Alberta Provincial Police. They tried to weaken radicalism among the miners by offering wage concessions while insisting that they would never negotiate with the OBU. The federal government intervened on the side of the mineowners and passed an order-in-council which rejected the workers' right to choose their own union. They ordered the workers to stay in the UMWA. The miners held out until they felt starved into submission. But miners' radicalism, already well-established before 1919, would rise again many times both within and without the UMWA.

AUGUST 2019

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WOMEN STRIKE LEADERS

MS. LUND, A NURSE - FROM THE BURGESS
PHOTO SHOP, EDMONTON, 1920

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 3192

Strike leaders were mostly male and of British or Northern European origin. But many women and people of diverse origins loomed large among rank and file strikers. In Edmonton, the telephone operators, who were mainly women, joined the strike though the equally female clothing workers of GWG declined to participate. Calgary laundry worker organizer Jean McWilliams played a key role in the Calgary strike. In Winnipeg, Helen Armstrong, president of the Women's Labour League, and seamstress Kitty Harris, an Industrial Workers of the World activist who became a leading figure in the OBU, played prominent roles. Several ethnic workers were arrested in the Winnipeg Strike. They included Sam Blumenberg, who was deported, and M. Charitonoff, who was ordered deported but later allowed to remain in Canada. Both men killed on Bloody Saturday, Mike Sokolowski and Steve Schezerbanowes, were non-Anglo-Saxons.

SEPTEMBER 2019

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Labour Day

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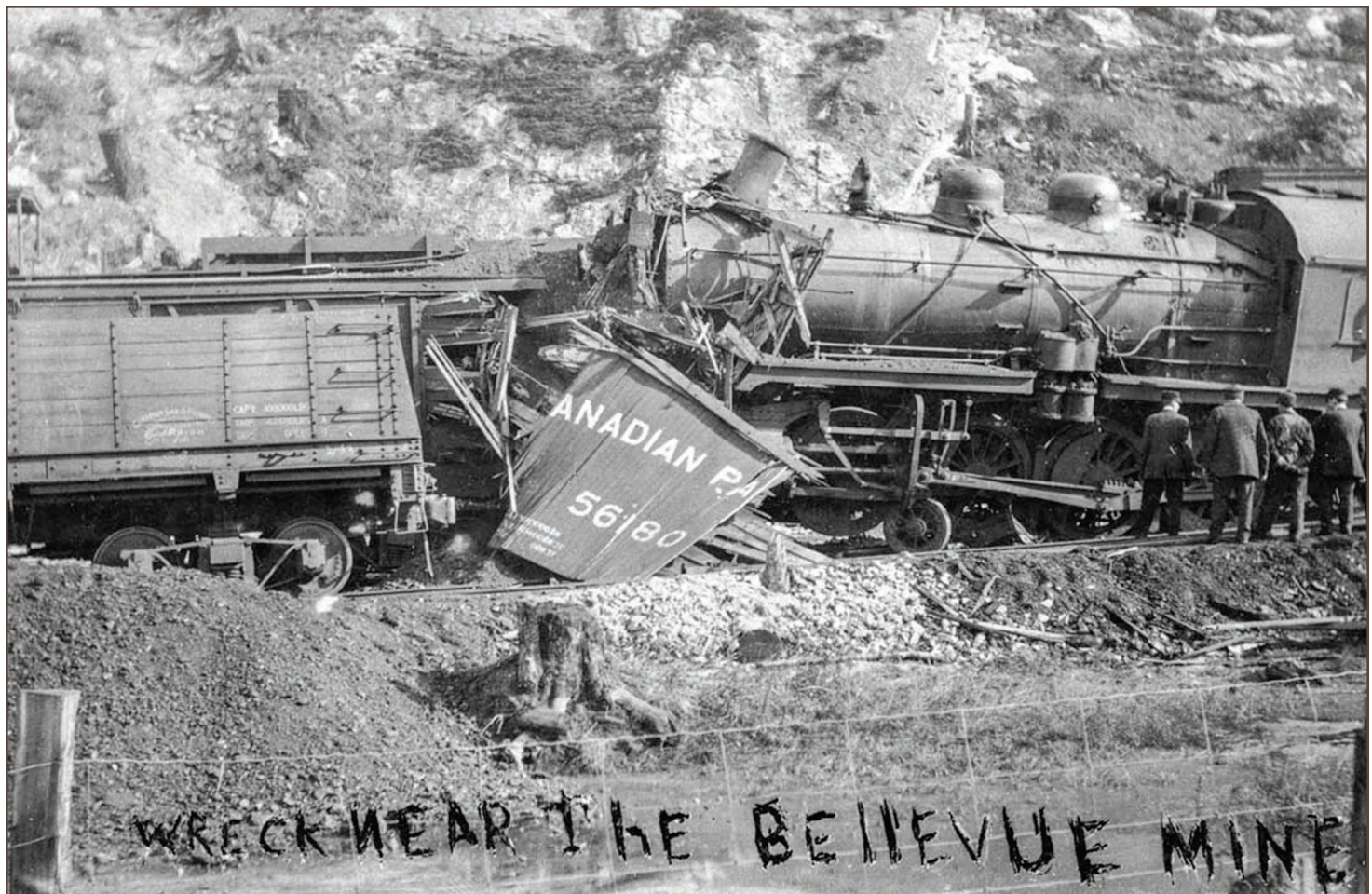
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WORKERS' POWER & GENERAL STRIKES

VIEW OF A CPR TRAIN CRASH THAT OCCURRED
NEAR THE BELLEVUE MINES, 1920

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 2036

Strike committees underplayed the revolutionary possibilities of general strikes, claiming they were simply a way to force employers to accept collective bargaining. On June 2, 1919, the Calgary Strike Committee's Calgary Strike Bulletin commented: "The system for which we stand...seeks no unjust advantage over the employer... Whenever an employer gets an opportunity to shelve the principle of collective bargaining he does his best. Not because it is against him, but because it robs him of an instrument from which he can use against fair play. The workers recognize that it is within their power to wrench this weapon from him by means of a sympathetic strike. They recognize that a sympathetic strike does call for inconvenience to innocent persons, and we can assure the Citizens' Committee (employers' organization) that we are prepared to do our utmost to remedy any inconvenience or suffering that is necessary."

OCTOBER 2019

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13	14 Thanksgiving Day	15	16	17	18	19
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27	28	29	30	31 Halloween		



WHO WERE THE GUILTY?

GROUP PHOTO OF PICNIC FOR
GWG EMPLOYEES, 1928

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 16146

Both a federal commission on labour unrest, which reported in June, 1919, and a Manitoba royal commission on the causes of the Winnipeg general strike which reported in November, 1919 (though the report was not made public till March 1920) dismissed notions of a revolutionary conspiracy and confirmed that workers had ample reasons for demanding structural changes. The federal commission emphasized unemployment, unstable employment, the high cost of living, government and employers' failure to allow collective bargaining, a lack of decent housing, the government's clampdown on free speech and a free press, and lack of educational opportunities for working people.

But the trials in Winnipeg proceeded nonetheless, with seven men eventually imprisoned for "sedition." Those who had precipitated the strike through their oppression of workers faced no charges.

NOVEMBER 2019

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10	11 Remembrance Day	12	13	14	15	16
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AFTERMATH OF THE STRIKES

ALBERTA FEDERATION OF
LABOUR CONVENTION, 1920

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 3756

In civic elections in early December, 1919, the mayor and six of nine councillors elected in Edmonton and three of four school trustees were Labour-endorsed. But only three Labour candidates were successful in Calgary. The post-war unemployment crisis had worsened and over four years of recession had begun. The recession increased the power of employers to discipline workers and during the 1920s union numbers fell in the face of employer demands that workers sign employment contracts agreeing to never join a union, which courts regarded as legal contracts. Collective bargaining contracts, by contrast, lacked legal recognition for some time to come.

The struggles of 1919, while they produced few short-term victories for workers, provided a demonstration of worker solidarity that promoted the long-term development of trade unions and socialist political parties.

DECEMBER 2019

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Christmas Eve

Christmas Day

Boxing Day

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New Year's Eve

THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE CALENDAR 2019

CENTENNIAL OF THE GREAT LABOUR REVOLT OF 1919



The Alberta Labour History Institute would like to recognize our partners who help us make this calendar possible:

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Nugent Law Office

McManus & Hubler, Lawyers

Brenda Kuzio, Lawyer

Seveny Scott, Lawyers

SETTLERS STANDING IN FRONT OF THEIR HOME IN DALUM, ALBERTA, 1918
ALBERTA PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES, A 10731

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