



Margaret Crang

**The Life of Labour's Leading Woman
Activist in Depression Alberta**

By Jocelyn Brown



Designed by Irina Edwards

COVER IMAGE: MARGARET CRANG AS A YOUNG WOMAN IN FRONT OF HER FAMILY HOME IN THE GARNEAU NEIGHBOURHOOD OF EDMONTON. THIS IMAGE WAS KINDLY PROVIDED BY ROBERT ALLIN OF BANFF, ALBERTA, NEPHEW OF MARGARET CRANG.

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**Labour
activist,
championing
the rights of
working people**

Margaret Crang

Every Albertan should know about Margaret Crang (30 August 1910 – 3 January 1991). Crang made her name during the Depression as a labour activist, championing the rights of working people who were under attack. Fiercely anti-fascist, she travelled to Spain to support the Republican cause, and worked in international peace and labour organizations. She drew the attention of the RCMP as a subversive activist, but stayed focused on unifying Alberta's Left. She was Edmonton's most radical councillor during the Depression and one of Canada's few women lawyers. She believed in revolutionary change and from 1933 to 1945 worked with an urgent sense of duty to achieve it. And she did all this by age 35.

Crang persevered through continually shifting alliances and division in Alberta's labour movement and the Left as a whole. Given her tenuous role in this ever-shifting political landscape, she can as easily be overlooked today as she was in her own time. Her insistence on having a voice was itself remarkable: for every moment a political woman spoke, she had to listen for hours, and her words were often ignored or undermined.

Early Life

Like other women leaders of the time, Crang had to balance her fierce intelligence and drive with the propriety expected of a woman.

These conflicting forces were present in her own home, where she clashed with her class-conscious mother, also named Margaret, and identified with her socialist father Frank Crang, a popular physician and school board trustee. The fourth of six children, Crang lived at home with her two sisters and parents in a Victorian mansion where her father regularly hosted political guests and gatherings. While growing up, she was influenced by anti-capitalist advocates from varying perspectives: socialist atheism, Christian anti-capitalism, and communist radicalism. As a young woman, she shared their commitment to social regeneration through grass roots work; throughout the thirties, she travelled tirelessly to small communities. Although relations with her mother and sister Jane were often hostile, Crang remained at home until leaving Edmonton in the mid-forties. Her fluctuating income discouraged living alone.



Depression Years in Alberta

By 1933, when Crang joined Edmonton City Council, hundreds of Edmontonians had lost their homes, overcrowding was a primary health hazard, and typhoid fever raged among homeless men living in the Grierson Dump below the Macdonald Hotel. Women without means were crowded into Bethany House or Rosary Hall, charity-run, supervised institutions. That year, 13 to 15 per cent of Edmonton's 79,200 residents were on relief and 20 to 25 per cent of the working population was unemployed.

By 1933, many Edmontonians felt betrayed as well as hungry. On December 20, 1932, their mayor and premier had ordered RCMP and local police to attack thousands of Alberta workers, farmers, and farm labourers gathered for a Hunger March. Marchers had planned to walk nine blocks to the Legislature to demand that both provincial and civic governments honour their relief responsibilities. However, Labour Mayor Dan Knott, pressured by United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) Premier J.E. Brownlee, refused to give organizers a parade license, though he had granted the Ku Klux Klan permission to demonstrate a few months previously. When the march's organizing committee carried on with preparations, local police and provincial authorities planned for violent confrontation.

EDMONTON'S HUNGER MARCH IN 1932 ATTRACTED AS MANY AS 12,000 PROTESTERS IN A CITY OF FEWER THAN 80,000 RESIDENTS. PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, A 9217.

As marchers gathered in Market Square, police and mounted RCMP lined the perimeter, leaving only the south end of the square open. When marchers began forming into parade, the RCMP cut in from one side, swinging batons from horseback, while police attacked from the back and other side. Two hours of chaos and bloodshed followed, and forty marchers were arrested, with several jailed for months. Amid dozens of Alberta strikes that decade, the Hunger March stands out for its sanctioned violence.

After the march, the UFA was irredeemably split between the anti-worker UFA government and the increasingly left-wing UFA organization, which endorsed the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a democratic socialist party formed in 1932 that is the predecessor of today's New Democratic Party. The Canadian Labor Party (CLP), in the form of Mayor Knott, alienated the unemployed by aiding government suppression of the march. Although Communists declared both the CLP and UFA leadership enemies of the people, they still accepted Crang as an ally in the unemployment movement.

There is no evidence that Crang joined the Hunger March and she only rarely joined marches or pickets. Her activism was rhetorical rather than direct, in keeping with the requirements of her “womanly” public image. She believed in direct action, and said that hunger and poverty would be solved by people taking collective action in their own interest, not by “long theoretical discussions.”¹



¹Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, File 494, “Radio Talk No 2” 3.

Women, Work, and the Depression

Idealized gender roles during the Depression clashed with economic reality. The ideal woman embraced the “noble profession” of motherhood and raised robust citizens for the Empire. Nevertheless, as one mother observed, it was hard to starve and freeze for honour and glory.

Infant mortality rates increased, and authorities often blamed childhood illness and malnourishment on poor mothering. Working mothers had virtually no public childcare. Childcare was treated then as now as a social intervention rather than a labour or human rights issue. By 1931, marriage rates had declined by 25 per cent and most single women supported themselves or contributed to their family’s income.² Over a third of employed females worked for poverty wages in domestic and personal service jobs.³ Women of colour and Indigenous women were especially vulnerable to exploitation. Yet, addressing a crowd of 2,000 in Edmonton in October 1933, bachelor tycoon Prime Minister R.B. Bennett claimed that pride, not poverty, hampered young women. After chastising a young woman who wanted to enter politics, he asked the audience,

“How many girls do you know who are willing to do housework?”⁴



CONSERVATIVE PRIME MINISTER R.B. BENNETT WAS ELECTED IN 1930 ON A PROMISE TO USE HIGH TARIFFS TO PROTECT CANADIAN JOBS AND FORCE OTHER COUNTRIES TO OPEN THEIR MARKETS TO CANADA IF THEY WANTED CANADA TO PURCHASE THEIR PRODUCTS. IN PRACTICE, INTERNATIONAL TRADE REMAINED WEAK, AND BENNETT DID LITTLE TO CREATE DIRECT EMPLOYMENT IN CANADA, WHILE USING POLICE REPRESSION TO DEAL WITH THOSE WHO DEMANDED THAT HE SUPPORT GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS TO CREATE JOBS AND PROVIDE INCOME TO THOSE WHO REMAINED JOBLESS.

²Heidi Macdonald, “Singleness and Choice: The Impact of Age, Time, and Class on Three Female Youth Diarists in 1930s Canada,”

In Catherine Carstairs, Nancy Janovick, eds., *Feminist History in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2014), 130. Raelene Frances, Linda Kealey, Joan Sangster, “Women and Wage Labour in Australia and Canada, 1880–1980,” *Labour History* 71 (Nov. 1996), 56.

³Joan Schiebelbein, “Women, Labour, and the Labour Movement” in Alvin Finkel, ed., *Working People in Alberta* (Edmonton: AU Press 2012), 246.

⁴*Edmonton Journal*, 19 October 1933, 9.

The labour movement and the Left embraced the breadwinner model of employed husband and mothering wife. The concerns of women workers—a living wage, child care, harassment, birth control information and access, domestic violence—were minimized in Communist Party policy and ignored by the labour movement. Even the Communist Women’s Labour Leagues, which fought for women workers’ rights on several fronts, downplayed women’s oppression as subordinate, not integral, to class oppression.

Homemakers fought oppression as much as wage earners; as one woman put it: “What can the women do at home, anyway, when there is nothing to cook, no food to serve; their place is on the picket line.”⁵

However, women labour activists could only speak as equals if they ignored the reality of women’s lives. Strategically, Crang could not use her public speaking skills to champion women’s equal rights in the workplace. Certainly, she supported fair pay for working women, but she ignored gender differences in her calls for revolutionary social change.



THIS FAMILY OF FIVE TYPIFIED DEPRESSION POVERTY.

⁵Mary E. Triece, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women during the Depression*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.

The 1933 City Council Election



*if a woman could be given influence,
so much more discretion could be
used in attending to the wants
of those in dire need.*

Many women activists legitimized themselves through maternalist language, and Crang did so in her campaigns. In 1933, she said: “if a woman could be given influence, so much more discretion could be used in attending to the wants of those in dire need.”⁶ In this case, she was also being timely. That fall, several labour and unemployed groups had registered complaints about the Special Relief Department, created for Depression relief as an adjunct to the permanent Civic Relief Department. After an investigation, city councillors acknowledged the need for a woman’s influence in the department.

The night before voting day in 1933, election intensity was white hot according to the *Edmonton Journal*. About 1,000 voters crammed Memorial Hall to hear and heckle candidates. Aside from relief matters, the Hunger March was on voters’ minds, and someone yelled, “Will you treat the unions the way the Labour party treated them last December 20th?”⁷ Crang was uninterrupted as she called for public ownership of utilities, but throughout her campaign, she had enjoyed the back and forth of hecklers. Though just 23, she was an experienced and confident public speaker.

⁶*Edmonton Journal*, 7 November 1933, 8.

⁷*Edmonton Journal*, 8 November 1933, 7.

Crang on City Council

Crang's convincing victory on November 8, 1933 was reported widely across Canada and the U.S. At 23, she was the youngest city councillor in the country and one of very few women in civic office. The "girl alderman" also had a teaching certificate and a law degree. She joined a seasoned but divided city council. The mayor's vote could have delivered a workers' agenda in a council otherwise evenly split between business and labour interests. But the labour side was divided, the mayor having proved himself opposed to workers' rights despite having been elected on the Labour ticket.

At her second council meeting, Crang asked when the Relief Department would hire female staff and became part of the hiring committee that appointed her friend as one of two female staff. With two other councillors, she then joined, and eventually chaired, the Special Relief Committee, hearing endless appeals from citizens whose requests for a winter coat or shoes or extra food allowance during pregnancy had been denied. Crang battled the Relief Department manager, Harold McKee, during her two council terms, attempting repeatedly to get him fired.

In general, her efforts to make relief operations more humane were frustrated, especially when race was a factor. In January 1934, a Chinese man hanged himself in a police cell after being jailed for stealing a bar of soap from the Relief Department. Crang's demand for a full report was ignored and her motion that "we request our Relief Department and Police Officials to deal leniently with petty theft cases on relief" was withdrawn.⁸ Crang's apparent lack of racism was unusual; even her father expressed anti-Metis views. Immigrants could be deported for applying for relief, and from 1930-1934, over 2,500 immigrants were deported from Alberta.⁹

⁸City of Edmonton Archives, RG8.14, File 323, 22 January 1934, 79-80, and F326, 12 March 1934, 126.

⁹Howard Palmer, *Patterns of Prejudice: A History of Nativism in Alberta* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart), 247.

Two relief issues proved particularly divisive for council in 1933–34: food vouchers and the work program. In both cases, dignity and income were bound together. Relief recipients in 1932 had briefly received cash for part of their food allowance, but provincial and federal governments made the city stop this practice.¹⁰ The full voucher system dictated recipients' food purchases and stigmatized them at the till. Several groups lobbied council to reinstate the partial cash system and increase the food allowance.

The second issue, the relief work program for married men, led to a strike. While the Unemployed Married Men's Association (UMMA) agreed with public sentiment that able married men should work for relief benefits, it believed that when they worked, they should receive direct wages and fair treatment. This hadn't happened after the federally funded infrastructure program was cut in 1932 and the city took over the work program. Instead of paving roads or building bridges for wages, men on relief were mucking out stables or moving garbage at the dump without pay. By spring 1934, the UMMA was fed up with council's indifference, and on May 15, 700 unemployed married men marched through downtown, on strike from relief work. In days to come, their wives occupied downtown coffee shops over the lunch hour, hoping to make owners appeal to council. Crang went against the grain to support the strikers' right to protest. She moved that council increase food allowances by 25 per cent for families and from \$1.50 to \$2.00 a week for single women. Heatedly debated by an evenly split council, the motion eventually carried.¹¹

As a councillor, Crang supported several unions and other groups that regularly appealed to council to improve the relief system, the most influential being UMMA, the UMMA women's auxiliary, and the Ex-Servicemen's Association of Edmonton. The risks of criticizing the Relief Department included public shaming and loss of benefits. People were also cut from relief for participating in strikes or demonstrations, and since these were usually organized with Communist support, the unemployed could be branded as Reds and harassed by the police.

¹⁰Eric Strikwerda, *The Wages of Relief: Cities and the Unemployed in Prairie Canada 1929–1939* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013), 80.

¹¹City of Edmonton Archives, RG-8.14, Box 7, File 328, 22 May 1934, 187–189.

Lawyer and Political Activist

By late 1934, Crang was admitted to the Bar, and, when she was not hired by her preferred firm, started her own practice in a downtown office shared with another lawyer. Her first legal work was seeking payment from her father's debtors for medical care, offering, in some cases, to take grain and livestock in lieu of cash. In many of her other cases, she represented injured workers and others in dire circumstances, often working *pro bono*.

Aside from her law practice and city council work, Crang was busy on the political front. After the federal government jailed Communist leaders in 1931, she joined others in demanding repeal of Section 98 of the Criminal Code, whose broad definition of "sedition" was used to imprison Communists. Tim Buck, the Communist Party of Canada leader, came to Edmonton in mid-April 1934 to promote a Communist Party-led united front.¹² Crang and her father attended the banquet for Buck a few days later, the Russian Workers' Club Choir singing "The Internationale" as he arrived.

In late 1934, Crang shared the complexity of her political life — and Alberta's — in her letter to a friend from law school days:

My life is so terribly serious now that I act like a woman of 30 [Crang was 24] and feel I am being terribly frivolous if I even go to the odd show. . . .

I spoke to the First Church of Christ Missionary Group the other day. All the women thought I was lovely and called me "dear," I told them the horrors of war, and the beauty of peace. . . . Sometimes I have to grit my dear teeth to keep from yawning, but I figure it is all for the good of the cause.

The last two weeks I have been doing some strenuous speaking in the country for the U.F.A. I wish you were here to drive me around. . . . In the last two weeks, I have spoken at Clearwater, Angus Ridge, Kingman, Bittern Lake and Millet.¹³

¹²Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 5, File 193.

¹³Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, File 494, Letter to Eric, December 15, 1934.

Crang was working against a rising tide of voter disillusionment. She had attended the CCF founding convention in Calgary in July 1932 and believed in its potential to renew Alberta. For the Alberta public, though, the CCF was an unappealing union of the UFA organization and the Canadian Labour Party's Alberta section. The entire UFA had been stained by the government's conservatism, and the CLP was marked by infighting and apathy to the suffering of the unemployed. On behalf of the CCF, Crang gave a decidedly non-festive radio talk on Christmas Day, 1934:

The crumbling social set-up under which we suffer . . . will make the struggle for existence even harder. *Capitalism is like that*. The age-old chant of "good will toward men and peace on earth" is drowned by the noise of marching feet of drilling armies, and the din of armament factories". . .¹⁴



THE FACE OF RURAL POVERTY IN ALBERTA IN THE 1930S.

¹⁴Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, File 503, undated speech, 2.

1935

Civic Election

On the civic front, cracks within labour deepened. During the city's 1935 election campaign, charismatic mayoral candidate Joe Clarke promised to fire the manager of the clothing section of the Relief Department, a labour organizer accused of corruption by another labour group. Voters were fed up with the rising costs, on the one hand, and inadequacy on the other hand, of relief. They elected new councillors with strong business leanings.

Crang worked well with Clarke, the new mayor, and he appointed her Deputy Mayor at various times during 1935. In this role, she defused a volatile situation in late January when 50 men from a nearby relief camp walked to an Edmonton soup kitchen and demanded food. Police arrived, tensions rose, and the next day, Crang ordered that the men be fed.¹⁵ By spring unrest among the city's unemployed was rising again. But public sympathies focused on the plight of waitresses. Working for an average wage of \$4.50 a week for up to 12-hour days, over 150 waitresses from 36 restaurants went on strike. They demanded enforcement of the provincial minimum wage of \$9.50 for a 40-hour week.¹⁶ A week earlier, hundreds of men on relief had struck for increased benefits, and they joined the waitresses' picket line. The collaboration helped the women: a Restaurant Workers' Union formed and 34 of 36 restaurants agreed to respect the law. Five waitresses lost their jobs, and Crang successfully advocated for them on council to receive the relief allowance for single women (\$2 a week in room and board).

The men's strike lasted much longer, and strikers faced negative press, police aggression, arrests, and imprisonment. Although she was Deputy Mayor for the first part of the strike, Crang could not stop council from cutting strikers off relief. Food vouchers continued to be distributed to strikers' families and the strike ended with minimal increases to food allowances. Strikers remained deeply dissatisfied with city council.

¹⁵ *Edmonton Journal*, 30 January 1935.

¹⁶ Jim Selby, *A Long Uphill Grind* (Edmonton: Alberta Federation of Labour and Alberta Labour History Institute, 2012), 10.



Provincially, divisions within and among leftist organizations, especially the CCF, had created plenty of space for Social Credit (Socred). With his bombastic authority, grassroots support, and promise of a \$25 monthly dividend to every adult, popular radio preacher and Socred leader “Bible Bill” — William Aberhart — swept into power on August 22, 1935. The UFA and Labour lost all their seats and the CCF, according to founding member William Irvine, was defeated before it had started. In a radio talk, Crang attributed the Socred sweep to a lack of unity on the Left and among trade unions. She rejected Irvine’s despair, writing enthusiastically about starting CCF clubs designed to grow the party federally and provincially. Although she supported some of his policies, Crang declined William Aberhart’s invitation to run as a Social Credit candidate in the October, 1935 federal election, working instead for CCF candidate Mary Crawford.

City council’s steady rightward turn continued in the 1935 election when Crang was the only labour councillor to win a seat. Outside council, she worked with fellow activists from the Communist Party and the CCF to form a united front inspired by the French Popular Front. In a letter (December 28, 1935) inviting another activist to join the “United Front of all the existing workers’ and farmers’ economic and political organizations,” Crang argued that France’s coalition had stopped fascism from gaining control in France. She hoped the document she and others were preparing would “act as a sort of bombshell.”

Local Division and International Community

The bombshell fizzled. For a provincial by-election in 1936, Crang planned to run for the new United Front, supported by the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), Edmonton Social Credit, unions, and other groups. Crang hoped to also gain the CCF nomination. Instead the CCF nominated teacher Harry Ainlay in a close race. Crang ran as an Independent. Condemned alternatively as a Communist sympathizer and Socred, Crang was expelled from the CCF. Predictably, in the election, Crang and Ainlay split the progressive vote and a Liberal won.

Disappointing though that loss must have been, Crang still had plenty to do. She was western representative of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism (CLAWF), whose focus by 1936 had become the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. Crang was their delegate at the Brussels Peace Congress, and she travelled to Europe with Tommy Douglas and others on their way to the concurrent International Youth Conference in Geneva.

Among 5,000 international activists dedicated to peace, Crang made significant connections in Brussels, including a friendship with Dr. Heng Chih Tao, a Chinese educational reformer with whom she would travel in Canada (and who wrote her poetry). Immediately after Brussels, she travelled with other Canadians to Spain, guided by a Spanish delegation who wanted North American activists to witness the war for themselves. There, she fired a shot in symbolic support of Republican women fighters. Later she would call this act “a terrible blunder.” Decorum, not politics, was the issue: she was widely criticized for being “unwomanly.”

Deeply influenced by her trip to Spain, Crang played a significant role in Canadian support for Spain's Republican cause. She organized and raised funds, wrote lengthy pieces for major newspapers across the country, and spoke to crowds in Toronto and Edmonton with A.A. MacLeod, a Communist organizer who would be elected in 1943 to the Ontario legislature. When a Spanish delegation travelled across Canada, supported by the CLAWF, Crang left Edmonton for Winnipeg on a moment's notice. Winnipeg's mayor John Queen as well as CCF leader J.S. Woodsworth wanted nothing to do with the Communist-organized League but Crang convinced them to welcome the Spanish emissaries and organized a reception attended by 2000.¹⁷ She returned to Edmonton to organize a similar reception before speaking throughout Edmonton schools and touring BC and Alberta to promote Spain's Republican government.

In a letter to her friend, Communist Youth League organizer Roy Davis (12 November 1936), she revealed the pace and complexity of her work life: her legal tasks, extensive correspondence, meetings all over the province and country, and, especially, her responsibility to advocate for Spain. In his reply, Davis thanked her for the \$25 she sent him and suggested that she subordinate her personal life to public duty. Socialist intellectual Scott Nearing (16 November 1936) cautioned her to change her "hectic" pace. Working flat out throughout 1936, she travelled to the south of the province on December 19th and gave four speeches—in Calgary, Canmore, Bellevue, and Lethbridge—before Christmas.

¹⁷Andrée Lévesque, *Red Travellers: Jeanne Corbin & Her Comrades* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 115.

Working More and More

Now the sole Edmonton labour councillor, Crang intensified her work on all fronts in 1937: at her law practice, on city council, organizing and travelling on behalf of the Canadian Youth Congress (CYC) and the CLAWF. She tried to get salaries restored for civic employees who had taken pay cuts since 1931; in June, council increased salaries 2–3 cents an hour for those making under \$100, but rejected Crang's motion to include stenographers and telephone operators. Crang also asked unsuccessfully for increased allowances for Chinese-Canadians on relief and requested a report on their living conditions.¹⁸

In spring 1937, city council largely ignored strikes of packinghouse and laundry workers. Early in the strikes Crang had encouraged strikers at a mass meeting of 1,000 people in Market Square. Weeks later, she continued to praise them and condemn police antagonism. When the strikes ended, strikers were cut from relief and Mayor Clarke reported that their children had been deprived of the necessities of life. Crang urged council to reinstate some of the families on relief. Instead, council filed the report and approved the next motion: to grant \$1,000 to the Coronation Committee for decorations for the coronation of King George VI in May. An approved amendment made extra funds available if needed.

Discouraged by council's indifference to children's welfare, Crang shifted focus to youth issues. In Montreal that May, she greeted delegates at the second CYC. The 735 delegates, representing trade unions, churches, political parties, YMCAs, and hundreds of other organizations and groups, planned to create a united front to lobby the federal government. The Congress achieved this unity through concessions to the Quebec delegation, agreeing to affirm Christianity, condemn subversion, and cheering as the Trotskyites, communists who had broken with the Soviet sympathizers in the Communist Party, left in disgust. Given her commitment to a unified Left, Crang likely agreed with Roy Davis that such concessions were necessary. Davis and Crang linked the anti-war work of the CYC with that of CLAWF; Crang connected the CYC to Alberta and made sure that Alberta youth benefitted from the forthcoming federal million-dollar grant for "youth rehabilitation."

¹⁸City of Edmonton Archives, RG17, File 369.



Once home, Crang urged city council to establish a Civic Youth Council, and then became its chair; she also joined the Youth Training Projects Provincial Advisory Committee. At its inaugural meeting in October 1937, there was little advising to be done, the Education Minister having already allocated funds to five employment programs. During the 20-person committee's long discussion about advertising these programs, Crang pointed out that, ideally, the programs would be attractive enough for youth themselves to promote them. She suggested a public relations committee, became its chair, and was soon on the radio promoting a training project for unemployed young women to become housekeepers. Her typed script describes how pretty the women looked in their uniforms; at the bottom of the page Crang had scribbled "fair and reasonable pay."¹⁹

In June, Mayor Clarke moved that immediate action be taken to remove Metis people living on vacant land in the Jasper Place neighbourhood. Crang tried to amend this motion with a request that the Relief Department investigate further. Her amendment failed and she made a futile motion to fire the relief manager.

A few weeks later, Crang travelled with Dr. Norman Bethune, a Communist Canadian physician who played an important role in the work of the Republican defenders, on behalf of the League Against War and Fascism. Bethune returned from the Spanish Civil War a hero to thousands of Canadians and he toured North America to raise money for the Spanish cause. After he spoke to 1,300 people at Edmonton's Empire Theatre,²⁰ Crang accompanied him around southern Alberta. Once back home, Crang wrote Scott Nearing about feeling despondent and unmotivated.

MAY DAY PARADE VEHICLE ADVERTISES SUPPORT FOR DR. NORMAN BETHUNE DURING SPANISH CIVIL WAR, EDMONTON 1937. CITY OF EDMONTON ARCHIVES, EA.160.1233.

¹⁹Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 11, File 478.

²⁰Gregory Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins. The Depression Years Parts I-V*, 866 (St. John's: CCLH, 1989), 325.

City Council and a Provincial By-election

Crang's last month as a city councillor began with her badly losing a provincial by-election on 7 October. She ran despite the Communist Party's request that she step aside so their candidate, Jan Lakeman, could be the main progressive candidate. As Lakeman had stood down for her in the 1936 by-election, the Communists were furious that she did not reciprocate. However, it was likely her relationship to the Socreds that cost her the election. Despised throughout Edmonton, Social Credit was compared to Nazism by the *Edmonton Journal* which attacked the Socreds from the right. In a radio talk, Crang had called Social Credit "a people's party," and said "A united labour front supporting the Social Credit movement will be of tremendous strength to the common people."²¹ For Crang and some other radicals, Social Credit could evolve into a united front, at least in its first years of governing. For instance, when the Communist Party pledged support to the Social Credit government in 1937, they called it the "great united people's movement." In the by-election, the Liberal candidate won with 17,788 votes; Crang received 1,275.

Despite that blow, Crang worked on council with her usual rigour and, that month, managed to get food allowances increased to \$1.85 per week for adolescents. In later weeks, though, she failed to win a general 15% increase of the relief food allowance.²² Once more, she tried to dethrone Harold McKee with a motion to amalgamate his Special Relief Department with the pre-existing Civic Relief Department. She pointed out potential cost savings and the losses now incurred by McKee's management: every single housing application, for instance, involved at least 12 people. Her motion was ruled out of order as was her final motion: to allow workers on relief a top-up up to 20% of wages for any non-relief work they might find.²³

²¹Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, File 490, Radio Talk No 2, 3.

²²City of Edmonton Archives, RG-8.14 File 374.

²³Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 11, File 478, Direct Relief Amalgamation Plan.

In the early November civic election, she ran as an independent, a voice for women and people on relief. The Edmonton Trades and Labour Council criticized her and other councillors for “partisanship,” and, once again, the *Edmonton Journal* promoted a conservative Citizens’ Committee slate. Crang lost badly. Her political career was all but over. Expelled from the CCF and on the outs with old-guard labour, she declined invitations to join Social Credit and the Communist Party. What she wanted was an elusive united front. Scott Nearing pointed out that independent (individual) political campaigning was almost impossible and told her to “put on a hair shirt, unify your life and devote yourself seriously to real work during the next 5 years.”²⁴ Instead, she went to Pittsburgh, where she found support and camaraderie among the 2000 attendees of the American League for Peace and Democracy’s National Congress.

After Pittsburgh, Crang toured with Dr. Tao. The CLAWF organized the speaking tour to raise money for medical aid for China. Crang spoke as well, and, in Sudbury, criticized Sudbury’s International Nickel Company for profiting from the Sino-Japanese war. Energized by public speaking, she was deeply disappointed when Tao had to leave the tour on short notice.

²⁴Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, File 490, 12 December 1937.

Social Credit

Crang resumed her legal work in 1938 and her battle with Harold McKee. She represented a 70-year-old man cut off relief because he refused to move from one labour camp to another, a single father with four children who was refused benefits, a woman with eight children and an abusive husband, and other cases, all likely *pro bono*. Several of Crang's clients came from east Edmonton, a working-class area where she always enjoyed strong electoral support. In March 1938, she helped elect Orvis Kennedy, a Socred, in a federal by-election in Edmonton East. Crang's ongoing support for Social Credit was one of the paradoxes of her political life. Despite her social justice principles and commitment to fair treatment of immigrants and women, she seemed able to accept or, at least tolerate, the anti-Semitism, racism, and conservatism increasingly evident in Socred policy. At the end of 1938, she fought for a young Black woman who had been rejected from the Royal Alexandra Hospital's nursing program. At an Edmonton Hospital Board meeting, Crang opened a 90-minute debate and convinced the Board to reverse their decision.

Social Credit pledged support for Crang in the 1938 civic election. Given their unpopularity in Edmonton, this was unhelpful. Once again, she lost. During this period, she wrote her most self-critical letter to Nearing in which she acknowledged the different standards for female politicians.

After much serious thought and talking the matter over with my Dad, I have decided not to devote myself for the next five years too entirely to law, sociology and economic study. The reason is that political events in Alberta under the Social Credit government are shaping up very rapidly. Unless a person keeps in the public eye, they soon become entirely forgotten by the public. This is particularly true of a girl. The caliber of the working or writing that I would be able to do with intensive study would be very limited. . . But my writing is very childlike and my analysis of situations is also very immature and I doubt that I would be of much help to the working class.²⁵

²⁵Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, 490.



Indian Immigration, Pandia, and Chattopadhyay

Durai Pal Pandia

During this difficult period, Crang developed a relationship with Durai Pal Pandia, a theosophist, immigration lawyer, and monarchist. Pandia was hired by British Columbia's Sikh community to defend Sikh men facing deportation. Crang had already taken on the case of one of these men, on request by her old university friend Sadhu Singh Dhani. Once Pandia succeeded in getting the deportation order stayed, Crang worked with him in Ottawa in an unsuccessful attempt to allow the men's Sikh families to join them.



After Pandia left Canada, Crang continued the work from Edmonton, beginning with a letter to F.C. Blair, Director of Immigration, a notorious racist, to remind him of their previous meeting and underline that most British troops then fighting in Egypt and Libya were from the Punjab.²⁶ Sikh community members thanked her for her efforts, but her work was otherwise unacknowledged by Pandia or historical accounts.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

Through Pandia, in 1940, Crang met Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of India's most prominent social reformers. Chattopadhyay worked closely with Gandhi, served three jail terms for her activism, and travelled widely to promote Indian independence. She also worked to reform the neglect of women in trade unions and demanded that women's work be recognized both inside and outside the home. Her rich correspondence with Crang speaks to world events and the challenges facing women radicals. Chattopadhyay praised Crang's convictions, cautioned her about Pandia, and shared her own relationship struggles during which Gandhi told her that working for freedom was "fantastic" even if she could not free herself. Although Chattopadhyay does not refer to pregnancy as one of Crang's challenges, two of Crang's other friends do. Roy Davis responds to her concerns about raising a mixed-race child, and, in his next letter, expresses relief that her problem was resolved. Correspondence from Scott Nearing also implies that Crang terminated a pregnancy towards the end of her relationship with Pandia.





The United Front

In Edmonton, Crang continued work on a united front strategy, this time for the civic election in November 1940. The only woman at a meeting of 18, she was the secretary for what became the Civic Progressive Association (CPA). The CPA chose seven candidates, the Labour Party insisted on running two of their own, two other progressives ran as independents, and all of them lost to the conservative Citizens' Committee. Shortly after that, Crang's sister, Grace, 27, died from lifelong heart problems. Once again, Chattopadhyay offered support: "I had only one sister who was one of the deepest attachments in my life and I have felt as though that gap created by her death has never been filled. Margaret, I really don't know what to say. It has been a very real sorrow to me to find you in distress."²⁷

Crang made one last run at a city council seat in 1941 under the CPA banner. She vowed to focus on the problems of women, especially those married to men at war. Although the other two CPA candidates won, she did not. It was her sixth loss in eight election campaigns.

WOMEN FIGHT TO PICK COAL DURING DEPRESSION.

²⁷Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, Box 12, File 489.

Crang and Civil Liberties during World War II

On 7 December 1941 Pearl Harbour was bombed. Within a few months, 27,000 American men were working in Edmonton on the Alaska Highway and other military-related projects. Over half of Edmonton's downtown buildings were leased by Americans, and in downtown Edmonton, American military police patrolled streets with local police. In this environment, Alberta's RCMP was preoccupied with homosexual men and Jehovah's Witnesses. Crang defended the rights of both groups.

Crang's good friend, Atha Andrewe, conducted the Empire Opera, and Crang agreed to become the company's treasurer. The Opera shared an audience, volunteers, and a gifted performer, Jimmy Richardson, with the Edmonton Little Theatre. Dozens of prominent Edmontonians worked on each production and were listed in the *Edmonton Journal's* lengthy review. Then, in the summer of 1942, they read that Richardson, Andrewe, and the Theatre's recent president were part of "a ring of bestiality."²⁸ The men were gay, in other words, and charged with gross indecency after an RCMP undercover operation. The Journal paid salacious attention to the trials for months. In some cases, one of Crang's closest friends, Jack McClung, son of Nellie, was the prosecution lawyer. Andrewe fled to Mexico but the RCMP and FBI cooperated to extradite him and, despite Crang's testimony on his behalf, he was sentenced to the Prince Albert Penitentiary. Her connection to the scandal wasn't publicized, but it was known. Fallout came in October 1942 from the CPA who told her "the executive feels that in view of all circumstances, it does not consider it advisable that you should be a candidate at the forthcoming Civic Election."²⁹

The RCMP also ran an undercover operation in Alberta to capture Jehovah's Witnesses after their denomination was banned in 1940 under the War Measures Act for its pacifism. Crang represented a man imprisoned for possessing Jehovah's Witness leaflets. She also defended a woman who produced leaflets on a mimeograph machine in her farmhouse.

²⁸Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 497 clipping, *Edmonton Journal*, 5 November 1942.

²⁹Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125 Box 9, File 449.

Crang and Social Credit

By the early 1940s, Crang and Social Credit seemed on opposite sides of an ideological divide. Now leaning to the right, Aberhart antagonized Communists and labour and was mum as Socred bigots disseminated anti-Semitism. Instead of defecting to the CCF with other leftists, Crang attended the Social Credit Women's Auxiliary annual conference in 1941, and, in 1942, renewed her memberships to that group and the Scona Social Credit League. She attended the Social Credit League's Post-war Reconstruction Conference in Edmonton, scribbling notes in the program about monetary reform, its main focus. In an article for *Today and Tomorrow*, the Socred newspaper, she urged the Alberta Government to "promulgate" Socred monetary theories at the University of Alberta. Although that article was apparently not published, in the March, 1942 issue of *Today and Tomorrow* she discussed the new Atlantic Charter, closing with an unconvincing "we are one common humanity."³⁰ Scott Nearing sent her a blistering critique; his subsequent letter suggests her loss of hope for a socialist and equitable society.

*It is an exceedingly difficult thing to live as you do – differently from the rest of the community – what really concerns me is the repetition in all of your letters of your indifference, boredom and cynicism. ... Most people get through this with religion. Some through philosophy. A one-ness. But without it, it is indeed difficult to live zestfully ...*³¹

By 1942, Crang could well have been gripped by depression or exhaustion: she had suffered hard losses in the last two years. However, she was perhaps drawn to Aberhart's fusion of religion and politics. She believed in applied Christianity, and in her speech, "Where My Convictions Have Led Me" (circa 1940), she said, "Christianity has waited for nearly two thousand years to be applied to everyday life and national economy."³² She praised Aberhart's spiritual approach and claimed the spiritual atmosphere of Social Credit meetings "greatly enhances the value of the meetings."³³ Crang attended progressive church services from time to time, kept brochures on progressive Christian views and groups, and wrote notes to herself on Buddhism and theosophy. She likely approached religion as she did leftist politics: a shared purpose was what mattered.

³⁰*Today and Tomorrow*, 19 March 1942

³¹Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 503.

³²Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 503.

³³Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 503.



Apart from delivering perhaps hundreds of speeches, Crang wrote many articles for newspapers and small magazines. Her writing was part of the immense cultural production of the thirties; from poetry to workers' theatre, the arts were integral to leftist activism. Norman Bethune wrote a well-known poem, "Red Moon" about Spain; Roy Davis edited *The New Advance* and wrote widely; and Sadhu Singh Dhami's novel *Maluka* remains an important contribution to post-colonial literature. Crang also wrote a book, now lost. Her former office-mate told her he had enjoyed the first seven chapters and her friend Jack Higgins provided a critique:

I've read your book and it's not half bad.

For some of it's merry and some of it's sad, but why need it be so truthful?

Why need old Horsie be such a sad mess? It may be the truth but nevertheless,

I'd pictured her lovely and youthful...³⁴

Leaving Edmonton

Still a young woman of 33, Margaret Crang had finished her political and public life. She must have wanted to leave Edmonton badly, since she chose to relocate to Montreal with a man open about his drinking, gambling, and lack of intellectual curiosity. During the previous three years, she had applied unsuccessfully to the Canadian Women's Auxiliary Air Force and for a fellowship to Radcliffe College to study personnel administration. Money was an ongoing issue: a 1936 campaign debt of \$11.34 ending up at the Credit Adjustment Bureau before she paid it off, months later, for \$8.³⁵ Even Roy Davis, who asked for money repeatedly, eventually said she was too poor to donate to his causes. The improved economy from 1940 didn't make Crang's legal practice more lucrative; she continued to represent people in dire financial straits. She was not, however, inattentive to her finances. She bought a life insurance policy after extensive research; she was exacting about small amounts she owed or was owed; and she was persistent in collecting fees, however small, from clients.³⁶ Before moving to Montreal with her new friend (they had known each other about a month), Crang reassured him that she wasn't a gold digger, suggesting a fear that she could be perceived as such.

Crang found work at the *Montreal Gazette*. She appears to have been a staff writer instead of a featured reporter with a by-line. Still, she was getting paid to write, which she had only ever done for free, and she remained in the political world without being in the line of fire. When Jack McClung committed suicide in 1944, she returned briefly to Edmonton for the funeral. She visited again in 1947 when her father died. Her sister Jane and her husband inherited the mansion, and Crang left the city again.

³⁵Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 448.

³⁶Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 486.

Illness

After feeling unwell for some time, Crang was diagnosed in Boston with Cushing's disease. Correlated to high levels of anxiety and depression, Cushing's had not yet been successfully treated. Crang successfully underwent experimental treatments, but she lost some of her vitality along with her good posture and height. For the next four decades, Crang appears to have lived privately. She travelled, spending time with her brother Frank in California who drove her out to Vancouver where she stayed. Despite their fractious relationship, her mother had left her estate to Crang.³⁷ There is no evidence that Margaret Crang participated in the great social movements of the post-war period – civil rights, Indigenous rights, women's liberation, LGBTQ rights—developments that she clearly believed in. The only indication we have of ongoing progressive activity is that she grew marijuana. Crang's family visited her occasionally, her nieces and nephews knowing her as the “wild” relative. She died alone in Vancouver on January 3, 1991.³⁸

³⁷Author's conversation with Edgar Allin, December 2008.

³⁸*The Vancouver Sun*, 15 Jan. 1991, C9.

Legacy

It's hard to consider Margaret Crang's life without feeling a sense of loss. Brilliant, tireless, and devoted to improving the world, she was often undermined rather than supported. The relentless imposition of a double standard meant that the men with whom she shared common values enjoyed a latitude of private behaviours that did not impinge upon or shadow their public effectiveness. Crang, on the other hand, was castigated when she was seen to behave in an unladylike way, such as firing a gun in symbolic support for Spain. Likewise, Crang was excluded from the wide range of social contexts where men formed alliances—from Masons and churches to public houses and 'back rooms,' men in public life had ways to build support that no woman could share. The more she worked towards her dream of uniting the Left, the more Crang became alienated and alone.

Margaret Crang revealed the paradox of the political Left in the 30s: although the progressive parties (the CLP, UFA, CCF, and CPC) promoted cooperation to achieve social regeneration, they were unable to unite into a coherent movement. Their ideological limitations failed to address large sections of the working class that they claimed to represent. The Labour Party, for instance, ignored the unemployed and were oblivious to working women's need for childcare. Moreover, ostensible allies worked against each other, squandering their energies in what Crang called "destructive fratricidal conflict."³⁹ In Crang's mind, this conflict contributed to the disastrous drop in voter participation from 1933 to 1943. She understood that self-interest and community work had to be aligned. She did not stand apart from the "grass roots" she championed and said that individual needs could not be separated from community needs. It must have been difficult to move between the ground-level suffering she saw and the revolutionary change she desired. Nevertheless, she worked on practical, local issues with as much intensity as she brought to international anti-fascism.

³⁹Provincial Archives of Alberta, PR1968.0125, File 497.

Margaret Crang remains one of Alberta's most dynamic and visionary labour activists. She was relentless in her determination to unify the Left, to improve the lives of working women and men, and to fight injustice wherever she found it. Remembering Crang and her work will help to inspire a new generation of activists. Alberta needs that inspiration now as much as it did in Crang's day.

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