



# MUNICIPAL WORKERS IN ALBERTA

THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE  
2025

# WHAT IS THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE?

The Alberta Labour History Institute was founded in 1999 to give working people a chance to preserve their own stories in their own words.

We are a group of trade unionists, community activists, archivists, and historians dedicated to collecting, preserving, and disseminating the stories of Alberta's working people and their organizations. Oral history, mainly via video, has always been ALHI's major form of research. Our videos are available in our office as well as at the Provincial Archives of Alberta. We supplement the oral histories with archival and library research. We post full transcripts on our website, along with podcasts of what we view as the best excerpts.

We've used our oral history materials to create films, booklets, annual calendars, and a book, all of which are available directly on our website or via links from the website. We also provide advice to unions re archiving and re educational materials. Most "deliverables" for the Alberta Federation of Labour centennial celebration in 2012—the book, a booklet, six videos, and various posters—were ALHI creations.

We've also sponsored workshops, conferences, film nights, and labour history tours, educational events that often provide us with interviewees. For example, in 2002, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Edmonton Hunger March, participants who were still alive spoke at our commemorative workshop and we recorded their words. We sponsored a conference on Alberta labour history in 2012 as part of the AFL centennial events. It included a combination of activists telling their stories plus academic sessions. We had a similar conference in 2014 and then in 2016, we marked the 30-year anniversary of the Gainers Strike and other major strikes that made up the "Alberta hot summer of '86" with an Edmonton workshop that included the showing of a video ballad by Maria Dunn and our videographer Don Bouzek on the Gainers workers. The video ballad was also performed in Calgary and Red Deer. In 2019 we hosted workshops and concerts across Alberta on "The Centennial of the Great Labour Revolt of 1919" and produced an accompanying video, display panels, and a booklet. Recent ALHI projects include "Indigenous Labour History Project," a major effort to gather the stories of First Nations and Métis people, and the "Caribbean Oil Workers Project," which allows Caribbean-trained oil workers who came to work in Alberta's oil industry to talk about their lives. Most interviews from those projects are now on our website. Among other videos on our website is "Waltzing with the Angels," where Métis ironworkers who did the most dangerous construction work on the skyscrapers of downtown Edmonton speak.

If you would like to join with ALHI in carrying out our mission to tell the history of Alberta's working people, please e-mail us at [alhioffice@gmail.com](mailto:alhioffice@gmail.com)

Or perhaps just tell us a story or send us pictures or artifacts you think should be on our website. If you are interested in learning more about ALHI, starting a chapter in your community, or making a financial contribution to support our work, please email us at [alhioffice@gmail.com](mailto:alhioffice@gmail.com)

Please check out our website at [albertalabourhistory.org](http://albertalabourhistory.org).

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Cover: Civic Service Union 52 (CSU 52) workers demonstrate their determination to get a respectful settlement from the City of Edmonton in early 2024 just hours before a strike deadline.



# MUNICIPAL WORKERS IN ALBERTA

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Once incorporated as towns, cities, or counties, Alberta settlements elected councils whose officials hired workers to implement their policies. Municipal governments hired workers to build and maintain infrastructure, construct and operate public transportation systems, serve as police officers and firefighters, operate libraries, run local boards of health, and sometimes to run a telephone company.

From the early 1900s unions of skilled trade workers demanded that cities and towns pay unionized civic employees union-scale wages and grant contracts only to contractors who paid union wages. Opposition from elected officials caused unions to sponsor candidates in city elections from the early 1910s. During World War One, firefighters, police, and city hall workers took advantage of low unemployment to also unionize. The efforts of unionized civic workers led both Edmontonians and Calgarians to elect Labour mayors in the early 1930s and a Labour majority city council in Edmonton.

Resistance to workers' demands for decent wages, just treatment, and guarantees against privatization of their work caused many workers to seek stronger union representation than local unions could provide. Alberta municipal workers led efforts to persuade the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLCC) to charter a national union for civic workers unrepresented by international or national trade unions. The TLCC chartered the National Union of Public Employees in 1953. The rival Congress of Canadian Labour (CCL) responded by chartering its own union. But in 1963, seven years after the two rival federations merged as the Canadian Labour Congress, the two rival municipal unions combined to create the Canadian Union of Public Employees. CUPE is now Canada's largest union, with 640,000 members, 36,000 of whom are in Alberta.

CUPE sometimes faced difficulties coordinating demands from diverse groups of public employees. In Edmonton, fractures developed between inside and outside workers. The inside workers of Local 52 had issues with the national office of CUPE and were angry after CUPE staff persuaded them to strike in 1976, only to learn afterwards that wage increases won during the strike would be nullified because of legislated federal wage controls at the time. In 1978 the local left CUPE to form the independent Civic Service Union (CSU) Local 52.

Unions of civic workers have won solid wage and benefit increases for their members. But they have faced significant challenges. Deep cuts in grants to municipal governments after Ralph Klein became premier in 1992 and increasing privatizations by right-wing councils caused civic unions in both Calgary and Edmonton to form solidarity coalitions. The Edmonton coalition included CUPE Local 30, ATU Local 569, CSU Local 52, Edmonton Firefighters Union Local 209, and IBEW Local 1007. The Calgary coalition involved CUPE Locals 37, 38, 709, and 1169, IAFF 255, IBEW 254, ATU 583 and the Carpenters Union.





## UNION SOLIDARITY WITH EDMONTON FIREFIGHTERS, 1918

In January, 1918, Edmonton's recently unionized firefighters were under threat. Their contract with the City of Edmonton included a seniority clause. But the City planned to ignore that clause as it named a new fire chief, seeking to hire from outside the union membership. At that time, labour contracts were not considered legal documents. The firefighters struck over the seniority issue, but the City seemed immovable. The firefighters asked the Edmonton and District Labour Council to launch a general strike to support their cause. Seventeen of 26 locals that held plebiscites voted to strike. The possibility of a general strike caused many private-sector employers to join workers in supporting the union's demand to appoint the senior Edmonton firefighter as the new chief. The City relented. Willingness of workers across occupations to strike to assert class solidarity with all striking workers marked a shift in class consciousness during wartime that led to the postwar election of Labour representatives in civic, provincial, and federal elections.



# JANUARY 2025

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			1 New Year's Day	2	3	4
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## CALGARY TRANSIT WORKERS' STRIKES

Calgary transit workers—drivers, maintenance workers, and office workers--were on strike throughout July and August, 1961, demanding better wages and working conditions. They made little progress. Calgary Mayor Harry Hays commented that “you should all be rickshaw drivers in China; then you’d know what it would be like to have a job and be happy.” Mechanic Gunter Bruckner, who would later become the first paid officer of ATU Local 583, told ALHI that “the most important thing to me was the solidarity of the membership, the helping out” during the strike. That solidarity helped gain important concessions during bargaining in the 1970s, including a reduced work week without loss of pay. The union also took control of its members’ pensions from the Alberta government which had applied proceeds from investing workers’ pensions to general government expenditures. The union pressured the government successfully to allow them to create and control their own pension board and pension investments.

In 2001 Local 583 was on strike for 50 days over wages and the growth of lower-paying community shuttle jobs.



# FEBRUARY 2025

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16	17 Family Day	18	19	20	21	22
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## EDMONTON TRANSIT WORKERS' STRIKES

Three hard-fought strikes—in 1969, 1973, and 1982—won important concessions for Edmonton Transit workers. In 1969 ATU 569 struck for 16 days in August. The 1973-4 strike was a 50-day winter strike beginning on November 29, 1973. The union settled for a 20 percent increase over 2 years rather than the 37.5 percent over 2.5 years that they were demanding. While the City claimed that 20 percent meant a hardship for taxpayers, it turned out to be several percent below the inflation between 1973 and 1975.

Local 569's 1982 strike, which lasted six full weeks, was a great success. The local demanded and received parity with their Calgary counterparts, whose earnings were 28 percent higher than Edmonton transit workers. The strike was well timed. The local settled during the second week of April. On May 1, the cancellation of a giant oilsands project signalled the beginning of a harsh recession in Alberta, during which employers demanded wage concessions.



# MARCH 2025

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2	3	4	5	6	7	8 International Women's Day
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16	17 St Patrick's Day	18	19	20	21	22
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30	31					



## CIVIC WORKERS VERSUS PRIVATIZATION

The trade union movement has fought corporate campaigns for privatization of civic services. Those inevitably result in both lower wages and poorer benefits for workers, and deterioration in customer service. Many private garbage collection companies in the US had Mafia connections, overcharged cities for their services, and paid workers poorly. Though Edmonton's public collection of garbage was well regarded by citizens, right-wing city councilors in the 1990s supported privatizing the service. A lobbying effort led by CUPE 30 failed to protect a full public service but forced a compromise that divided the service 50-50 between public and private. A later, similar campaign by CUPE and the Calgary and District Labour Council failed to prevent the city from privatizing up to 25 percent of the city's black cart collection service in 2019 despite opposition from Mayor Naheed Nenshi. In 1995 Edmonton sold Ed Tel to Telus. Public services won a victory in Edmonton in 2021 when a decisive ATU membership campaign led to council reversing a decision to privatize 100 transit cleaner jobs.



# APRIL 2025

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13	14	15	16	17	18 Good Friday	19
20	21 Easter Monday	22	23	24	25	26
27	28 National Day of Mourning	29	30			



## DOREEN WABASCA AND THE FIGHT AGAINST SEXISM AND RACISM WITHIN CITY GOVERNMENTS

Women and minority members of trade unions have exerted pressures on their unions that have made the trade union movement a leading force in society against sexism and racism. It wasn't always so. When Doreen Wabasca, a residential school survivor, was hired by the City of Edmonton for a road construction job in the early 1970s, she faced continuous discrimination, including verbal abuse. The abuse got worse when the City chose her as the first woman and the first Indigenous person to be the "construction foreman" for the city. She stayed in the position for 2 ½ years so as to serve as a role model to other Indigenous people seeking trades work. But the abuse from the men who reported to her and their frequent letting the air out of her tires finally got to her, and she left the City to work in other blue-collar jobs.

In an ALHI interview, CSU President Lanny Chudyk notes that even today in the city, in "some of the engineering areas particularly, it's still a male dominated society." Few firefighters as well are women.

Doreen Wabasca's construction and leadership skills impressed the City of Edmonton enough to make her their "construction foreman" but the sexism and racism of the construction workers forced her out of her job.



# MAY 2025

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				1 International Workers' Day	2	3
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11 Mother's Day	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19 Victoria Day	20	21	22	23	24
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## SHAW WORKERS STRIKE

In 2002 the largely part-time minority immigrant employees of the Shaw Conference Centre/Edmonton Convention Centre joined UFCW 401 and struck to get a first collective agreement with the Edmonton Economic Development Centre (EEDC). The strike lasted seven months; it owed its eventual success to both the workers' determination and the dogged support of then 401 President Doug O'Halloran. The workers' issues included management sexism and racism: an authoritarian management paid them poorly but punished workers arbitrarily and showed them no respect. While the Convention Centre was built with taxpayer monies and is owned by the City of Edmonton, it contracted out management of the Centre to EEDC (now renamed Explore Edmonton). The militantly anti-union EEDC ignored Alberta Labour Relations Board rulings condemning management-organized violence against strikers. They hoped to break 401 financially, but O'Halloran was prepared to spend without limits, and won cross-union and public support for the strikers. When a mass strike was about to prevent the Centre from presenting the Grey Cup awards, EEDC finally capitulated. It was a victory for worker solidarity, anti-racism, and anti-sexism.

Striking Shaw Conference Centre workers hold up a poster pointing out that even Alberta's normally pro-employer Labour Relations Board called out the Conference Centre's treatment of its workers. Courtesy Christine McMeekan (long-time UFCW 401 activist and officer).



# JUNE 2025

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Father's Day

National  
Indigenous  
Peoples Day

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## HARASSMENT AND BULLYING OF CIVIC WORKERS

In 2017 City of Edmonton employees, believing that their reports in employee engagement surveys about harassment, discrimination, and verbal abuse were being ignored by civic managers, went to the media to blow the whistle on their bosses. Nearly a fifth of City employees reported harassment in the 2016 survey. The city manager apologized to staff and pledged to take measures to change the authoritarian culture that had developed. In an ALHI interview, CSU President Lanny Chudyk, whose union now represents 7900 inside workers, blamed the toxic work culture on changes in how management and labour relations officers were chosen. Initially those positions were given to staff members who had worked their way up in the City hierarchy. Such managers understood the jobs of City workers and could sympathize with their issues. But in recent years, the City had chosen to hire outsiders on the basis of their technical skills. Those individuals often imposed irrelevant criteria in their judgments of workers whose jobs the managers and labour relation officers understood quite shallowly.



# JULY 2025

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		1 <small>Canada Day</small>	2	3	4	5
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## KATHLEEN ANDREWS, FIRST EDMONTON WOMAN BUS DRIVER

Before 1975 no woman ever sat behind the steering wheel of an Edmonton Transit Service bus. Kathleen Andrews, a single mom who was working in a low-paid "woman's job" as an ETS information clerk, changed that. Bus drivers were paid 2 1/2 times what Andrews was earning, and she decided to apply for a bus driver position and take the required tests for a driver in order to better support her two children. She faced considerable hostility from both many male co-workers and passengers. In 1978, Andrews, tired of the long, irregular hours of a driver, became ETS's first woman dispatcher.

Over time, thanks to the breakthrough by Kathleen Andrews, many women became ETS drivers and activists in ATU Local 569. Kathleen's daughter, Lisa, like her mom, and brother Brad, became an ETS operator. Lisa Andrews led a campaign that led to ETS's new transit garage that opened in 2020 being named the Kathleen Andrews Transit Garage, a tribute to the woman who broke the gender barrier for bus drivers and dispatchers.



# AUGUST 2025

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3	4 <small>Heritage Days</small>	5	6	7	8	9
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31						



## SCHOOL BOARD WORKERS

School board employees are municipal workers whose bosses are school boards rather than city councils. In the 1990s, the province took over assessment of the portion of property tax dedicated to public schools and Catholic schools from school boards. But the local boards still manage the schools, and board officials choose school principals and other administrators. School teachers are members of the Alberta Teachers Association while CUPE represents most unionized support workers. There have been many support workers' strikes, with pay the chief issue. Minority workers abound among service workers in city schools, particularly custodians. They rely on their unions to fight harassment and discrimination. Many are active in CUPE's lobbying campaign to counter threats to the public school system from private and charter schools. They defend the right of all Canadian children to enjoy equal opportunities to succeed. Often coming from countries where money determines which children get a good education, they oppose tendencies to such inequalities in Alberta. They view cuts to education by conservative-minded governments as part of a privatization drive.

"Some of the schools are already in shambles; they need upgrading or new schools or whatever. Teachers are doing whatever they can. We need a voice and we need to fight this government somehow. We need a weapon, because this government is not listening." Pauline Cardinal, a long-time school custodian and CUPE 474 member in Edmonton told ALHI in an interview in 2002.

# SEPTEMBER 2025

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21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30 National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.				





## CUPE MUNICIPAL STRIKES

Most strikes of unionized workers directly employed by cities and counties have been settled at the table, often after workers gave their negotiators support with a strike vote. But some strikes of both inside and outside workers have proved necessary. In 1975 110 County of Ponoka workers in CUPE 1855 struck successfully for union security and automatic deduction of dues. In 1978, City of Calgary outside workers in CUPE 37 were on strike for 55 days before the City agreed to their demand for a four-day work week without pay cuts. Calgary's inside workers in CUPE 38 struck for 13 days in 1980. In 1981 a three-week strike in Lethbridge by both inside and outside workers in Local 70 yielded big gains in wages and benefits. That year CUPE 812 workers, employees of the Municipality of Crowsnest Pass, also made big gains after they carried out a boycott of Highway 3.

# OCTOBER 2025

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12	13 Thanksgiving	14	15	16	17	18
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26	27	28	29	30	31 Halloween	





## CIVIC UNIONS AND CIVIC POLITICS

Civic workers' unions on their own and allied with other unions have endorsed candidates and sometimes slates of candidates since the early years of Alberta civic elections. Their criteria have included candidates' support of civic services being delivered by in-house workers, adequate funding for city services, and support for unionized workers. In the interwar period, city members of the Labour Party chose a slate of candidates during civic elections. As that party was absorbed into the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) it became more common for city labour councils and individual unions to endorse particular candidates. In Edmonton from the late 1950s to the 1990s, a group of union members created the Edmonton Voters' Association to support pro-labour candidates, including bus driver Brian Mason who was on council from 1989 to 2000. He later became leader of the Alberta NDP. Calgary civic unions have been active in Calgary's Future, which "seeks to find, support, and elect community leaders who share the vision for a resilient economy, quality city services, responsible spending and strong neighbourhoods."



# NOVEMBER 2025

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9	10	11 Remembrance Day	12	13	14	15
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## THE INFLATIONARY SPIRAL, CIVIC WAGES, AND UNION REACTION

CSU 52 workers rehearse for a strike that was avoided at the last minute in 2024.  
Courtesy CSU 52, Edmonton.

Like workers at other levels of government, civic workers have been victims of austerity policies. Civic workers are especially vulnerable because municipal governments have limited sources of revenue and are dependent on financial aid from provincial governments. The conservative governments in Alberta in the 1990s and since 2019 have been particularly insistent on reducing funding to municipalities. The latter have attempted to both cut services along with pay and benefits of civic workers to cope with the cuts. Unions of civic workers have mobilized their members to resist having their wages frozen or rewarded only with small increases as the national inflation rate has shot up 18 percent from 2020 to 2024. In Edmonton in early 2024 the CSU, which represents almost 8000 inside workers, was hours away from a strike of all its members before the city made wage concessions and concessions regarding working conditions and benefits. The city made a significant commitment to hybrid work, expanded possible earned days off, and expanded possibilities for unpaid days off for various celebrations.

# DECEMBER 2025

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21	22	23	24 Christmas Eve	25 Christmas Day	26 Boxing Day	27
28	29	30	31 New Year's Eve			





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THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE WOULD LIKE TO RECOGNIZE  
OUR PARTNERS WHO HELP US MAKE THIS CALENDAR POSSIBLE:

Blair Chahley Klassen, Lawyers | Chivers Carpenter Lawyers | McGown Cook Barristers & Solicitors  
Nugent Law Office | McManus & Hubler Lawyers | Brenda Kuzio, Lawyer | Severyn Scott Lawyers

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