



# A HISTORY OF IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN ALBERTA

THE ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE  
2026

# 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 the "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. The 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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When Confederation occurred in 1867, today's Alberta was Indigenous territory. Slow Prairie settlement by central Canadians caused the federal government in the late 1890s to invite previously unwanted Eastern Europeans with farming experience despite bigoted campaigns from imperial-minded British settlers. The newcomers faced prejudice, the hardships of clearing lands for cultivation, and a checkerboard system of land granting where the Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway held half the land in many areas for speculative purposes.

Many immigrants joined the urban and industrial labour force, facing exploitation that led to attempts to form unions despite a legal regime that treated labour contracts as unenforceable. Coal miners, faced with employers who ignored occupational health concerns and controlled workers' lives, became the backbone of the labour movement.

The Canadian authorities tried to break solidarity between Ukrainian workers and Anglo workers during World War I by claiming that Ukrainians were "enemy aliens" attempting to sabotage the British war effort against Austro-Hungary. In fact, the Ukrainians detested the empire that had exploited them, and opposed all warfare as efforts by rival bosses to use workers as cannon fodder. The federal government banned their newspapers, arrested their leaders, and, after the war, restricted their immigration and often deported non-British immigrants involved in labour activities.

Visible minority immigrants were shunned altogether. After Oklahoma Blacks escaping dispossession and lynchings came to Alberta to farm in the 1910s, immigration officials received instructions to forbid further entry of Blacks. East Indians were kept out via a decree that newcomers must arrive directly from their point of origin. The CPR hired over 17,000 Chinese workers to perform the most dangerous jobs in building the railway. Thousands died on the job. The railway built, the survivors were segregated in "Chinatowns." The Canadian government imposed steep head taxes to prevent them bringing their families to Canada and from 1923 to 1947, forbid Chinese immigration.

The trade union movement was largely racist until the 1960s and hostile to non-white immigration. Labour shortages as fewer Europeans sought to emigrate to Canada forced the federal government to reduce racist considerations in immigration legislation in 1962 and 1967. Attitudes within the trade unions shifted towards support for universal human rights and an embrace of multi-culturalism.

Canada had a niche-oriented temporary foreign workers program for decades for high-skilled occupations with temporary worker demands. But a Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program, begun in 1966, divorced labouring in Canada from a pathway to citizenship for vulnerable workers. In 2002, the temporary foreign worker program was expanded to include vulnerable low-skilled workers outside agriculture. The number of TFWs in Canada grew from 13,326 in 2004 to 845,000 in 2021, over four percent of all paid workers in Canada. Tied to particular employers who could cause their deportation by firing them, these workers were de facto slaves. Many were supporting families back home and, when their contracts expired, remained in Canada as undocumented workers.



## CHINESE RAILWAY WORKERS

Author Pierre Berton romanticized the entrepreneurs who built the Canadian Pacific Railway. But they were heavily subsidized by taxpayers and earned extortionate profits. The workers who did the real railway-building were exploited mercilessly. That was especially true for the 17,000 imported Chinese workers assigned to the most dangerous jobs. They were paid a dollar a day, less than half what white workers received, and required to pay for their own supplies. No one kept an accurate count of how many Chinese workers died building the railway. Estimates vary from 600 to 4000. They died of exhaustion, exposure, explosions, collapsed tunnels, and scurvy from being unable to afford fruits and vegetables. The early Western trade union movement resented the downward pressure employers could put on wages by importing Asian workers. But rather than blame the employers, they blamed the Asian workers themselves and lobbied for their deportation. The radical Industrial Workers of the World were the only early Western union that refused to exclude Asian workers. In the 1930s, the Communist Party and the CCF joined the defence of rights for Asian workers.

# JANUARY 2026

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## EAST EUROPEANS: FARMS, MINES, AND INTERNMENT

Ukrainian peasants and workers in both the Austro-Hungarian empire's province of Galicia and the Russian empire's "Little Russia" had long resisted oppression by landlords and employers. Responding to Canada's offer of landlord-free land, many were disappointed when they arrived. CPR and Hudson's Bay speculators controlled so much land that homesteads were dispersed over large areas, which increased costs of creating community institutions. While these companies received huge government grants, no aid was offered to immigrant farmers. Many worked as miners in the off-season to survive, and more than half proved unable to make a living from farming. In the mining communities, they faced a lack of occupational health and safety protections along with low wages and high prices at the company store. Building on their militancy from their homelands, they joined unions such as the United Mine Workers and later the One Big Union to fight the mine owners. Disillusioned with the armchair radicalism and Anglo-Saxon disdain of eastern Europeans in the Socialist Party, they formed the Ukrainian Social Democratic Party. The authorities targeted USDP members in forced labour internments of 8600 "enemy aliens" during World War I.

# FEBRUARY 2026

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## RACISM AND STRIKE- BREAKING

Over half of Alberta coal miners by 1919 were non-Anglo-Saxon, with Ukrainians, Hungarians, and Italians especially prominent. Lured with promises of good wages and comfortable company housing, they were instead herded into overcrowded, bedbug-infested tents where there was no clean drinking water, and typhoid and other diseases ran rampant. The bosses mixed ethnicities in each camp to limit solidarity. In 1919, demands for improvements in working and living conditions as well as an end to piecework led to shutdowns of all but one Alberta mine. The Drumheller mine operators exemplified ruling class racism used to prevent workers from focusing on capitalists as the "alien." They hired returning Anglo-Canadian troops, angry that they could not find work, as constables, persuading them that the cause of their grim situation was "enemy" workers. Constables dragged striking workers back to mines, threatening to hang them if they refused to work. Miners formed self-defence militias but the well-armed constables beat or tarred and feathered strike holdouts.

Humberstone miners lacking any protective clothing pose for a publicity photo in 1916. Their elected One Big Union leader, Joe Cavazzi, reported in 1919 that the mine also lacked washhouses, a dependable water supply, and warming facilities for cold weather. Courtesy Glenbow Archives, NC-6-2153.

# MARCH 2026

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St Patrick's Day

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## GWG AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Immigrant women with little English found most job opportunities in Alberta closed to them. An exception was Great Western Garments, which operated in Edmonton from 1911 to 2004. Piecework assembly-line clothing manufacturing jobs were hard on the body and mind. But the workers had unionized as Local 120 of the United Garment Workers shortly after the company opened. Union-negotiated pay and benefits helped to support immigrant women's families. During World War Two, as the GWG work force doubled, Ukrainian and Italian-speaking women accounted for many of the new workers. Later, Portuguese immigrant women would join them. Beginning in the 1960s, Chinese speakers were sewing at GWG and by the 1980s, Asian-origin women constituted the majority of the workers in the factory.

Anne Ozipko, who came to Canada from Ukraine when she was a toddler, worked at GWG during the war as a piece work sewer and returned in 1963 to earn money for her son's university tuition and a piano for her two daughters. In the 1970s, as Local 120 president, she succeeded in persuading GWG to pay straight wages rather than piece rates.

# APRIL 2026

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## BLACK SLEEPING CAR PORTERS

Canadian immigration policy before the 1960s blocked most Blacks from coming to Canada. An exception was made for educated Blacks willing to work as railway sleeping car porters. Porters responded to whims of passengers, their low wages making them dependent on tips. Deprived of sleeping quarters on runs that averaged 72 hours, porters had to sneak a brief nap in the small seats they were allotted.

Shunned by white unionists, CNR porters formed the Order of Sleeping Car Porters in 1917 and wrung some concessions from their employer. The CPR fired union activists and its porters only unionized in 1942, forming a Canadian branch of the American-based Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Three years later they won a collective bargaining contract that finally won them a paid vacation as well as better wages and hours.

Open discrimination against Blacks in employment and housing continued before the Alberta Human Rights and Citizens Commission was established in 1973. By that time the union movement had joined the civil rights movement and Black workers sought union solidarity when confronted by racist bosses, fellow workers, or clients.

# MAY 2026

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## INTERNMENT OF JAPANESE- CANADIANS, WORLD WAR II

Japanese-Canadian migrant workers arrived in Alberta's mines, railway construction camps, and sugar beet fields in the early 1900s. Some settled near Raymond, Alberta, where they farmed and worked in coal mines, facing hostility from the white population as they did in coastal British Columbia where 90 percent of Canada's Japanese-origin population lived when World War II broke out. Though there was no evidence of any support of Japanese-Canadians for Japan during the war, the Canadian government used the War Measures Act to declare them "enemy aliens." The government dispossessed the coastal Japanese-Canadians, seizing and selling their homes and businesses. Most were forced into labour camps in the BC interior.

About 3000 Japanese-Canadians were assigned to Alberta beet growers who treated them like slaves, overworking them and paying them wages well below the provincial minimum wage. They were housed in shacks, uninsulated granaries, and chicken coops. The willingness of established Japanese-Canadian communities in sugar beet areas to provide assistance to the forced labourers compensated in part for the ruthlessness of their employers.

# JUNE 2026

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## RACISM AND PRO-FASCISM IN CANADIAN IMMIGRATION POLICY, 1923-1962

Events like the Hunger March in Edmonton in December, 1932, caused the Canadian establishment to be wary of immigrants with left-wing backgrounds. Courtesy Provincial Archives of Alberta, A9217.

Canadian immigration policy was racist and restrictive in the inter-war period. Immigrants with British and French heritage were labelled preferred immigrants while eastern European immigrants and Jews from anywhere were labelled non-preferred and only allowed entry if they served an immediate economic purpose. Canada tightened the screws against Jews when the coming to power of the Nazis in Germany caused most to wish to escape from Europe.

Non-white potential immigrants were almost totally prohibited. That continued from 1945 to 1962, a period of large-scale European immigration. The government only wanted Europeans who were deemed supportive of the capitalist system and hostile to socialism. Communists and others deemed a threat to capitalism were systematically excluded from even visiting Canada. But, beginning in 1950, almost all former and current supporters of German Nazism and Italian Fascism were welcomed. The RCMP protested that the government was inviting war criminals into the country. Anyone who was a member of the Italian neo-fascist party was welcomed while activists or likely supporters of the Italian Communist and Socialist parties, which had the votes of most Italian trade unionists, were excluded.

# JULY 2026

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## THE ERA OF MULTI- CULTURALISM

Xenophobia and racism reigned in Canadian immigration policy before the 1960s. By the early 1960s however labour shortages hampered the Canadian economy. Europe was back on its feet from wartime destruction, and provided ever-smaller numbers of potential immigrants. So Canada reluctantly opened itself to other parts of the world with legislation in 1962 and 1967 that removed racial barriers to entry. A points system was introduced that theoretically benefited skilled workers and professionals. But in practice, the latter in particular found that Canadian professional bodies created barriers as much in an effort to limit entry into their professions as to protect the integrity of those professions. Trade unions proved more friendly to new arrivals and the trade union movement, which had been openly racist before World War II, became an important participant in the movement for human rights legislation and for non-racist immigration policy. For the most part unions lobbied for a planned economy in which both high levels of immigration and full employment were compatible. But there remained instances in which union leaders adopted the conservative view that immigrants, not employers and politicians, were responsible for recessions and unemployment.

# AUGUST 2026

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## HOW UNIONS HELP RACIALIZED WORKERS

Born in poverty in rural Jamaica, Pauline Cardinal began factory work right after elementary school. Her Kingston city work as a domestic helper opened up the door for nanny employment in Canada in 1979, at \$40 per week. Though the hiring family reported higher wages to Immigration, Cardinal had to support her Jamaican family on meagre wages.

Cardinal received permanent residence through marriage to an Indigenous Albertan pen pal, who died 10 years later of poor health. In Alberta, Cardinal was able to obtain better wages, though sometimes experiencing tremendous workplace stress. But she was able to obtain subcontract work in hospitals and permanent employment in the public school system as a custodian who is assigned to various schools. She encountered racism at work and in the community. But her union training in courses offered by CUPE Local 474 allowed her to defend both herself and others from racial discrimination, unreasonable work assignments, and disrespect from principals and fellow workers. Many racialized workers whom ALHI has interviewed report similar experiences of both racism and union help in combatting it.

# SEPTEMBER 2026

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27	28	29	30 National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.			



## TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS (1)

There was a 'postwar compromise between capital and labour' in which the capitalist class, fearful of the growing radicalism of the working class, accepted more state programs that stabilize the lives of people, and begrudgingly accepted unionization in some economic sectors. But, by the late 20th century, capitalists complained that that compromise was reducing their profits. Employer pressures led to social program cuts, increases in unemployment, and attacks on unions. Temporary foreign worker (TFW) programs became a means of assembling workers forced to accept low wages and lacking all social rights, including a path to citizenship. It began with the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program in 1966 which imported Caribbean and Latin American workers to do work that Canadians were unwilling to do for the wages that agri-business offered.

After 2002, hundreds of thousands of TFWs were recruited into such areas of work as construction, retail, restaurants, fast foodies, and gasoline stations. Tied to particular employers who could force their deportation by firing them, they were unprotected from all abuses by employers including unsafe working conditions, unpaid wages, and even rape.

Tarik Accord, born in war-torn Somalia, exemplifies the determination of vulnerable immigrant workers in Alberta to seek social justice. She helped form a union at Bee Clean in Edmonton in 2010 to struggle against the overwork, low pay, and authoritarian management that she faced.

# OCTOBER 2026

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## TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKERS (2)

Evangeline Cayanan is an undocumented worker whose harrowing tales, included in an ALHI interview ([albertalabourhistory.org/evangeline-cayanan](http://albertalabourhistory.org/evangeline-cayanan)), are an indictment of the Temporary Foreign Worker program and treatment of undocumented workers.

The TFL hired Edmonton lawyer Yessy Byl in 2007 as a TFW advocate providing case assistance to TFWs in need. Byl found that 60 percent of the employers with TFWs whom she investigated had breached either the Employment Standards Code or the Occupational Health and Safety Act. Few penalties were ever assessed. Brokers illegally charged fees to TFWs, and employers charged exorbitant rents while failing to pay full wages promised or overtime pay.

Many workers whose TFW contracts had expired or who had escaped a predatory employer went underground and became undocumented workers. With few prospects for work back home and families to support, they accepted under-the-table work, often with conditions even worse than TFWs experienced. Estimates in early 2025 counted 1.2 million TFWs with permits that would expire that year as well as at least 500,000 undocumented workers.

Inflation increased after the COVID economic interruption in the early 2020s and housing costs soared. Excessive profit-taking and a declining willingness of governments to build housing or control rents were the culprits. But employers, the media, and racist thinking encouraged the view that hard-working immigrants, especially TFWS and “illegals,” were the problem.

# NOVEMBER 2026

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## WELCOMING WORKERS

Canadian employers benefited from exploitation of TFWs and undocumented workers, and then blamed those workers for Canada's housing and unemployment problems. The Canadian Labour Congress, by contrast, has called for an end to the whole idea of treating low-income workers in Canada as wayfaring slaves. They have demanded that temporary workers have open employment permits rather than being tied to a particular employer. They have also called for permanent residency opportunities for both current TFWs and former TFWS who have become undocumented.

The labour movement has also decried portions of the Canada Strong Borders Act of 2025 that drastically reduce the ability of individuals who face dangerous situations if they return home to seek refugee status. The bill borrows heavily from anti-immigrant practices implemented by Donald Trump. The danger for both immigrant workers and Canadian-born workers is that anti-immigrant advocacy has always created divisions within the working-class movement that weaken the solidarity of workers and ultimately support the interests of employer.

If someone is good enough to work in Canada, they are good enough to enjoy all the rights that Canadian-born workers enjoy, including full union protections.

# DECEMBER 2026

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				Christmas Eve	Christmas Day	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:

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