Bows and Arrows

Indigenous Workers, IWW Local 526, and Syndicalism on the Vancouver Docks

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Few may be aware that the first union on the waterfront of Vancouver was organized by Indigenous workers, mostly Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh. And it was organized on an explicitly syndicalist basis as Local 526 of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW group would become known as the Bows and Arrows, a name that spoke to their active and more politically militant perspective and commitment to Indigenous solidarity. The Bows and Arrows organized on a multicultural/multiracial foundation of class solidarity.

While the lifespan of IWW Local 526 was brief (formally only a year while informally for about seven years) it had a lasting impact on working class organizing on the waterfront, anti-racism and racial solidarity on the docks, and on political organizing in Indigenous communities. It also showed the pivotal role of organizing within the logistical chains of global capitalism in sabotaging resource extractive industries, while providing a model of work organization that sustained community relevant work and work cycles rather than the single career monoculture of industrial capitalism at the time.

As historian Andrew Parnaby suggests, the Bows and Arrows:

Join[ed] in the broader upsurge of support for the Wobblies that took place among loggers, miners, railroad workers, and seafarers prior to the Great War…Reformers, rebels, and revolutionaries: collectively, they were responsible for a level of militancy on the waterfront that was unmatched by most other occupations, provincially or nationally. Vancouver waterfront workers went on strike at least sixteen times between 1889 and 1923; the four largest and most dramatic strikes were in 1909, 1918, 1919, and 1923. (2008, 9)

While Local 526 would finally be broken through battles with waterfront employers that have been described as titanic, these workers provided important and lasting examples of working class militance, workplace organizing tactics, racial solidarity and anti-racism, and cultural defense. They offer a critical model of syndicalism in diverse workforces and changing economic conditions within a context of settler colonial capitalism.

Longshore Histories

The history of Indigenous men and boys working as longshoremen on the waterfront of what is now called Burrard Inlet dates to before the incorporation of Vancouver as a city. Indigenous families were involved in longshoring from the time the first sawmill was built at Burrard Inlet in 1863 and milled logs were loaded and shipped for export. Several generations of workers from the same families worked on the docks over decades with many beginning their working lives longshoring at ages as young as thirteen years old. Indigenous workers made up substantial parts of the workforce on the docks between 1863 and the late 1930s. According to Parnaby:

The number of "Indian" gangs working on Burrard Inlet between 1863 and 1939 varied. Estimates by veteran longshoremen, who were thinking specifically about the early 1900s, put the number at between four and six – which means that, depending on the size of the vessel, and whether it was being loaded or unloaded, anywhere between forty and ninety Indian lumber handlers could be found on the docks on a given day. The figures available for the early 1920s, drawn from union records and the Department of Labour, are higher, placing the number at about 125. (2008 83)

Several who would go on to become well regarded Indigenous leaders worked as longshoremen, including Andy Paull, Chief Dan George, Chief Simon Baker. Many would reference their

experiences as Bows and Arrows members as central to the formation of their political perspectives and commitments. Chief Joe Capilano used money earned from longshoring on the waterfront to finance a trip to London to lobby the King for the rights of BC's First Nations in 1906. That trip would play an important part in the development of pan-Native political work against colonialism in subsequent years.

The earliest attempt to organize longshore workers on the Vancouver waterfront took place in 1888 when several longshoremen organized with the Knights of Labor (Delgado 2010). They participated as individuals and did not form a union on the waterfront. The first union on the waterfront would be Local 526 of the IWW founded in 1906. Local 526 began with an impressive group of fifty to sixty lumber handlers, most of whom were Squamish.

The decline of Local 526 would see periods of fracture, showing the significance of the syndicalist organizing in developing and sustaining class solidarity on the waterfront. Predominantly white longshoremen would form a separate union in March 1912. Vancouver Local of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), Local 38-52, would launch with 60 charter members (Delgado 2010, 69).

Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh workers would organize an independent Indigenous local of the ILA in 1913. With about 90 percent of support by Indigenous longshore workers, ILA Local 38-57 was maintained as an independent political organization. Local 38-57 endured as an autonomous, independent organization until 1916, when it merged with Local 38-52 (Parnaby 2008, 90). The influence of syndicalist perspectives and priorities persisted. The Vancouver ILA would support the One Big Union, a revolutionary union formed in 1919 which would become highly active and influential in working class organizing in the Canadian state context, particularly in Western Canada (see Parnaby 2008). The One Big Union would play a central role in and gain prominence through, the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. The One Big Union core in ILA would participate in numerous strike actions through the general strike of 1918. It would decline following the bitter strike of 1923.

The Bows and Arrows and Colonial Capitalist Labor Markets on the Waterfront

The period of the 1860s and 1870s was one of growing spatial and economic encroachment on the Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh communities of the North Shore of Burrard Inlet as what would be the City of Vancouver was greatly expanded across Indigenous lands (as Vancouver is based on unceded territories). Growing urbanization and industrialization around reserve lands meant that Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh traditional economies were made increasingly marginalized and threatened. This was not an innocent, undirected, process. At the very same time as capitalist industries were growing, government-imposed laws increasingly restricted Native fishing and hunting practices as well as restricting access to land and waters necessary for subsistence. The result was that the impacted Indigenous communities had little choice but to turn more and more to participation in the wage-labor economy for survival. This is another stark example of the process of primary accumulation outlined by Marx by which capitalist markets (including labor markets) are aggressively imposed on communities by undermining or destroying, through legislation as well as through force, traditional, communally and ecologically appropriate, subsistence practices and economies.

Longshoring became a quite significant source of income between 1863 and 1963. The shipping economy would take on growing significance over the decades at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries with the labor market in other industries like timber becoming increasingly competitive.

The decentralized structure of the IWW matched well the flexible and mobile work practices of the Indigenous members who preferred multiple working patterns in different seasonal economies. The structure of longshoring at the time was often casualized. This suited the interests of Indigenous workers who worked in other traditional community-relevant economies. It also suited the organizing style of the IWW who organized to support casualized work without loss of jobs or pay according to the needs of longshore workers (in a way that allowed more to have jobs).

As Parnaby suggests the Indigenous longshore workers found in longshoring a suitable work framework that allowed them to continue work in other community relevant areas. This became a matter of struggle. The flexibility of labor became a key aspect of class struggle. In Parnaby's words:

Like their colleagues in the lumber industry, waterfront employers saw labour strife not simply in terms of specific workplace grievances, but as a byproduct of a wider problem: labour turnover. Like loggers, longshoremen were thought to be voteless, rootless, and without families; as such, they had no stake in civil society and thus were prone to agitation. To rectify this condition, the Shipping Federation hoped that by weeding out the foreign-born and the radical, recruiting white married men, and promoting middle-class values of discipline, sobriety and thrift, it could shape a new, more compliant working-class identity. (2008, 12)

Of some note, activism within the union around waterfront labor provided a collective mechanism to advocate for Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh economic interests at a time in which they and other Indigenous communities were impacted by significant social pressures and socio-economic transformations.

The Bows and Arrows moved beyond dominant capitalist society attempts to at political marginalization and cultural assimilation. Their syndicalist approach maintained cultural respect while also offering effective political economic organization, in culturally meaningful ways, in a spirit of class solidarity and militance. Indigenous workers used the Squamish language on the job to help build camaraderie. At the same time use of their language allowed the Indigenous workers to subvert authority by keeping their conversations socially unavailable to surveillance by white employers and oppositional colleagues (Parnaby 2008, 85–86). One might suggest, using a contemporary language that this was a form of social encryption.

At the same time the Bows and Arrows addressed growing economic pressures resulting from increasingly competitive labor markets in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Racism and Work on the Waterfront

Work specialization on the Vancouver waterfront was structured along racialized lines from the latter decades of the 19th century through the early decades of the 20th. The work gangs composed primarily of Indigenous men became known for their skill, competency, and stamina in handling lumber, developing reputations particularly for the combination of speed and efficiency with which they could turn around lumber ships. The effectiveness of the Indigenous crews

became a point manipulated by shipping bosses who hired Indigenous workers as specialists (so-called side runners, hatch tenders, and "donkey-men").

The specialized skills involved in lumber loading and the proficiency with which Indigenous workers did the work served as something of a double-edged sword for Indigenous workers. On one hand it served to gain respect for Indigenous longshoremen while at the same time being used by shipping bosses as a justification for splitting the labor market on the docks. Bosses put forward a racial determinist notion of race as associated with skills involved in specific tasks (Parnaby 2008, 84). Historian Rolf Knight suggests that racialization in dock work played a large part in the prevalence of Indigenous men doing the work of lumber longshoring. As Knight argues: "loading lumber was one of the more strenuous kinds of longshoring, [so] that employers attempted to maintain competition between racially distinct crews and that a reluctance seems to have developed among employers to hire Indians to handle [non-lumber] cargo" (Knight 1978, 127). Sam Engler, who worked on the waterfront for forty-five-years, recalled that preference for the best jobs above deck was given to white longshoremen. He relates: "[The Indians] used to call us white brothers and we were getting the choice jobs" (quoted in ILWU 1975, 99).

According to Chris Roine the "[lumber] longshoring was a difficult and often dangerous form of work, but it offered slightly higher wages than did general labor in a sawmill and provided the opportunity to work intermittently and pursue other activities when so desired" (1996, 32). The labor of lumber longshoring involved handling raw, unprocessed logs and milled lumber and moving them into the holds of ships (Parnaby 2008, 81). In the early decades of longshoring, this involved transporting logs by hand into the sailing ships by maneuvering them through portholes or the stern, or by sliding them down "a series of ramps to the ship's hold" (Parnaby 2008, 81). Milled lumber was loaded into the ship holds using a sling which was lifted by cable with a steam-powered engine, called a "donkey" which was situated either on the docks or on barges in the inlet or river (Parnaby 2008, 81).

The shipping bosses clearly viewed racism and racial division of workers as an essential strategy for controlling the waterfront. That meant devoting great energy to separating Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers (especially given that the Indigenous workers had a history of syndicalist organizational practice). Notably the bosses saw a vested interest in promoting statist nuclear family structures as a mechanism for building allegiance to the dominant Anglo-Canadian society in British Columbia.

Local 526 met in a hall on the Squamish reserve. Unlike some other unions of the day, and reflecting its syndicalist character, IWW Local 526 was actually a multicultural local, though organized predominantly by Indigenous workers an addressing Indigenous community issues. This was counter to the efforts of shipping bosses and some workers alike who sought to maintain racist job and task separation and work scheduling on the docks.

Conclusion

Contemporary green syndicalists assert the necessity of building alliances with Indigenous workers and communities as central to building resistance to colonialism, capitalism, and ecological destruction. Too few syndicalists perhaps recognize that Indigenous workers played important parts in in the history of syndicalist organizing. Looking at the case of IWW Local 526, and the legacies of the Bows and Arrows, can make an important contribution to understanding histo-

ries of class struggle in settler colonial capitalist contexts. Indigenous organizing is a part of the history of syndicalism. Syndicalism is part of the history of Indigenous organizing.

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