

Book Reviews

A Review of Rod Mickleburgh's *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*

John R. Hinde¹

¹ Department of History, Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, Canada

E-mail: john.hinde@viu.ca

The history of British Columbia has been profoundly shaped by the struggle of workers to end their exploitation and to win political and economic rights. Historically, however, this fight between labour and capital has been profoundly unequal because of the close collaboration between the state and business against the working classes. Rather than the state being a neutral mediator between the interests of labour and the interests of capital, for the most part the state has been dominated by representatives of the business elites and has actively facilitated the suppression of worker mobilization. With the consistent backing of government and institutions of the state, such as the police, militia, and courts, companies and corporations have waged an unrelenting campaign against attempts by workers in both the private and public sectors to unionize in order to better articulate and defend their rights and interests. But corporate interests have not always prevailed. Against tremendous odds, over the past 150 years the labour movement in British Columbia grew into a powerful force to be reckoned with. Despite setbacks and challenges, it was not destroyed and indeed continues to play a vital role in British Columbia society.

Rod Mickleburgh's new and important book, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, tells the story of this remarkable struggle. While a considerable amount of academic works exists on the history of the labour movement and the working classes in British Columbia, Mickleburgh's book aims to reach a broader public.¹⁰⁸ Wonderfully written and richly illustrated in the format of a coffee-table book, *On the Line's* goal is to provide detailed and comprehensive snapshots of working-class struggle over a period of 150 years, beginning with the arrival of the first Europeans to the election of the NDP in 2017. This history can be divided into two general phases: from colonization to the Second World War; and from the post-war era to the present day. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the formative period of the labour movement as it was of the province's capitalist economy more generally, which was based on primary resource extraction. Coal mining, especially on Vancouver Island, was the early driver of the capitalism in British Columbia, but as the colonial population grew with the influx of British, Chinese and Japanese settlers, often displacing First Nations labour, the primary economy expanded into other sectors such as fisheries and timber. Attempts to unionize followed as workers struggled for better pay and working conditions. Strikes were not only frequent, but by the end of the nineteenth century workers had begun to mobilize politically: in 1901, for instance, Nanaimo's James W. Hawthornthwaite became the first socialist elected to the provincial legislature.

The government's response to working-class mobilization until the Second World War was often drastic and extreme. "Along with other governments across Canada," writes Mickleburgh, "the province aligned with powerful

¹⁰⁸ Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, (British Columbia: Harbour Publishing, 2018).

business interests and police to clamp down on union organizing at every turn.”¹⁰⁹ It never hesitated to use all the instruments of state power at its disposal – police, militia, or private American security, such as Pinkerton agents – to intimidate strikers, break up strikes, enforce blacklists, and protect scabs. The arrest of striking workers and union leaders was common, and they were often sentenced to lengthy prison terms. During the Vancouver Island coal strike of 1912-14 the government used all the force at its disposal – police, Pinkertons, and the militia in an attempt to break the strike – and during the “Battle of Ballantyne Pier” in 1935, mounted police wielding truncheons charged striking longshoremen, many of whom were First World War veterans, including Mickey O’Rourke, a winner of the Victoria Cross. With no equivalent of the American Wagner Act, passed by the Roosevelt administration in 1935 which recognized union rights, Canadian workers continued to be at the mercy of a hostile state and angry employers. The situation began to change somewhat with the passage in 1937 of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act (ICA) by the government of Thomas Dufferin Pattullo. But Pattullo’s attempt to foster labour harmony was belied by subsequent strikes, violence, and the continued refusal to recognize unions.

The Second World War marked a turning point for the labour movement in British Columbia, as after many decades of struggle, legislative changes were made in 1943 to the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act which recognized unions, ended the use of company unions, and forced recalcitrant employers to bargain. This was reinforced by federal legislation granting unions legal bargaining rights the following year. “For the first time,” Mickleburgh writes, “governments accepted that unions were vital partners in the economy, their yearnings legitimate” (p.108). However, this did not mean that governments or business interests were eager to work with the unions, which had seen significant growth in membership during the war and the post-war economic boom. On the contrary, their goal of destroying the union movement did not change; their strategy, however, did, as employers “discovered to their delight that the courts could be just as effective as truncheons for thwarting unions. For the next twenty-five years, police on horseback and the billy club were replaced by the court injunction to keep labour in its place.”¹¹⁰

But it proved difficult “to keep labour in its place.” Under the Social Credit regime of WAC Bennett in the 1960s labour unrest intensified and the face of labour began to change with the growth of public sector unions. By the early 1970s BC’s labour movement was considered the most militant in Canada and Bennett’s government the most anti-labour. “Social Credit’s record of anti-union legislation was unrivalled in the history of BC. By the time of the 1972 election, the province’s unions were in a virtual state of war against Bennett, his government and BC employers.”¹¹¹ The election of the first NDP government under Dave Barrett in 1972 led to important labour reforms, but Barrett’s defeat in the snap election of 1975 returned the Social Credit to power under Bill Bennett. Under Bennett and the Social Credit, the state continued its onslaught against labour, defeating the powerful Solidarity movement in 1983 and eliminating reforms to the Labour Code introduced by Barrett’s NDP. The situation was little different under the Liberals, the successors of Social Credit, during the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. Confronted by the neo-liberal wave which began to sweep the globe in the 1980s and with labour increasingly on the back foot, labour unions have struggled to maintain their role in society.

This very accessible book is a much welcomed and timely celebration of the resilience of unions and their vital role in the history and development of this province. While it is unfortunate that Mickleburgh has not provided footnotes of his sources, his extensive research and deep understanding of labour history is evidenced by his thorough bibliography, and he makes a very valuable contribution to the existing literature of BC’s labour movement. Two points deserve emphasis here. Of particular significance is his examination of the roles played by First Nations, women, and Asian immigrants as active participants in the development of British Columbia’s economy in general, and the labour movement in particular. Second, this book is also a welcomed counterthrust to the neoliberal narrative which argues that unions are an anachronism in the increasingly globalized capitalist economy. Indeed, at a time when labour and the left around the world are besieged by global corporations and right-wing extremism- arguably a time when unions are needed now more than ever – this book offers an invaluable reminder of the role unions have played in creating a more progressive and just society.

¹⁰⁹ Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, 100.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181.