
STORIES OF
ASIAN CANADIAN
LABOUR HISTORY

CHINESE RAILROAD WORKERS

From 1881 to 1884, over 17,000 Chinese workers came to Canada to build the railroad, and later maintain it.

Chinese workers were repeatedly degraded in newspaper articles and editorial illustrations. White Canadians feared that Chinese workers would accept lower wages and steal jobs their jobs. Negative stereotypes proclaimed Chinese cultural practices such as dress, living conditions and funeral rites to be abhorrent.[1]

British Columbia passed legislation barring Chinese into the province, but this was declared unconstitutional. Besides, Chinese workers were the only workers willing to do the work. The first Prime Minister of Canada admitted that the railway could not be completed without Chinese workers.[2]

THE REAL HISTORY BEHIND THE UNION LABEL

The union label or "union bug" is a cherished symbol of the Canadian labour movement that indicates a product or service was produced by unionized labour. However, the union bug has a more sinister history. It was developed in the 1880s in response to perceived unfair competition from Chinese workers. At the time, union labels became synonymous with not only sanitary and fair conditions of labour, but also products produced by white labour.[3]

KOMAGATA MARU

In May 1914, in direct challenge to Canada's racist immigration laws, the Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver harbour with 376 mostly Sikh adults and children. Worried that the federal government would not adequately address the concerns of white Canadians—more particularly of white workers—the Vancouver and District Labour Council voted overwhelmingly to demand the immediate deportation of the "Hindoos" on board the ship. One of the supporters of the 14-5 vote argued that it was "up to labour to take a stand against the admission of Asiatics". After a two-month stalemate, the Canadian Navy forced the boat back to sea. Only 20 people who could prove they were already Canadian residents were allowed to stay. The Komagata Maru returned to India to be met by the British military and 20 passengers were killed in the ensuing confrontation.[6]

In May 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau offered an official apology in the House of Commons for the government's tragic role in turning away the majority of those passengers. The apology states that "the passengers of the Komagata Maru, like millions of immigrants to Canada since, were seeking refuge and better lives for their families. With so much to contribute to their new home, they chose Canada and we failed them utterly. As a nation, we should never forget the prejudice suffered by the Sikh community at the hands of the Canadian government of the day. We should not and we will not."[7]

STRIKE FOR AN 8 HOUR DAY

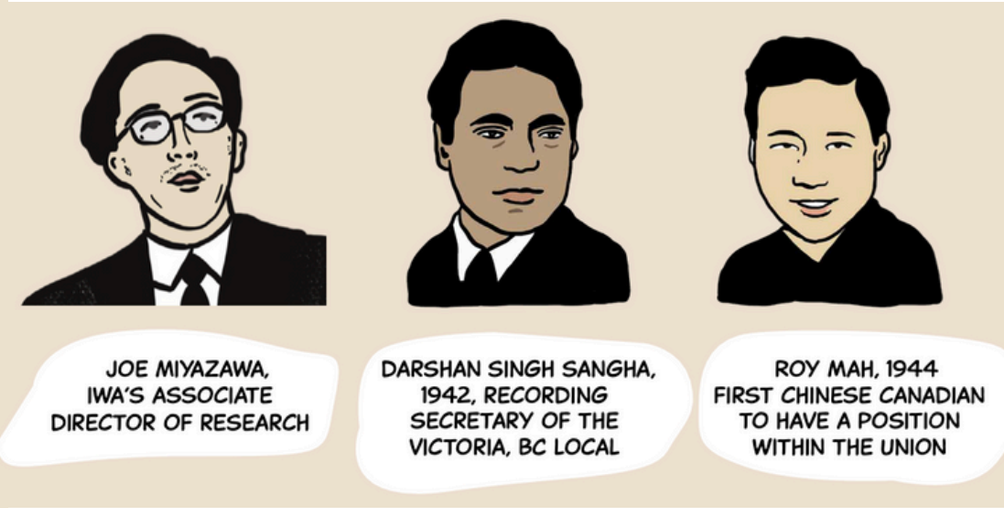
In 1919, approximately 800 workers, mostly of Asian descent, took strike action against differential pay reductions, and demanded an 8-hour day and better working conditions in dozens of shingle mills in British Columbia's lower mainland. The workers struck for 40 days, in partnership with the International Weavers Union of America who represented the White shingle workers. The strike ended successfully, two months before the historic Winnipeg General Strike. The strike was one of the first joint efforts to organize across racial lines in Canadian labour history.[1]

ASIAN WORKERS WIN EQUAL PROTECTION, BUT LOSE BARGAINING POWER

For decades, Asian workers were subjected to inferior wages and working conditions compared to white Canadian workers. After pressure from members and with the need to organize Asian workers in the saw mills, the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) demanded equal pay for all workers in their collective agreements. In the 1940s, the IWA started hiring Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian organizers to overcome racial barriers and build the membership.[3]

Roy Mah, the first Chinese IWA union staffer, organized over 2,500 Chinese-Canadians into the union and wrote a Cantonese union newsletter believed to be the first of its kind in North America. Joe Miyazawa began organizing during his internment in a Japanese prison camp where he was a mill worker. After his time as a successful organizer, he became the IWA's Associate Director of Research. Darshan Singh Sangha successfully organized many Sikh-dominated mills and became the first racialized person to be a district trustee.[4] While successful within the IWA, multiracial solidarity was less present in sectors like the pulp and paper industry. The International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Mill Workers' (IBPSPMW) bargaining leverage improved after Japanese workers joined the union.

However, the union subsequently negotiated collective agreement language that excluded Japanese workers from future employment within the industry.



JAPANESE INTERNMENT: CURFEWS & RESTRICTIONS FOR FARM WORKERS

In 1942, an influx of Japanese workers from British Columbia arrived in Ontario as part of the Ontario Farm Service Force. These workers were subjected to racist attitudes, similar to those faced in British Columbia's Okanagan Valley when large numbers of Japanese were expulsed from British Columbia's Coast at the onset of World War II. White Ontarians saw Japanese workers as threatening to their Anglo-Saxon attitudes, values, and standard of living. The Nisei (born in Canada to Japanese parents) were perceived as a threat to white womens' sexual morality, and to the "racial purity" ideals that were popular in the early-to-mid twentieth century. With such racism prevailing, Japanese farm workers in Ontario faced exclusion, and lacked opportunities to integrate into farm town life.

The city of Chatham was among the most outwardly aggressive in protests against the labour mobilization of Japanese-Canadian internees into their community. A resolution passed by council states that, "the purpose of the Japanese here be fulfilled by requiring them to work and keep out of town during labour hours, or be confined to camp at all times under detention".[5]

Founding of the Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists

African Canadian, Caribbean, East Asian, and South Asian unionists formed the Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (OCBTU) in 1986.

“Black” was used as a political term encompassing all who are racially oppressed. The OCBTU is an independent, autonomous body, allowing racialized activists in different unions to keep the anti-racism agenda in the forefront and hold the mostly white male union leadership accountable. OCBTU continues to achieve victories through their commitment to addressing racism within organized labour and the community. In 1996, the organization was renamed the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) after it affiliated with the US-based CBTU and became a fully recognized chapter in Ontario.

ACLA and CBTU frequently collaborate on anti-racist initiatives.

Domestic Caregivers Fight Back and Win

Caribbean women who came in the 1940s and 50s for domestic work were subjected to pregnancy tests, paid less, and denied the permanent residency offered to European workers.

In 1981, migrant, labour and community activists pressured minister of immigration, Lloyd Axworthy, to reform Canada's immigration policies and provide a pathway to permanent residence for caregivers. Known as the foreign domestic workers movement, caregivers could apply for residency after 24 months of service.

In the 80s and 90s, Canada's domestic worker labour source shifted to the Philippines. In 1992, Canada implemented the live-in caregivers program to address some of the abuses that these workers faced. Organizations like the Caregivers' Action Centre, Migrante, Philippines Women's Centre, and Intercede played instrumental roles in resisting and organizing, which pressured Canada to reform its racist and exclusionary practices

ACLA Launches

In 2000, Asian activists founded parallel chapters of the **Asian Canadian Labour Alliance** (ACLA) in British Columbia and Ontario, inspired by the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) Canada chapter, Asian activism in the United States, and the vibrancy of the Asian Pacific American Labour Alliance (APALA).

ACLA is dedicated to advancing the rights of racialized workers in Canada and has supported organizing drives, undertaken advocacy for racialized workers mistreated by their unions, and fought for the inclusion of marginalized voices in the labour movement. ACLA is an independent, autonomous voice that demands fairness, justice, and equality for all.

SARS, COVID-19 AND BEYOND: THE VIRUS OF ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

In 2003, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic reached Canada and became racialized as an East Asian disease. Chinese community members, and those who might be perceived as Chinese, were stereotyped as being infected and many people refused to go near Chinese people or patronize Chinese businesses and restaurants. The tourism and hospitality sectors were hit hard as fewer visitors came to Toronto, and many workers became unemployed. A broad pan-Asian solidarity campaign developed, showing support for businesses and workers hurt by the economic and social impact of SARS. From organizing community dinners in Chinatown to advocating for income support and training opportunities for industries that were hit hard, ACLA and its allies campaigned to ensure that racialized communities would not be left behind.[2]

Nearly two decades later, the COVID-19 pandemic saw Asian communities experiencing a sharp resurgence of anti-Asian racism and violence. COVID-19 has also created many opportunities for communities to come together to organize such as hosting video conferencing to conduct meetings, webinars and organizing assemblies. In 2020, ACLA organized a series of webinars that reached thousands of people . The webinars highlighted the specific struggles Asian communities faced during the pandemic, the conflict of the model minority myth, and how that perpetuates racial divisions, especially anti-Black racism. On March 28, 2021, in response to the upward rise in anti-Asian violence in Canada and abroad coupled with targeted fatal shootings in Atlanta, Georgia, Asian community members, organizations, and allies came together for the Toronto Solidarity Rally Against Anti-Asian Racism at Nathan Phillips Square. Co-organized by ACLA, Butterfly, Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice (CCNC-SJ), Chinese Canadian National Council, Toronto Chapter (CCNCTO) and For A Safer Space, the rally was attended by thousands of people.