

Finnish Influence in the Canadian Labour Movement: A Cause Transplanted

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At the opening of the twentieth century, Finnish civil society was deeply engaged in a struggle for assertion of national identity in the political context of the Russian Empire. After the 1905 general strike, socialist ideas which informed the labour movement at home and abroad loomed large in that struggle.

During the Russification efforts before and after the strike, many activists were transported to Siberia or were forced to flee abroad, mainly to the United States and Canada. Many were members of the radical intelligentsia, journalists, authors, politicians, and labour organizers. In Finnish centres such as Thunder Bay, Ontario, they became quickly identified by the locals as "The Gentlemen from Helsinki." There were quite a few "Helsinki Ladies" as well, women like Sanna Kannasto, who had become active during the movement to win suffrage for their sex, which Finland became one of the first countries to achieve in 1906.

There was something of an over-representation of socialist intellectuals with nationalist leanings among Finnish immigrants to Canada at least until the end of the First World War. This might also describe other immigrants fleeing Russification, notably Ukrainians and Russian Jews. The Finns stand out particularly because of their extensive successful organizing efforts in the liberal climate of the Grand Duchy of Finland before Russification.

Finns both at home and in the diaspora were largely in a "mobilized" mode before the Second World War, which characterized their choices for social participation. At the turn of the century over 70% of Finnish immigrants to Canada were classified as farmers or workers. One quarter were occupationally classified as "unknown." The role of intellectuals in social mobilizations is difficult to quantify by such statistics but this does

not imply their influence cannot be discerned in qualitative terms.

Theirs was a particular brand of social idealism which went beyond modest reforms or the concerns of a particular trade. Finnish leftists' views encompassed a holistic vision of a better, fairer society – a vision which had been fondly harboured and fostered over almost a century of imagining the birth of a Finnish nation.

When committed social activists experience the adversity of exile, the responses range from resignation, even renunciation of social engagement, to ethnic enclavism to retreatism to the other extreme of intensified engagement. All of these reactions to exile were evident among the turn-of-the-century immigrant activists.

How individual Finnish activists responded to their exile was determined by factors such as the depth and success of their activism in Finland, settlement location in Canada and the array of personal skills they brought with them. These labour intellectuals also possessed study skills either learned in educational institutions or through self-study which they were able to apply to learn the English language. Thus many of them also became natural community interpreters and leaders.

Language certainly proved a high threshold for those who wanted to pursue their political ideals. Parliamentary or municipal politics was not accessible to most because of fluency and citizenship requirements. Activism in ethnic and labour organizations served as a natural outlet.

Many became entrepreneurs, tradesmen, farmers, and labourers, leaving politics to others. Matti Kurikka was an example of retreatism and became engaged in founding a utopian colony in Sointula after pursuing a career of political activism in Finland.