

The Finnish-Canadian Contribution to Labour and Politics in the Early Twentieth Century

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During the first 35 years of the twentieth century, socialism in Canada owed much to the presence and enthusiastic support of Finnish immigrants. This is remarkable considering Finns only made up a minority of the Canadian labour force. Many of these workers had already been radicalized before immigrating to Canada by the changing nature of politics in Finland in the wake of rampant industrialization and the Russian Tsar's program of Russification. Many sought political refuge in the burgeoning Canadian socialist organizations.

Finnish immigrants injected new ideas into existing Canadian socialist organizations that had previously been based on policies derived from British and American trade unionist and labour politics. At the Lakehead, Finns played a crucial role in the development of the early history of the left.

Upon their arrival to Canada, most Finnish workers did not share common cause with the existing Anglo-dominated trade unions organized under the American Federation of Labor and later the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. In fact, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada advertised itself in the Lakehead as the only organization in the region capable of protecting workers from "cheap, foreign-born labour."

As a result, Finns formed their own workers' associations, based on the same principles that had guided the Finnish cooperative movement in the late nineteenth century. The Port Arthur Finnish Workingmen's Association, Imatra #9, formed in 1903, was one such organization. Its membership drew heavily from the Finns dissatisfied with the social and political discussions in the local churches and temperance associations. The expressed goal of the Amerikan Suomalainen Työväenliitto Imatra was the dissemination of socialism by taking an active role in cultural, edu-

cational, and political activities. Activities centred around the Finnish labour halls or temples. This "hall socialism" remained a powerful force among Finns.

One of the most visible characteristics of Finnish involvement in politics during the first two migration waves was the role of women such as Sanna Kannasto as regional and national advocates on the issue of women's suffrage. Having achieved the right to vote in Finland in 1906, many women were astounded to discover that they lost what was considered a basic right when they arrived in Canada. Through lecturing in halls to sewing circles, these women discussed and debated a host of issues ranging from contraception, maternal health, the nature of marriage and abortion to the writings of Karl Kautsky and Vladimir Lenin. Their progressiveness and willingness to counter the dogma of the Canadian state led them to being branded as troublemakers, unfit parents, and prostitutes. Their most vocal opponents were the wives of the Anglo elite who would themselves later champion the right to vote movement.

Dissatisfied with the lack of political action undertaken by the parent organization, Finnish socialists associated with the Imatra #9 in Port Arthur and Fort William actively pushed the Imatra #9 League to play a greater role in politics and unions where Finnish populations existed. Long blocked from political involvement and frustrated by the English orientation of trade unions, local Finnish workers established a branch of the Socialist Party of Canada in Port Arthur in 1906. This provided a natural home for those Finnish-Canadian socialists who were looking to take a more active political role within Canada and had left the Imatra #9 League.

By 1910 internal divisions had taken a toll on the party. Differences in political ideas and eth-