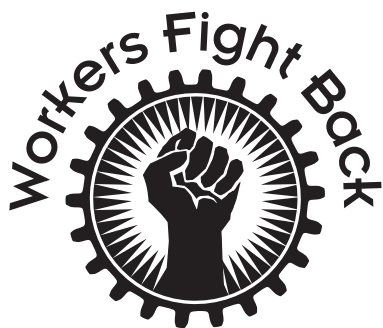


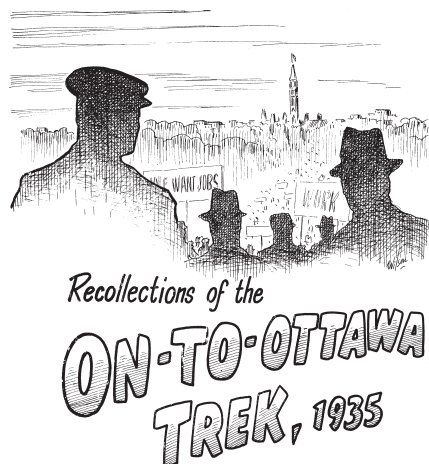
# On-to-Ottawa Trek, 1935



## LESSON 2—GRADE 11

### PRESCRIBED LEARNING OUTCOMES

- demonstrate skills and attitudes of active citizenship, including ethical behaviour, open-mindedness, respect for diversity, and collaboration
- identify attributes associated with active citizenship, including
  - empathy
  - questioning and promoting discussion
  - individual and collective responsibility
- demonstrate skills of collaboration and co-operation, including the ability to
  - collaborate and consult with others
  - respect and promote respect for the contributions of other team members
- distinguish among Canada’s and BC’s major political parties in terms of policies, philosophies, and priorities
- compare mechanisms whereby public policy can be changed (e.g., elections, petitions and protests, lobbyists, special interest groups, court actions, media campaigns)
- assess the development and impact of Canadian social policies and programs related to immigration, the welfare state, and minority rights
- give examples of Canada’s treatment of minorities
- explain economic cycles with reference to the Great Depression and the labour movement in Canada
- describe the effects of and various responses to the Great Depression (e.g., unemployment, government intervention, protest parties, soup kitchens)
- relate economic cycles to the development of the labour movement
- describe the role of women in terms of social, political, and economic change in Canada
- identify ways in which women have influenced Canadian society



Fraser Wilson cover illustration from book *Recollections of the On-To-Ottawa Trek, 1935* by Ronald Liversedge, 1961.

### TITLE

On-to-Ottawa Trek, 1935

### OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the efforts of the unemployed in the 1930s. Students will be able to empathize with the living conditions of the unemployed in the “Dirty Thirties.”

### INTRODUCTION

The On-to-Ottawa Trek ranks as one of the most important events in Canadian labour history. In the 1930s, with so many unemployed, the focus of working-class organizing became the unemployed. The social safety net: unemployment insurance, welfare, universal medical care, and worker’s compensation didn’t exist in the 1930’s. The “Dirty Thirties” led

to a marked swing toward radical left-wing organizations, from block committees growth in memberships of the Communist Party of Canada and a new socialist party: the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The three divisions of unemployed, led by Slim Evans, that left Vancouver for Ottawa in 1935 to demand action from Bennett's Conservative government are part of that radical workers' movement. The "Dirty Thirties," with its strikes, unemployed workers' unions, riots, occupations, street demonstrations, sit-ins, a dramatic increase in unionized workers, the rising popularity of socialism, the CCF, and the almost universal feeling that classical capitalism had failed, will have long-term consequences that will help shape contemporary Canadian society.

### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

Article, On-to-Ottawa Trek (highly recommend resource—the video On-to-Ottawa Trek, directed Sara Diamond). The video is being added to the web page. Check the web site: <http://www.ontoottawa.ca>. This site is maintained by the On-to-Ottawa Historical Society, which also offers background on the depression, the relief camps, the trek and the aftermath.

### **TIME**

One to two periods

### **PERIOD ONE**

Divide class in groups of four students.

Read the introduction (On-to-Ottawa Trek) to the class, and discuss.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Do you know someone who is or has been unemployed?
2. Is unemployment a problem only for the unemployed? Explain why or why not.
3. What do people do today when they are unemployed?
4. Why do you think the unemployed were so desperate in the 1930s?

Students will read to each other the article "A Trekker Remembers," divide the questions, report to the group, come to a consensus on the answers, and record the answers in their notebooks.

1. Why were so many people supportive of the trekkers?
2. Comment on the effects of the depression in Saskatchewan.
3. Why did the meeting between R.B. Bennett and Slim Evans end in mutual insults?
4. What were the long-term consequences of the trek?
5. Describe the role of women in the article.
6. What would you have done if you were unemployed in the 1930s?
7. What was a relief camp, and what were the conditions like in the camps?
8. Quote the sentence that tells you there was no need for people to go hungry.

After students have finished discussing and writing down their answers, take up their responses with the class. (This could be done at the beginning of the next period.)

## **PERIOD TWO**

In their groups, students will collaboratively write one friendly letter from the point of view of Ronald Liversedge, the trekker. The letter will be addressed to his parents back in Vancouver. The letter should describe what he sees and hears, the people he meets, his inner frustrations about being young and unemployed.

Have each group read its letter to the class. At this time, the class can do a variety of activities, including asking questions to each of the groups and/or discuss the similarities and differences in the letters. The letters could be sent to another group, and then have the groups collectively or individually write back to Ronald, from the point of view of his parents.

## **EVALUATION**

Collect and mark questions and letters.

## **THE ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK—INTRODUCTION**

The On-to-Ottawa Trek in the summer of 1935 captured the hearts and minds of Canadians. The Depression of the 1930s—The “Dirty Thirties”—was a time of despair and fightback. Thousands of people were thrown onto the streets without jobs, without money, without savings, without hope. By 1932, 1,800,000 Canadians were on welfare. More than one-third of the labour force was unemployed. There was no unemployment insurance in those days. Those who were working also suffered. Employers could cut wages and increase hours without fear of strikes.

Families broke up. Men left home to look for jobs. Boys were cut off their families’ relief on their 16th birthday. They travelled the country on freight cars to look for work and food. In 1932 the federal government set up relief camps in isolated areas for unemployed single men. Over the next four years, more than 100,000 young Canadians lived in those camps. The camps were run by the army. Pay was 20 cents a day in addition to bad food and poor accommodation.

The relief camp workers in British Columbia were organized into the Relief Camp Workers Union. They wanted “work and wages.” The union demanded an increase in wages, a five-day workweek, unemployment insurance, and Worker’s Compensation coverage, the right to vote, and to have the camps taken out of control of the Defence Department.

In 1935, about 1500 left the camps in B.C. to protest the bad conditions. They gathered in Vancouver over several weeks. The relief camp workers organized a trek to Ottawa by freight car to protest directly to the federal government. Starting with 1500 in Vancouver on June 3rd and joined along the route by more unemployed, 2000 trekkers reached Regina two weeks later. In Regina on July 1 (Dominion Day), citizens and trekkers were brutally attacked by the RCMP and city police on orders of Conservative Prime Minister R.B. (Iron Heel) Bennett.

The trek was stopped. Its leaders were arrested. But the trekkers maintained their unity and organization. They won the right to return to their homes as a group in railway passenger cars.

Within months, the Tory Bennett government was defeated. Soon after, the relief camps were abolished. Although the trekkers didn't make it to Ottawa, they won their battle. They raised people's spirit to fight for jobs and a better life. They helped change Canada.

**Adapted from *Heritage of Struggle Canadian Labour History Workbook*, published by Metro Labour Education Centre**

## **A TREKKER REMEMBERS**

Ronald Liversedge took part in the On-to-Ottawa Trek and was a member of the CPC.

### **Ronald Liversedge Remembers**

We boarded the CPR boxcars and huddled together on top of the cars preparing ourselves for the long, cold ride ahead. We were slowly moving east to the shouted good wishes of the people of Vancouver. At every crossing, there were people to bid us good luck, until Victoria Drive where the train picked up speed, and soon it was goodbye to Vancouver, and that was the start of the trek.

After one night in Kamloops, the trekkers headed east again. Their next stop was Golden, as Calgary was too far to go in one stretch.

I was wondering about Golden in the heart of the Rockies. From what I could remember, having passed through a few times riding freight, there was nothing at Golden except a station, a hotel, and a few shacks. Trek leader Slim Evans was very optimistic. He said, "There is a large farming area there with lots of good farms." What's more, there was a little white-haired lady living on one of those farms, a communist, and a personal acquaintance of Evans, to whom Slim had sent a telegram from Kamloops telling her the time of our arrival in Golden, and stating, "Please prepare food and welcome for one thousand."

We pulled into Golden shortly after noon. We very soon marched onto a large expanse of park like land, richly grassed with large shade trees scattered here and there. Under a half dozen of the huge shade trees were cooking fires, and suspended over the fires were various kinds of makeshift cooking vessels full to the brims with simmering, bubbling, thick, heavenly-smelling beef stew. Over one fire (and this is the gospel truth) was suspended a full size bathtub, also full to the brim with beef stew. There were long trestle tables with thousands of slices of golden crusted bread. Around each fire were just two or three quiet, smiling women, salting, peppering, and tasting.

It was incredible, it was heartwarming, it was beautiful.

The next day, we left Golden with reluctance, but we had to pass on. There was one bad spot on this lap of our journey, the Connaught tunnel. The tunnel, which spirals through the heart of a mountain, is about seven miles long. It was a nightmarish trip. I think the two locomotives pulling the train were coal burners. The tunnel was filled with dirty,

brown, billowing, gritty, warm smoke. The acrid sulphurous stench was overpowering, and gave one a choking sensation. We all lay on top of the boxcars, covering our mouths and noses with handkerchiefs or rags. The trip through the tunnel took about 30 minutes, and it was a wonderful sensation to finally emerge into the fresh air.

After Calgary, soon we were rolling across the lone prairie, where the coyotes howl, and the sheriffs were busy delivering more closure notices to the poor farmers. In Saskatchewan alone during the depression, 5,000 farms were seized for debt by the mortgage companies, the banks, and the farm machinery companies. There was very little in the way of crops evident as we travelled along on the boxcars. What was the use of growing wheat when all the elevators were full to the bursting point. No matter that millions of people in the world starved, along with scores of thousands in our own country. As long as the people didn't have money to buy, then the goods and food would remain locked away and guarded by armed men.

One entry into Regina was something of a triumph. We had been successful up to now, had built our forces up, and we were a proud little army. As we marched through the city streets, throngs of people lined the sidewalks to give us a rousing welcome. At the official welcome, there were gathered representatives of all the working people's organizations, communist, CCF unemployed, trade union, and there was a large choir from the Ukrainian Labour Farmers Temple Association.

Hundreds of unemployed workers joined the trek as it moved east. Public support was growing. In a manoeuvre to stop the trek, the federal government invited a delegation to negotiate in Ottawa. They met Prime Minister R.B. Bennett.

There sat Bennett behind his desk, surrounded by officials and guards. There were the press, and in front of Bennett, the eight representatives of the trek. The Prime Minister wasted no time, but went into his diatribe of abuse, condemnation, and threats, his face crimson with hatred.

He then singled out Slim Evans and roared, "We know you down here, Evans! You are a criminal and a thief!" At this, Slim calmly rose to his feet, and looking the Prime Minister in the eye, he said, loudly and distinctly, "And you're a liar, Bennett, and what is more, you are not fit to run a great country like Canada."

The offer of negotiations, openly and cynically a trap to get the delegation to Ottawa, the heaping of verbal abuse on their heads, with no intention of negotiating, all this, even coming from Bennett, was, in the eyes of the Canadian people, shameful and inexcusable.

The trek representatives returned to Regina by July 1; plans were made to call off the trek. But at the outdoor meeting to announce the decision, the federal mounties launched an attack. Dozens of people were injured, 100 were arrested, and there was much damage in downtown Regina.

What a price to pay for the defeat of a government and extinction of a political party. Although R.B. Bennett was too great an egotist to admit the fact, he had on that Dominion Day in 1935, signed the death warrant of his government and party for the next two-and-a-quarter decades.

**Adapted from *Heritage of Struggle, Canadian Labour History Workbook*, published by Metro Labour Education Centre**

## **NOTICE**

In the absence of the leader of the marchers at the Stadium Friday morning, the following notice was handed by the railway companies' representatives to Bert Canaven, who stated that he was qualified to receive it and would undertake to see that it got to the leader of the relief camp strikers:

REGINA, 14th June, 1935

To Whom it May Concern:

We are instructed to inform you that no person or persons will be permitted to further ride on the trains of the Canadian National Railways or on the trains of the Canadian Pacific Railway without authority or without holding proper transportation entitling such person or persons to do so.

It is requested that you will accept this notice and refrain from unlawfully boarding or riding on the trains of either Railway Company, and that you will notify and instruct those that may be associated with you or under your directions not to unlawfully board or ride on any train of either Railway Company.

We are further instructed to inform you that if you or those associated with you further persist in unlawfully riding on the trains of either Railway Company, the proper authorities will give every assistance and use every means available to ensure that the law in this respect is observed.

You are requested to disperse and return to your respective homes. If you will do this the Railway Companies will take up with the Dominion authorities the question of providing some means by which you can so return.

THE CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS.  
THE CANADIAN PACIFIC RAILWAY.

Courtesy of Saskatchewan Archives.  
Regina Commission Exhibit.

## **National Historic Site for Trekkers**

The federal government has announced its intention to designate a National Historic Site to commemorate the On-to-Ottawa trek of 1935.

Sometime in early June 2001, Heritage Canada will unveil a plaque and cairn in Regina—likely in Victoria Park—telling the magnificent story of the trek.

The On-to-Ottawa Trek came out of the hardship and desperation of the Great Depression.

With close to a third of the workforce unemployed the Canadian government, led by millionaire Conservative prime minister R.B. Bennett, decided to set up “relief camps” to get jobless men off the streets and out of the reach of “agitators.”

### **“Slave camps” set up**

Bennett established over a hundred such work camps, most of them in remote areas of northern Ontario and the interior of B.C. The relief camps were under the control of the Canadian military, and living conditions were harsh and primitive. All work was done by hand with picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows. Pay was 20 cents a day. There were no radios and little reading material. The relief camp workers were not even eligible to vote in elections. They began referring to themselves as “inmates of slave camps,” and some began organizing the Relief Camp Workers Union (started by the CPC) to fight for real jobs, real wages, and a decent life.

### **Strike starts**

In the early spring of 1935, the RCWU called the camp inmates from the Rockies to the Pacific out on strike. Many of the strikers converged on Vancouver in early April and held large demonstrations, parades, and protests calling for implementation of their slogan “Work and Wages.”

Vancouver unions and supportive citizens kept the strikers going with food and money.

The strikers’ call for federal assistance was ignored, so they decided to take their protest to the nation’s capital, riding the rails as they were used to doing.

On June 2, 1935, over a thousand unemployed young men left Vancouver on top of a CPR freight train, thus starting the famous On-to-Ottawa Trek. They were led by Arthur “Slim” Evans, a veteran trade union organizer, labour militant, former Wobbly and Communist.

### **Riding the rails**

Through Kamloops, Revelstoke, Golden, Calgary, Medicine Hat, Swift Current, and Moose Jaw, the Trek rolled on. An advance party that included Regina’s Matt Shaw managed to scrounge food for the growing band of jobless men. The Trekkers slept in public parks or baseball diamonds.

Bennett ordered the RCMP to halt the Trekkers—now 2000 strong—at Regina on June 14. He feared a revolution if the protesters got to Ottawa.

### **Trekkers reach Regina**

The Trekkers were housed in the barns and display buildings at the Regina Exhibition Grounds and issued meal tickets for local lunch counters and cafes. Donations of food also came in from Regina citizens.

An eight-member delegation from the RCWU, which included Slim Evans and Doc Savage, was allowed to travel to Ottawa and meet with R.B. Bennett, whom they unsuccessfully lobbied for job-creation measures. The meeting ended in a yelling match between the Tory prime minister and Evans.

On the evening of July 1, 1935, a large meeting of Regina citizens sympathetic to the Trek was held in the downtown area. The police and RCMP used the gathering to arrest the Trek leaders.

### **Regina Riot**

This obvious provocation initiated the Regina Riot on the evening of Dominion Day 1935. Scarcely any windows were left unbroken in downtown businesses, dozens were wounded by bullets fired by the police, one plain clothes police officer was killed.

Within days the Trekkers returned to their camps or homes and the Trek was over.

But the effects were lasting. In the fall of 1935 the Bennett government was decisively trounced in a general election. The camps were closed soon after. Before long the new federal government started planning an unemployment insurance system, and governments also started paying social assistance to single unemployed people. And from 1935 onward politicians could no longer simply ignore high rates of unemployment.

### **Trek important**

The Trek is important to the labour movement for a number of reasons.

It was workers who organized and took part in the On-to-Ottawa Trek, the majority of them young, single, unemployed men from western Canada.

A majority of the most committed Trekkers were union members, and all the prominent leaders of the Trek were trade-union activists. Many of them went on to long and distinguished careers with a variety of unions after the Depression. Doc Savage with the Canadian Seamen's Union (a CPC affiliated union), Harry Linsley with the Packinghouse Workers, and Bob Jackson and George Edwards in the Woodworkers.

The Trekkers deserve to be recognized for the bold stand they took against oppression and injustice.



So come out to whatever unveiling ceremony there is in early June and in the future when you pass the On-to-Ottawa Trek National Historic Site, show some respect for those honoured there. They were some of the great pioneers of the labour movement.

## **CLASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT THE FILM *ON-TO-OTTAWA***

### **What was the situation for single unemployed men in the early 1930s?**

What was the situation for women?

Who was the prime minister, and what was he like?

What was the situation for Indians? How were some First Nations people caught in a “catch 22”?

What was the situation for immigrants? What happened to some of them?

What was the “red menace”?

Why did people stand together?

Who were the “flying pickets”, and what did they do?

Name two songs of the day.

What were the relief camps, and how did they start?

Describe the conditions in the relief camps. Mention at least five things.

How did the relief camps eventually improve? Who caused the change?

Why did they stamp “G” on the men’s papers?

Describe two or three actions used to repress the protesters and organizers.

Who was Joe Hill? What did he do?

Who was Slim Evans? Describe his organizing style. Why did he insist on discipline? What did he mean by discipline?

Who was the mayor of Vancouver?

What were the women’s organizations like?

Why did McGeer get an iron door put on his office?

What is May Day?

What was the influence of women on the relief-camp protests? Why were the women involved? What are three actions that they took?

Why does the film suddenly show a picture of Hitler? What do the filmmakers want you (the viewer) to think about?

If you were given the same choice as the boys who had no money to pay for their restaurant meals, 48 hours to leave town or 90 days at Okalla, what would you choose? Give three reasons why. Consider the consequences of your decision and the message that it will give.

What did each of the three divisions do?

Give three reasons why the strikers thought it was a good idea to take the strike to Ottawa.

When and where did the strikers first meet with the government?

What was the government's offer? Cite three aspects of it.

What were two reasons to reject the government's offer? What were two reasons to accept it?

Describe the meetings with Bennett. How did the strikers act? How did Bennett act?

What were three ways the government prevented the trek from going on from Regina?

Did the "On-to-Ottawa" trek work? What was gained? What was lost?

What event brought an end to the Depression?

In this film biased or unbiased? If it is biased, whose side are the filmmakers on? Give three examples from the film to support your interpretation.

Many of the strikers and unemployed called upon the government to provide relief, to sustain their families, to provide jobs, etc. What should government have done? What is the responsibility of government in times like the Depression? Who is the government?