

# WHAT THE PEOPLE DID, WHILE THE LEADERS LED: An Introduction by Gavin Hainsworth, LSP Team Leader

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Writing labour history, and presenting it in a way that is interesting and relevant to young people, presents significant challenges. As the poem by Bertolt Brecht, “Questions from a Worker Who Reads” that prefaces this resource suggests, the leaders get all the credit, build all the monuments, commission all the plays, paintings, and ballads.

However, this is more than just the old axiom that “history is written by the victors”, or that the King is more interesting (and glamorous) than his cook.

It is more than just movements looking for a leader, as when the French Revolutionary, Danton, wrote in his journal: “I see a crowd marching on the square, I must leave this now, to get in front, for I am a leader of the people.”

It is more than just the old Great Man Versus Great Moment debate of historical theory where the argument exists between those who argue for Napoleon's uniqueness (Great Man) against those that suggest a time traveller accidentally preventing Napoleon from being born would still have seen a French conquest of Europe (Great Moment).

It is also more than moments of historical fate: like that in Lech Walesa's biography, where during the Gdansk Shipyard Strike, since the keynote speaker was drunk, Lech was forced reluctantly to the podium and into history as the leader of Poland's Solidarity—arguably the first crack in the rapid breakdown of Soviet power in Europe.

At its heart, this challenge reveals much deeper lessons of the creation and definitions of personal, cultural, and national identities—which in turn define the very concepts of progress and the future. What are these lessons? What are the reasons?

Firstly, people's movements and activist or radical labour unions are often too busy making history to record it. It is as ridiculous to imagine workers being tear gassed and beaten pausing to write down their feelings and impressions as they occur as it is to imagine man on the street interviews with the followers of Spartacus.

Whatever remnants of writings of these groups might exist by those wishing to record their side of events are usually preserved by accident rather than by design. There are no great marble archives of Worker Studies nor founding chairs in People's Movements. It is the odd but blessed packrat, the uncleaned garage, or a rare flea market that offers a vital key for those seeking to access these stories.

Secondly, even within the labour movement (those who should know better), labour history is frequently not highly valued, or, when celebrated distorted. The most interesting stuff of labour history (the conflicts, the “moments”, the truly human stories) are usually kept “In Committee” behind the strategic need to appear unified in the face of a common enemy. By contrast, it is often the intrigues of the lives of kings and conquerors that dominate that lead to their appeal to students and historians—their faults being as compelling as their victories and defeats. To show the human side of labour leaders, or to track the powers and limitations of personal alliances, would make them come alive for students and historians alike.

Thirdly, there is the common trap of labour historians (or teachers wishing to pull a peoples drama from the curriculum) to focus on “the noble, but tragically but all so glorious dead” of the labour movement. To celebrate the strike brutally broken, or the reform repressed. The lesson given is to suggest change is to invite violence. To attempt to lead a change is to give your life.

A bumper sticker reads: *Unions, The People Who Brought You the Weekend.*

There are no hymns of heroism in the labour song book for the bargain-ers of better working conditions. Yet, a healthy union (or any people’s movement), has both the firebrands that push things into action, and the moderates that sign the deal. To have either missing is to unravel into bloodshed or obscurity. Many of the positive aspects of our society were not our birthright, but were hard won on the streets and in the committee and bargaining rooms.

The final point in this already too lengthy editorial will be one of those missing stories. It is that of the cover artist, Fraser Wilson. The cover is from a water-colour done in 1947. Wilson was born in 1905, in Vancouver. A gifted cartoonist, he sold his first published illustration to a national magazine at the age of twelve. In his early life he painted ships in Wallace’s Shipyards, ran a candy store, did carpentry, developed photos, worked as a painter and decorator, and laboured in a shipyard. It was due to a work-related injury in the yard that he pursued commercial cartooning as a career. At the peak of his political cartooning reputation, he was a favoured artist in both Vancouver dailies, the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Province*.



Wilson was also active in his union and in the CCF during the 1930s and 40s. He was president of the Vancouver Newspaper Guild, local #1 (even having the number one membership card of that former union), and also served as vice-president of the Vancouver Labour Council. Within the CCF, Wilson was their preferred cartoonist, and his illustrations (without by-line, but unmistakable) are found in the party pamphlets and publications of the time. It is hard to imagine that, when compared to the savage cartooning style embraced today, his “Punch magazine” style depictions of captains of industry or unflattering profiles of politicians almost at times cost him his job. One cartoon of a

symbolic press baron standing on the neck of a woman in a white dress tabled “the truth” almost got him fired for libel.

He was finally ejected by the Vancouver Sun for comments he made during the marathon Province Newspaper strike of 1947 while acting in his capacity as Newspaper Guild President. According to one account, the Sun's publisher (reportedly a friend) read him his notice while tears ran down his cheeks. Fraser was dismissed for disloyalty to the paper although his comments were directed at the Province, not the Sun, and he was told to leave the premises within the hour. Despite his popularity and elected position, he was blacklisted from both papers, and never worked in the news media again.

As a labelled “Red” in 1947 BC, Wilson had very few options or opportunity to practice his craft. One fortunate commission to come his way was a mural for the Marine Workers and Boilermakers Industrial Union Hall, formerly on Pender Street.

The water-colour on this guide's cover is the working proof from which Wilson painted a mural that covered the Hall's wall. The Pender Hall became a major meeting centre for Vancouver trade unions in the late 40s through the 50s and early 60s—its artist known only by a few, and celebrated by even fewer. Wilson continued to work occasionally as a commercial sign-painter, but unfortunately his skills were used to sell products, not ideas; carrying a logo and not a by-line.

It was not until the Pender Hall was to be painted over the mural, and after it had changed owner (who now wanted a white background for divided work areas) that a few individuals including Gary Oliver, BCTF's Jim MacFarlan, and Alderman Bruce Yorke, lobbied an application through the 1986 Vancouver Centennial Commission to move and restore the mural for the walls of the newly-built Maritime Labour Centre, the new home of the Vancouver District Labour Council, and several unions including the Boilermakers.

Through this process it was discovered that Wilson was still alive, and was brought in to save and restore his own work into a new home and prominence. Before his passing, almost ten years later, Wilson was reinstated as an honorary lifetime member of his union, and the mural is now a leading icon of the Vancouver labour scene.

Looking at its panels, one can easily see the myth that many hold regarding unions. It is men, and white workers at that, who worked the waterfront of Vancouver in the 1940's. To then believe that there were no Chinese, Asian, women, or First Nations people on the waterfront, nor involved in unions and then to discard the image is to repeat the banishment of people like Fraser Wilson. Wilson was no racist, nor bigot, and minorities and women have played strong roles in B.C.'s labour history. It is too easy to look back at the labourers and labour unions of the past, and say that “they had their time” (and by the way thank

you for things like the eight-hour day). It is too easy to maintain that unions have nothing further to say, and only the same tired stories to tell.

Young people usually know little or nothing of Brecht, and they no longer stump along to Pete Seeger, (even when modernized by Billy Bragg).

But the youth who wish to change the world, whether on the streets of Seattle, or in the “youth caucuses” of unions and political parties, still can see much of themselves in the stories and sepia-tone photographs starring at them from the past.



*C.L.C. National Day of Protest, May 3 1997. (Photo courtesy of BCGEU archives)*