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THE ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK

by

Katie Carlson

A Paper submitted to R.A. Adams in partial
fulfillment of the requirements of History 105

- August 6, 1979

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CANADIAN HISTORY 105

Ron Adams

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CARLSON, KATIE.

THE ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK : WAS IT A

THE ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK: WAS IT A COMMUNIST PLOT?

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Katie Carlson

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This is an excellent paper: well researched and carefully thought out. Most students, indeed, most historians take the view that the Trek was a spontaneous reaction to the horrible conditions in the camps and not a communist plot. You have made a very convincing case against the communists. I have taken the liberty of making a copy of the paper for the library.

But this account has shortcomings. You could have put police records & better use, particularly Evans' criminal record; and your conclusion is weak. You might have discussed the significance of the Trek and the divisive role played by the communists. Your use of direct quotations is unsophisticated;

(next page)

and many of your quotes should have been paraphrased. Mature writers usually do not use long quotes -- viz: Brighton. Your punctuation and capitalization are still erratic, and you should study the basics before you start teaching.

A-

The Canadian government was not prepared to meet such a devastating depression. There was no social welfare or unemployment insurance to fall back on. Men were forced to leave their homes and search for jobs. Soon there were many unemployed men travelling across the country looking for work, which became a hopeless search.

The government was concerned for the many homeless men roaming the country and in 1932 set up a system of Relief Camps to accommodate the wandering, unemployed single man. "During the next four years, these camps played host to well over 100,000 young Canadians".¹

These Relief Camps were established for mixed motives. Firstly, they provided a means of useful employment to occupy the young men who had no hope of finding work. Secondly, they helped to dispel the fear that these men would fall prey to revolutionary factors. The recent revolution in Russia gave legitimate reason to the government for fearing that men in such hopeless conditions would accept the Communist answers to the problem. For this reason the camps were located in remote areas and were administered by the Department of National Defence. The men were not allowed to organize or present group petitions. Anyone who endeavoured to organize a grievance committee to protest conditions, was blacklisted and shipped out of the camp.

Useful work was done by the men in these camps, and for their efforts they were paid the magnificent sum of 20 cents per day. Within a few years, however, the Department of National Defence ran out of suitable projects and funds so discipline became more of a problem.

There were differing opinions as to the effectiveness of the Relief Camps. Some felt that repressive conditions in the camps brought much resentment among the men. They were isolated, removed from a normal

¹Abella, p. 17

life pattern. Because these camps were expected to be temporary, to meet conditions of depression and unemployment that would soon pass, there were no adequate recreational facilities. The pay of 20 cents a day and tobacco allowance of 10 cents a week were an insult to human dignity.

Stuart Jamieson asserts that (introduce the speaker)

"The most serious complaint concerned the loss of civil rights of free speech and freedom to organize among men in the camps, under the rules and regulations enforced by the Department."¹ They were allowed as individuals to put their grievances in writing and submit them to the authorities but were not allowed to organize or present group petitions. Another serious complaint was that although the camps were meant to be operated on a volunteer basis, there was an element of compulsion involved. "Financially hard-pressed municipalities relieved themselves of looking after single, unemployed men by refusing to give them relief unless they volunteered for service in the camps and could prove that they were unacceptable to the Department of National Defence for physical or other reasons."² Other smaller grievances were poor food, bed-bugs, stench from washrooms - all of which would have been bearable had the men been able to retain a sense of human dignity. The main areas of suffering were those of loneliness and humiliation.

is this a significant loss of civil rights?

Advocates of the program pointed out that the men in the camps were "far better off than their contemporaries who were left to 'ride the rails' and survive as best they could under the conditions of mass unemployment and meagre and uncertain relief. Food, medical, and dental care and other essentials were ample, and on a par with those that were standard for personnel in permanent Forces."³ It was felt by government officials

¹ Stuart Jamieson, Times of Trouble, (Ottawa, 1968), p. 240.

² Ibid.,

³ Ibid., p. 239.

that there were very few legitimate complaints and that these were magnified out of all proportion by "Communist agitators".¹

In concluding the matter, it would seem that although these camps did make physical survival possible, they did nothing to meet the inner needs of men whose morale had been badly shaken by the terrifying economic conditions. As the depression passed into what was more than a temporary crisis, the men began to demand action, political action. To survive was not enough, they wanted to earn their own way in a world where relief would no longer be necessary.

It was a difficult era of Canadian history, amply called "the dirty thirties", and the men in the Relief camps had legitimate complaints. These conditions made them easy prey for revolutionary groups who had more than the good of the workingman at heart, but envisioned a whole new system of government with themselves at the helm.

Let us look briefly at an organization that claimed to have the answers to Canada's political and economical ills - the Communist Party of Canada.

During the decade prior to the depression, the Communist party had attempted to infiltrate the existing trade unions and work from within these unions. However, in the 1930's they began to attack the existing unions and set about to organize "revolutionary"² organizations not only among workers but among the unemployed and those in Relief Camps.

Historian Ivan Avakumovic reports that

"The attacks on existing unions went hand in hand with calls for militant action to defend the interests of the working class. Communist agitators did not shrink from using violent language and physical force to put

¹Jamieson, p. 239

²Ibid, p. 215

their views across."¹

A skeleton network of Communist led unions existed by September, 1933. Affiliates of these unions and branches of more mass organizations were attached to a new trade union center, the "Workers Unity League".² This center, which played a leading role in the On-to-Ottawa Trek, was Communist initiated and controlled. ✓ One of their chief interests became the organization of the unemployed. This interest stemmed from directions received from international leaders of the Communist Party.³

The Communists found a ready audience among the unemployed and those working in Relief Camps. An effective method of spreading Communist propaganda was the use of mimeographed bulletins, two of the most widely circulated were "The Relief Camp Worker" and "The Unemployed Worker".⁴ Working for very low wages, coupled with other grievances, made the Relief camp worker an easy prey for various propaganda, including the idea that these camps were an attempt at the "militarization of Canada in preparation for another war."⁵

The Relief Camp Workers' Union was organized and chartered by the Workers Unity League in 1932. This union played the dual role of "agitator and propagandist for the Communist Party"⁶ as well as calling for strikes and violent action to demand better conditions for the workers.

Communist tactics to achieve their aims are described very graphically by Ivan Avakumovic:

The launching of a strike in industry followed a relatively simple procedure. To begin with, contact with potential strikers had to be established. Newspapers and leaflets would be handed out at the

¹Ivan Avakumovic, The Communist Party in Canada, (Toronto, 1975) p.69

²Ibid, p. 71

³Ibid, p. 74

⁴Ibid, p. 76

⁵Ibid, p. 79

⁶Jamieson, p. 242

factory gate, and workers would be invited to meetings held under Communist auspices. Once a nucleus of sympathizers had been formed, the Communists would try to establish either a union branch or a rank-and-file committee to represent the workers. The next step would be to exploit grievances, of which there was no shortage in the early 1930's. After the workers had been induced to abandon work, the Communists did their best to bring the strike to a successful conclusion. The strikers' demands would be publicized and expressions of solidarity would pour in from pro-Communist organizations. Food and small sums of money would be collected to help the strikers hold out. At the same time attempts would be made to spread the strike to other firms. Heightened tension brought to the fore men whom the Communists described as "organizers" and their opponents called "agitators". Although few in number they were highly mobile, as police forces across Canada discovered more than once.¹

The Communist tactics of unionization, strikes and militant action were all clearly seen in their efforts among the Relief Camp Workers culminating in the On-to-Ottawa Trek and bloody Regina Riot. Certainly from the viewpoint of organization and strategy, the activities of the On-to-Ottawa trek were inseparable from the Communist Party of Canada.

Because Arthur Evans was the chief instigator and organizer of the On-to-Ottawa Trek, an examination of his personality and ties with the Communist Party is appropriate before we examine the actual events which occurred.

The Regina Riot Inquiry Commission has the following to say about the personality of Arthur Evans:

Evans has developed and shown ability, not only as an organizer, but also as a speaker, writer and agitator. He is persistent and forceful, and is suspicious and intolerant of everyone who does not agree with him. He is reckless and indifferent as to the truthfulness of his utterances, whether expressed in speech or pamphlet, caring only to create the impressions and gain the results which he may desire. He pictures the police forces of the country as the enemies of the men he is leading. Evans has little or no respect for those in positions of authority. He is critical of courts and juries, who convict and imprison him, and he himself is never wrong, and always right. ²

¹Avakumovic, pp. 69, 70

²Regina Riot Inquiry Commission (Sask. Gov't, 1936) pp. 250, 251

When one follows the activities of Evans throughout the On-to-Ottawa movement, and reads excerpts from the speeches he made, it becomes evident that the above quotation is a true evaluation. ^{good} For example, Evans repeatedly claimed on the public platform that he had personally seen the R.C.M.P. club Detective Miller to death, when it has been proven that Evans had been arrested and could not have possibly witnessed such a scene. The Victoria Colonist, Feb. 3rd, 1934, records Evans as having made the following remarks - he had designated the police as "dirty skunks", the R.C.M.P. "he would spit in their faces". He referred to the relief camps as "lousy slave camps".

There is no question of the fact that Evans held the admiration of the men associated with him as is evident in remarks made by ^{in the} Ronald Liversedge: "Evans was dedicated to the uplifting of the working class, dedicated to communism, so much so that he was like an absent-minded professor. Nothing outside of the working class struggle held any interest for him. Slim had experienced police clubs and prison, and to him it was a nuisance, in that it took him away from his work. During the On-to-Ottawa Trek, some of us would be having to remind Slim to eat once in a while, and as for sleep, he got less than the rest of us."¹

The Regina Riot Inquiry Commission has the following to say about Evans actual involvement in the On-to-Ottawa Movement:

→ He was unquestionably the outstanding leader of the whole movement from the beginning to the end. This was so much the case that we know of no move of importance during the strike or the trek, apart from the Calgary incident, which he did not initiate and of no instance where his wishes or will were over-ruled. 2

Evans is an avowed Communist and his writings, speeches and actions all bear evidence of that fact. 3

¹Victor Hoar, Editor, Recollections of the On-to-Ottawa Trek by Ronald Liversedge. (Toronto, 1973) p. 59

²Regina Riot Inquiry Commission, p. 304

³Ibid, p. 306

Arthur Evans joined the Communist Party of Canada in 1926. In 1932 he joined the Workers Unity League, a Communist trade union center established in Toronto in 1930. Because of his experience as a labour organizer and his ability as a public speaker, Evans was appointed as B.C. District Organizer of the National Unemployed Workers' Association formed by the Workers' Unity League.¹

Evans, as District Organizer of the Workers' Unity League, played a prominent role in the organization of the Relief Camp Workers' Union in 1932. This newly formed union began to publish the "Relief Camp Worker" which was circulated throughout the camps. Each issue carried letters from men in the camps describing terrible conditions and struggles that they were facing. One main line of propaganda used was questioning the placing of these camps under the Department of National Defence rather than the Department of Labour. Evans stated, "In our opinion it was to start a system of military training among the men in the camps."² The persistent, agitational work of the Relief Camp Workers' Union began to bring results in the form of strikes in various camps. Those who took part were blacklisted and made to leave the camps.

In 1934, at a conference at Salmon Arm, the R.C.W.U. drafted a planned program with a list of demands. When these demands were not met or even seriously considered by the government, a conference in Kamloops decided to propose a mass walkout set for April 4th. Rather than striking in the camps, the men would walk to Vancouver to make their demands known.

Evans sent the following message to the proposed strikers which appeared in the March 19th, 1935 issue of the Relief Camp Worker, Evans "tendered greetings from the Workers Unity League and pledged the support

¹Jean Evans Sheils & Ben Swankey, Work & Wages, (Vancouver 1977) p. 35

²Ibid, p. 77

of that organization and its various affiliates." ¹

In early April, "numbers as high as four thousand converged on Vancouver demanding work and wages of 50¢ an hour, abolition of military control of the camps, recognition of camp committees, and other improvements." ² This was not a spontaneous movement but was highly organized by Union leaders. Arthur Evans played a major role in welding the relief workers into a disciplined group of men. Their plight attracted a great deal of sympathy. Evans organized the first tag day in which money was collected for the strikers. As money and food became more scarce, clashes between police and strikers became more numerous.

While the strikers were in Vancouver, Evans was a member of the Action Committee of the Strike Committee and Chairman of the publicity committee. "I sat in on the Strike Committee as a representative of the W.U.L., ^{unrecalled by} but I also sat in other capacities, for example as a representative of the Action committee." ³ It becomes evident that Arthur Evans, avowed Communist and representative of the W.U.L., was the organizer and director of strike activities in Vancouver.

Historian Jamieson writes

"Twelve hundred of the more militant and able-bodied of the strikers were organized into three 'divisions', each under separate leaders with broad strategy planned by a co-ordinating committee. These divisions were able to carry out an effective campaign of harassment." ⁴

When a riot developed in the Hudsons Bay Store, Mayor McGeer found it necessary to read the Riot Act. The Mayor publicly declared this movement to be Communist inspired and the following words appeared in the Vancouver

¹Sheils & Swankey, p. 84

²Jamieson, p. 243

³Sheils & Swankey, p. 87

⁴Jamieson, p. 243

News Herald: "It is now perfectly clear that Vancouver is being victimized by an organized attempt to capitalize, for revolutionary purposes, the conditions of depression which now exists. From information supplied to me, there is a definite organization of Communistic activities which are centering on calling of a general strike in Vancouver."¹ Government officials in Ottawa issued a similar statement recorded in the News Herald: "There is reason to believe the vast majority of the men who left the unemployment Relief Camps in British Columbia to associate themselves with those who have invaded Vancouver, did so under coercion by subversive organizations, Defense Department officials said here today."²

Arthur Evans denied these charges and made a public statement to the effect that although the Communists were supporting and assisting the strikers, they did not control them. Evidence has proven this statement to be untrue.

It is interesting to note the attitude of the leaders of the C.C.F. Party. Although they supported the demands of the Relief Workers, they felt the strike was led and organized by Communists and therefore tried to avoid any identification with its leaders.³

It was Arthur Evans who devised the idea of a mass trek to Ottawa to discuss work and wages with the federal government. This idea was enthusiastically received at a mass meeting of the strikers and Evans was elected as trek leader. It was decided to leave Monday, June 3rd.

The Communist Party did not at first support the idea of the trek and did not want Evans to go any farther than Golden. Evans was obedient to the orders issued to him from the executive of the W.U.L. The reason

¹Sheils & Swankey, p. 90

²Ibid, p. 91

³Ibid, p. 93

source?
Warrant
suggested
someone on
floor of the
meeting

Given was that Evans was needed in Vancouver, but it is possible that Tim Buck, the leader of the Communist Party of Canada, feared that Evans was becoming too popular and could pose a threat to his position. When the movement grew to great proportions, the ^{communist party leaders.} W.U.L. yielded to pressure from the trekkers and realized Evan's leadership was needed to carry the movement successfully; they reconsidered their decision and allowed Evans to rejoin the trek at Medicine Hat.

excellent.

The trekkers were dept well-disciplined and organized by their leaders in order to win and keep public support. The "army" was growing as new recruits joined at each town. Two thousand trekkers arrived in Regina on June 14th, 1935.

Manion and Weir, cabinet members from Ottawa, arrived in Regina to negotiate with the strike leaders. Here again, Evans took the major role, as chief spokesman for the delegation. It was decided that a group of strikers, led by Arthur Evans, should go to Ottawa to negotiate directly with the Prime Minister and his cabinet. This meeting was not successful, Bennett defended the government's policy concerning the Relief Camps and Evans ended up calling Bennett a liar.

While in Ottawa, Evans became even more ambitious and advocated a national trek. He issued this statement "In the course of a few days a national call will be issued jointly by the Workers Unity League, Relief Camp Workers Union and the National Unemployment Council executives." ¹ According to a telegram sent to George Black in Regina, this national call would result in a "mass trek to Ottawa." ²

When Evans returned to Regina, he announced that the trek would continue. In the meantime, it had been decided by the Federal Government to stop the trek in Regina. They were not allowed to continue by rail.

¹Sheils & Swankey, p. 148

²Regina Riot Inquiry Commission, p. 71

This suggests that Cpc leaders wanted to use it for their own intended purposes. I think that started from Buck's election campaign.

At a mass meeting, Evans suggested that they try leaving by vehicles. A few were sent out on June 27th. These were arrested outside the city of Regina and its occupants arrested and imprisoned. The R.C.M.P. had also received orders to arrest the leaders of the Trek movement, under Section 98 of the Criminal Code dealing with unlawful associations.

On July 1st, the strike leaders were addressing a mass meeting in Market Square, Regina. There were about three thousand people in attendance. Of this group, only about three hundred were actual strikers. The rest of the strikers stayed at the Exhibition grounds where they were housed, perhaps out of fear that they might be displaced. The R.C.M.P. and City Police chose this occasion to arrest the strike leaders. As the police moved in to arrest the leaders who were on the platform, a riot developed.

There are several versions of the riot itself. After considering various sources, Stuart Jamieson summarizes it thus:

Some spectators fled in panic, others joined the strikers in fighting the police. From Market Square the riot surged on to other streets and fighting continued in scattered forays for almost three hours. Tear gas and revolvers were used by City Police, as well as clubs by City Police and R.C.M.P. to quell the rioting. The main weapon of the strikers were rocks. At the end, a city detective, Charles Miller was dead, a dozen policemen had been seriously injured, half a dozen civilians had been shot, (some estimates ran as high as forty) and more than one hundred had been injured by police clubs or by rocks thrown by strikers and their supporters. Seventy-six people were arrested in addition to the eight strike leaders. 1

The "Worker", the official voice of the Communist Party, featured a bitter editorial on its front page on July 4, 1935, entitled "How to commit murder as demonstrated in Regina", and climaxed thus:

When you get hungry and call a meeting to get food, then's the time to strike. Order the RCMP to attack the meeting and start beating up and shooting. In case one of your agents gets hurt or killed in the melee, all the better; you can frame the strikers up on murder or something. 2

¹Jamieson, p. 247

²Sheils & Swankey, p. 203

Arthur Evans describes the riot in these words:

Just then a whistle blew and out the back door of the Fire Hall a large number of City Police rushed out four abreast swinging their batons and yelling like maniacs. The R.C.M.P. in the trucks also unloaded when the whistle blew. Both them and the City Police started to club the unarmed men, women and children assembled at this peaceful meeting. 1

Still another version of the riot is given in Liversedge's highly biased account:

The meeting that evening on Market Square, while not being as big as most meetings we had held, still had a substantial audience. The meeting wasn't long under way. Evans was speaking, when four large furniture vans backed up, one to each corner of the Market Square. A shrill whistle blasted out a signal, the backs of the vans were lowered, and out poured the Mounties, each armed with a baseball bat. They must have been packed very tightly, in those vans for there were lots of them. In their first mad, shouting, club-swinging charge they killed Regina City Detective Miller, who evidently had come onto the Square to help them. In less than minutes the Market Square was a mass of writhing, groaning forms, like a battlefield. 2

After three hours, the strikers were finally forced to return to the Exhibition Grounds where they were kept under guard by police with machine guns.

The Provincial government arranged to have the young men returned via train to their hometowns. Most of them returned to the Relief Camps from which they had come. However, nothing had been done to remedy the grievances which had brought them out of the camps. In the following year the problem was solved - the camps were shut down.

The Saskatchewan Provincial Government announced the appointment of a Commission to inquire into the causes of the riot. Some interesting facts were revealed in this investigation that throws an entirely different interpretation on the riot from that voiced by Evans and other Communist sources. And that is, that some of the strikers present at the meeting July 1st were armed with weapons which had obviously been prepared beforehand.

right!
¹Sheils & Swankey, p. 181

²Liversedge, p. 112

The ferocity of the attack of the strikers on the police is in striking contrast. Evidence of preparedness is indicated in the possession by many of them of missiles when they went on the Square. The speed and spontaneity of their attack on the one troop of police which was in plain view previous to the arrest of the leaders shows a previous massing of strikers at the point of the attack and an intention on their part to attack. 1

Constable Brims was attacked by a man armed with a long piece of scantling. Some of the attackers were armed with pieces of iron pipe. 2

Weapons of various kinds were found in the buildings occupied by the strikers; pieces of scantling of various lengths, pieces of heavy rubber hose in which wood the size of a broom handle was inserted, iron pipe of various lengths, clubs made of winding hay-wire around pieces of wood, brakeshoe pins similar to those which were used so effectively in the riot at the Hudson's Bay Store in Vancouver. 3

Many of these clubs, especially those made of wire, show considerable skill and indicate that the makers had previous experience in the manufacture of such weapons. The vicious character of many of the weapons can only be appreciated by an examination of them. 4

Evidence was also found to indicate that these weapons were manufactured prior to the day of the riot.

Iron bars and lead pipes were gradually gathered over a period of days, clubs made of wire were not all prepared that night but must have been gradually made when more time was at the disposal of the strikers; and the brake-shoe pins, of which there are a score, were not obtained that night; some of them in all probability were brought from Vancouver. 5

The strikers argued that these weapons were prepared for defense purposes but one wonders if these were to be used in an offensive attack on the police in an effort, possibly, to free those of the trekkers that had been imprisoned June 27th. The strikers had come to the end of their rope, they were receiving no more food or money, transportation avenues were closed to them and they faced enclosure in what they called a "concentration camp". It is possible that Evans planned a way to end on

¹ Regina Riot Enquiry Commission, p. 288

² Ibid, p. 136

³ Ibid, p. 237

⁴ Ibid, p. 238

⁵ Ibid, p. 241

good thing
everyone will
disagree with
this interpretation

a note of victory rather than defeat, by freeing the prisoners and then disbanding honourably. ✓

The two forces inadvertently met at the same time, in the Regina Square, July 1st, 1935. Police were surprized to find the men armed with pipes, stones, clubs and at the ferocity of their attack. It savours something of another Communist tactic, that of having a small "Workers self-defence Corps" who were usually armed with pipes, cables and weapons of that sort and were trained to fight for their cause. Whatever the purpose of the weapons, the strikers were defeated and disbanded.

The On-to-Ottawa Trek was a well-planned Communist plot to undermine and overthrow the government of Canada. Had the trekkers been allowed to continue, there is no doubt that many thousands of unemployed would have joined them along the way and their numbers would have swelled to an enormous "army" who would have arrived in Ottawa to press their demands on the Bennett government, that was already hard pressed to find some solution to the great depression.

The closing paragraph of the Regina Riot Inquiry Commission, dated April 23rd, 1936, presents so neatly the fact that the Communists did not have the answer to the severe problems of the depression years and gives a solemn word of advice for all Canadians.

The unemployment problem will not be solved by killing or brutally assaulting the police in the performance of their duties, nor by damning men who hold responsible positions of authority, nor by broadcasting false propaganda in speech or pamphlet. It will be solved only by sincere, intelligent co-operation on the part of all classes of society. 1

¹ Regina Riot Inquiry Commission, p. 312

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