

“STANDING BY OUR PRINCIPLES”: THE TRADES AND LABOR CONGRESS OF CANADA AND IMMIGRATION, 1933 – 1939

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the approach of Canada's largest labour central, the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC), to immigration from 1933 to 1939. This was a unique period in Canada's immigration history, as in 1930 the government responded to the onset of the Great Depression by closing the gates to almost all immigration for the first time since Confederation, and by 1933 there was no doubt that the gates would remain closed for some time. Despite this dramatic change, Canadian labour leaders stood by their longstanding views on immigration through to the end of the 1930s. Although the level of concern about immigration predictably declined, TLC leaders generally gained confidence that their established views had widespread support. This confidence encouraged unionists to pose as protectors of immigrants against hardship in Canada. It also assured them that they did not have to devote as much energy as in earlier periods to agitating for the deportation of some immigrants, or to their longtime favourite cause, restricting immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe.

Altogether, changes in the economy and immigration rates did not necessarily entail changes in labour's attitudes. A number of other factors, including ideological trends within the movement, prevailing attitudes towards race and gender, and the efforts of groups advocating immigration served to entrench labour's views even more deeply in the 1930s.

INTRODUCTION

The early 1930s saw a major shift in Canadian immigration history. Since Confederation, promoting large-scale immigration was a central part of successive governments' economic development and nation-building policies. But as the Great Depression set in and unemployment soared, a new consensus rapidly emerged among mainstream political leaders and commentators that Canada needed to close its gates to immigrants. Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett thus moved quickly to shut down recruitment efforts and impose severe restrictions on admissions (Kelley and Trebilcock, 1998).

The policy shift had a profound effect on organized labour, and particularly Canada's largest central, the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC). For decades, agitating against large-scale immigration had been a key priority for labour leaders. But once it became evident that the government was committed to keeping new influxes into Canada to a minimum, the labour movement entered the first period since its birth in the 1870s when immigration was not one of its chief issues. In particular, unionists' sense of desperation when discussing immigration receded for the first time in memory. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, unionists constantly claimed that Canada was either awash with immigrants or on the verge of another flood. By about 1933, however, union leaders finally gained some security that massive new waves of immigrants were not on their way.

Remarkably however, in the years following this profound shift, the single biggest theme of labour's approach to immigration is continuity. From 1933 to 1939, TLC leaders actually gained confidence in reiterating their well-established positions on immigration, despite the radically different circumstances. This paper will document and explain this continuity. It builds upon my previous study of the approach of labour leaders across Canada to immigration from the 1870s to the onset of the Depression. It focuses exclusively on the national central, the TLC, and will serve as the first part in my broader project exploring the views of TLC-affiliated unions around the country, and organizations affiliated to other congresses, particularly the Canadian Congress of Labor and later the Canadian Labor Congress, from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Studying the TLC in the 1930s is important in itself, particularly because it brings home the essential point that labour leaders' positions were not determined solely by obvious conditions such as the rate of influx and the state of the economy. A wide range of other factors were critical, including public opinion, social constructions of race and gender, the activities of other players in the immigration debate, political and ideological trends in the labour movement, and unionists' perception of their own interests and public image, and their long history of opposing immigration. In the 1930s, many of these factors were especially important in making unionists not only stand behind their principles regarding immigration, but believe that they had the support of the public and policy makers. But within this fundamental continuity, there were some important shifts in emphasis. In particular, unionists gained confidence in professing concern for the welfare of immigrants (especially from Britain), but committed less energy to demanding the deportation of certain immigrants and vilifying Asians and southern and eastern Europeans. On the latter issues, unionists were able to take an almost unprecedented approach in the 1930s: to sit back contentedly, feeling assured that their main concerns were being addressed.

“HOLDING THE LINE” ON IMMIGRATION

The continuity in the TLC’s position was most evident in two basic areas. First, while labour leaders’ sense of vulnerability to an impending flood of immigrants dissipated, they remained on guard against any possible new influxes into Canada. Throughout the 1930s, the TLC was constantly on the watch for evidence, or even rumours, of new efforts to attract immigrants (1933 *Proceedings*; *Congress Journal*, 1/1934; *Labour Gazette*, 10/1937). From the point of view of some mainstream newspapers, mere “preliminary steps” toward unlocking Canada’s gates were enough to make the TLC “needlessly alarmed over immigration.”¹ As in previous periods, TLC leaders were especially sensitive to the importation of workers who had signed contracts with a specific employer before arriving in Canada. Although there were only a handful of cases of employers using “imported contract labour” in the 1930s, it was enough to keep unionists complaining throughout the decade (*Congress Journal*, 2/1934, 1/1937; *Labour Gazette*, 2/1935).

Second, when it came to the content of the TLC’s policies, there was almost no change. The extent of this consistency was illustrated in 1937, when the TLC executive responded to another rumoured recruitment plan by reiterating the congress’s official policy on immigration. The essence of the policy was first established by the TLC convention of 1906 (*1906 & 1937 Proceedings*).

Space does not allow for a full recapitulation of the congress’s entrenched policies, but covering the basics is essential.² TLC leaders opposed almost all types of immigration, but they portrayed some immigrant groups as particularly threatening. Through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they constructed Asians as “tools of the capitalists” and menaces to the living standards of Canada’s workers and the moral and medical vitality of its communities. Labour leaders insisted that it was the responsibility of all working men to demand exclusion in order to protect their place in the job market, the health of their fellow Canadians against diseases like leprosy, and the “virtue” of their wives and daughters against alleged Asian predators. Although southern and eastern Europeans were vilified to a lesser extent, they were still dubbed “foreigners” who were also unfair competition for Canadian workers. Unionists were often sympathetic toward immigrants from the British Isles, especially “upstanding” workers and their families – but still insisted that their migration was devastating to Canadian workers because it overcrowded the labour markets.

Regarding many British immigrants, labour directed much more of its anger toward the agents, philanthropic organizations, government and business officials that promoted and facilitated immigration to Canada. Labour leaders relentlessly accused those involved the “commerce of immigration” (Harney, 1977) of reaping profits from trading in people, peddling fairytales about prospects in Canada, and circumventing the law by bringing in migrants under

false categories, particularly by getting industrial workers categorized as farmers. Starting in the 1870s, union leaders sustained a fierce campaign against immigration promoters, not only to protect the Canadian labour market, but also, they insisted, to protect immigrants from being exploited.

Immigration also played a key role in the TLC's approach to broader political and ideological issues. Although this aspect of unionists' policies changed considerably over time, since World War I they had settled on a position shaped by their embrace of corporatist thinking. Their central focus was on demanding that the government create a rigorous and centralized system of management for immigration and the labour market as a whole. The TLC insisted that rather than leaving these crucial issues under the control of promoters and other narrow interests, the government should create a central administrative body, which would have representation from key community groups, including, of course, labour.

The starting point of an analysis of the TLC's leaders' steady adherence to these policies is their over-all political and ideological orientation in the 1930s. The decade was one of the most conservative for the congress; immigration was one example of how labour leaders "stood by their principles" even though conditions were changing around them. Indeed, almost all of the inter-war period saw congress leaders take a cautious, defensive and unimaginative approach to most issues. After repudiating radical elements during the post-war labour revolt, the TLC was dominated by a core of traditional craft union leaders. In the 1930s, new ideas and organizing drives were being generated by groups outside of the congress, such as the communists (whom the TLC had rejected in the 1920s), Catholic unions in Quebec, and industrial unions that formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the United States in 1935 and were slowly expanding into Canada (Manley, 1998; Abella, 1973). The TLC's devotion to "safe and sane" philosophies did have a major benefit in the 1930s, as it encouraged its leaders to hunker down and limit the damage to craft unions (Morton, 1998). But it ensured that staleness settled into TLC policies throughout the decade. A notable illustration was that congress leaders generated no innovative responses to the economic crisis, and seemed content to reiterate time-honored demands for an unemployment-insurance system, expanded public works projects, and shortened workdays.³

Another factor was that the TLC's stance on immigration was one part of their general platform that enjoyed widespread support throughout the 1930s. The political clout of craft unions had been declining since the early 1920s and the TLC's relations with Bennett's Tory government of 1930 - 1935 were particularly frosty. But Bennett was happy to declare that his immigration policies were "in harmony" with those of the TLC and the government's official statements on the issue were some of the only ones that the TLC was willing to endorse and reprint in the *Congress Journal*. More important, when it came to

public opinion, for the first time in decades TLC leaders could speak confidently about what “must be regarded as the sensible attitude of the Canadian people on this question” (*Congress Journal*, 10/1935).

One of the TLC’s long-time positions that especially gained strength in the Depression was that immigration intensified labour market problems. As the economic slump deepened and job losses became a top political issue in the 1930s, the congress was in a prime position to blame previous waves of immigration for the severity of the crisis. Indeed, given their long history of struggling against immigration “boomsters”, TLC leaders were determined to ensure that “memories of unsound immigration plans of earlier years are not yet forgotten” (*Congress Journal*, 10/1937). As for future planning, the Congress was more confident than ever in affirming that “any influx of immigrants would just add to the immediate charges of relief” (*Congress Journal*, 1/1938).

Yet the Depression conditions also enhanced TLC leaders’ ability to present themselves as defenders of the welfare of immigrants as well as Canadian workers. With prospects in Canada so poor, the Congress readily asserted that “no sincere friend” of the unemployed in the Old Countries “would invite them to move here when their condition could not possibly be assisted by the change” (*Congress Journal*, 10/1936). The miniscule levels of immigration also made it easier for labour to pose as a legitimate “friend” of potential immigrants. In previous periods, the TLC’s credibility in this regard was always shaky, as congress leaders would profess sympathy for immigrants while at the same time complaining bitterly about the impacts of their migration on Canadian conditions. But in the 1930s, labour leaders rarely had to discuss newly arriving immigrants, and were thus able focus almost exclusively on the immigration promoters.

Many of the traditional proponents of immigration also continued their efforts throughout the 1930s. In short, labour leaders stuck to their positions over immigration because many of their longtime enemies over the issue were doing the same. Hence, the importance of the immigration question in Canada was manifested in a new way in the 1930s, as even the decisive shutting of the gates was not enough to keep immigration from playing a major role in debates about the Dominion’s development, especially for the long-term. Many promoters and Canadian business leaders held to their view that new immigration would bolster the economy and the nation-building project by expanding western settlement and domestic consumer markets. While not powerful enough to sway public opinion and government policies back in their favour, these interests certainly kept the TLC on guard (1936 *Proceedings*; *Congress Journal*, 1/1938). Throughout the 1930s, congress leaders continued to warn darkly of “well organized financial and economic interests ... seeking to hatch new immigration schemes” (1937 *Proceedings*).

As in previous periods, promoters of immigration were active not only in Canada, but also in immigrant-sending countries, especially Great Britain. Many philanthropic groups, politicians and business leaders sought to launch programs to send unemployed British workers to Canada. A constant refrain for these interests was that Canada had massive tracts of vacant land waiting to be populated, and so emigration was a natural solution to Britain's "overcrowding" problems. Nothing aggravated TLC leaders more than hearing these "myths" about Canada coming from the other side of the ocean. "Every so often," declared one *Congress Journal* editorial, "after visiting our shores and viewing our vast stretches of land, some noteworthy visitor from the Old Land returns home and, telling tales of a land of 'milk and honey' [...] assures his public that Canada wants but one thing to complete her greatness - population and more population" (*Congress Journal*, 10/1936).

Throughout the Great Depression, the TLC seized the opportunity to assail these promoters as self-serving manipulators, usually from the upper-classes, who were hopelessly out of touch with Canadian conditions and offered only false hope to prospective migrants. And it was hard to argue with some of the TLC's claims, especially in cases where British groups advocated placing migrant workers in some of Canada's most devastated industries, such as Prairie agriculture. Hence after decades of raging about their inability to match the influence of immigration promoters, in the 1930s Canadian unionists became almost apologetic for the ease with which they rebuked efforts to begin new recruitment schemes. The TLC was even moved to assure readers that "to raise this point of immigration today is not to set up a straw man for the amusement of bowling him over" (*Congress Journal*, 10/1935).

COMFORTABLY QUIET: DEPORTATIONS AND THE RISE IN RACISM

Another sign of TLC leaders' unusually favorable position in the immigration debate was that one of the government policies they were least enthusiastic about was not some new admissions program, but rather the deportation of migrants deemed undesirable. The government sent home at least 25,000 immigrants during the 1930s, mostly on charges of vagrancy, subversive activity, or physical "defect" (Roberts, 1988). The congress leaders were generally apathetic in response to these measures, neither giving enthusiastic support to the government's policies nor becoming the champions of those facing deportation. The congresses' mixed feelings were manifested at the 1933 convention, where a motion calling for the "immediate stoppage of all deportations" was defeated. The congress's committee on resolutions declared that the motion "went too far" because in some cases "deportations were necessary" (1933 *Proceedings; Globe*, 22/9/1933). In the following years, the TLC habitually renewed general calls for the vigorous enforcement of existing

immigration regulations but also reprinted in the *Congress Journal* statements from non-labour writers that the deportations were “inhumane” and damaged Canada’s “good name” in other countries (*Congress Journal*, 05/1932, 09/1933).

The TLC’s subdued approach towards deportations was remarkable given both their general protests about immigrant job competition and their particular demand for the government to become more active in controlling all aspects of the labour market. Since the early 1920s, the TLC was even on record as calling for deportation to be used to achieve some of these controls, especially against immigrants brought in under false pretenses. One plank of the general policy on immigration called for “the deportation of those entering Canada under assisted immigration schemes [who], within twelve months, seek or accept employment in other occupations” (Goutor, 2007). Government officials frequently used precisely this charge, which they called “entry by misrepresentation,” to deport many immigrants (Roberts, 1988). These were undoubtedly some of the cases where the 1933 committee on resolutions felt deportations were necessary. Yet there was always some ambivalence in TLC leaders’ views on deportations. Congress leaders were vehemently opposed to the sections of the 1919 Immigration Act (passed largely to facilitate the repression of subversive activity in response to the post-war labour revolt) allowing for the deportation of British subjects. The congress insisted these measures could be used against its own leaders and activists.

The larger factor shaping labour leaders’ response to deportations was their security that the gates to Canada were finally locked, and so they could afford to remain quiet on the issue and even make some faint gestures of magnanimity towards immigrants. In particular, the congress published familiar lamentations about immigrants being victimized by the empty promises of promoters. One article decried how the government was now targeting immigrants who had been “mislead by lecturers with picturesque tongues (sic) ... [in] a great game of cruel deception,” and pled with Canadians stop the “darkening of that deception with defamation and deportation” (*Congress Journal*, 09/1933). But on the whole, after decades of demanding rigorous action to reduce immigration, the TLC was unlikely to protest loudly if the government’s control measures now seemed excessive in some regards.

The greatest instance of prevailing trends moving in the TLC’s favour in the 1930s was regarding the immigration of Asians and “foreigners” from continental Europe. Not only were these migrants completely barred, even in cases of desperate Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis (Abella and Troper, 1982), but prevailing attitudes towards Asians and “foreigners” resident in Canada hardened considerably. There was a growing attitude that good jobs belonged to white males, and immigrants and women earning incomes faced pressure to make way for workingmen supposedly more suited to the role of breadwinners (Patrias 1994, Srigley, 2005). The TLC could certainly be counted among the

hostile voices, as it continually renewed the plank in its Platform of Principles (the core statement of beliefs in its constitution) that called for “the exclusion of all races that cannot be properly assimilated into the national life of Canada” (1933 -1939 *Proceedings*). On the whole however, the 1930s saw a clear drop in the TLC’s efforts to arouse public antipathy toward immigrants from Asia and continental Europe.

Labour leaders’ position in the 1930s was particularly surprising given their finely tuned reflexes to complain about “uncivilized” immigrants whenever Canadian unions and workers faced hard times. These reflexes were evident during the economic slump of the early 1920s when the TLC stepped up its attacks on immigration from Europe and Asia, even as it was mired in lethargy on most issues. Anti-Asian racism was so ingrained that labour leaders in central Canada and the Prairies regularly campaigned for exclusionary policies even as they acknowledged that Asian populations in their regions were minimal (Goutor, 2005, 2007).

But after they finally gained assurance that influxes of “uncivilized” migrants were shut off, TLC leaders’ reflexes became noticeably rusty. Regarding Asians, this process had already begun late in the previous decade, after a series of major new exclusionary laws had been passed, especially the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 (Roy, 2003). Through the late 1920s, anti-Asian invective became less prominent in Congress publications, and some demands for restrictions on the voting rights of Asians living in Canada were discarded (Bangarth, 2003; Goutor, 2007). Through the 1930s, as the Depression grinded on and even rumours of new recruitment plans were confined to British migrants, TLC leaders had few occasions to raise the volume of their anti-Asian agitation to earlier levels.

Nevertheless, the change in labour’s attitudes in the 1930s needs to be measured in fine increments and comes with serious qualifications. There was no trace of interest in reconsidering any of the long-standing stereotypes of Asians as “wage slaves” and “sexual predators,” or of Europeans as “foreigners.” On the contrary, union leaders seemed to be taking quiet satisfaction that prevailing policies and public attitudes towards Asians and Europeans conformed to their own views. Still, this quieter stance is a significant departure in itself, since in previous periods unionists continually broadcasted vicious stereotypes of “uncivilized” immigrants. In another sense, silence about the plight of Asians and Europeans was a stronger, and colder, position given the desperation many faced in the 1930s. The congress was mute as starvation gripped Chinatowns in the far west, claiming the lives of 175 in Vancouver (Anderson, 1995). As the masses of Jews seeking refuge from Hitler became a major international and humanitarian issue, the TLC was moved to do no more than reprint an article by the Canadian Jewish Congress that sought to counter anti-Semitic “pseudo-scientific racial theories” (*Congress Journal* 11/1938).

CONCLUSION

In the 1930s, immigration into Canada was almost entirely closed, but debates about immigration remained open. In fact, the decade brought important developments in the approach of Canada's largest labour central to the issue. One crucial change was predictable: the decline in the amount of attention the TLC paid to the issue after it was clear that a new restrictive admissions policy had been established. But another major trend was a surprising increase in confidence with which TLC leaders stood by their established principles throughout the 1930s. Never before in the history of the labour movement had union leaders affirmed their positions with such a sense of security that the public and policy makers were on their side, that they had the upper hand on immigration promoters, and that they could credibly pose as protectors of the interests of immigrants. At a time when TLC leaders had few fresh ideas to offer on most issues, they were fortunate to have one area where their established views gained support. This increased confidence itself had further implications. While there was an overall continuity in their policies, labour leaders felt secure enough to reduce their pre-occupation with some of their favorite causes, particularly deporting immigrants deemed undesirable and agitating against immigration from Asia and southern and eastern Europe.

As Canada entered World War II in 1939, immigration generally slipped further down the list of priorities for labour and most interest groups. But some of the same factors that had made labour leaders so comfortable with their restrictive and racially discriminatory policies in the 1930s would undergo massive new changes during the war. Indeed, immigration rates would remain minimal in the early 1940s, but there would be shifts in key variables such as prevailing views about race and ethnicity, and in the ideology (and the basic composition) of the labour movement itself.

NOTES

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- ¹ The TLC indignantly reprinted some of these criticisms in the *Congress Journal*, 2/1934.
 - ² For a full analysis of labour's position from the 1870s to the 1930s, see Goutor, *Guarding the Gates*.
 - ³ At their annual meetings with the federal cabinet, TLC leaders ritualistically repeated these policy demands. See for instance *Labour Gazette*, 2/1933, 2/1935, 2/1937.

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