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## The mystery of the missing workers

### Canada's new citizenship guide omits mention of workers or unions.

Dateline: Monday, August 23, 2010

by David Frank

When the Government of Canada published a new study guide for Canadian citizenship earlier this year, nobody paid much attention to what the Guide said about the place of workers in Canadian society.

Labour Day seems a good time to look, but it is not easy to find answers in the pages of *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*.

#### **The guide says that until 60 years ago, most Canadians could not afford "adequate food, shelter and clothing".**

If you search for the word "workers", you will find it twice. On page 20, there is a picture of a Chinese workers' construction camp near Kamloops, BC on the Canadian Pacific Railway line in 1886. And on page 60 there is a note giving a source for the photograph. This is welcome recognition of exploited workers who helped complete the transportation backbone of Confederation.

Unfortunately, these appear to be the only "workers" ever to make an appearance in Canadian history, as the word is not mentioned again. The term "trade union" cannot be found at all in these pages, although if we look for "union", we do find two references.

The first mention of unions is on page 31, under a discussion of voting by secret ballot. Nobody, we are told, "including family members, your employer or union representative, has the right to insist that you tell them how you voted". Fair enough, but this is the first reference to unions anywhere in the Guide. There is no information about what they are or where they came from.

There is another reference to unions later on, in a section where we are asked to identify the responsibilities of citizenship. "Obeying the law" is one of the "right" answers, and "belonging to a union" is one of the "wrong" answers. Again, unions seem to exist in Canadian society but they seem to be not that important and vaguely disreputable.

If we look a little deeper, we also find the word "labour" itself. Unavoidably, it shows up in the list of statutory holidays on page 41 where Labour Day continues to occupy its place in the annual calendar. But where Labour Day came from remains unexplained. (It was enacted in 1894 by a Conservative government, some two decades after an earlier Conservative government confirmed the legality of unions in 1872).

An interesting historical mystery sits at the centre of this Guide, and there is a clue to it on page 24 that is worth quoting in full: "In 1951, for the first time, a majority of Canadians were able to afford adequate food, shelter and clothing". Read that again: until 60 years ago, most Canadians could not afford "adequate food, shelter and clothing".

The statement stands out awkwardly in a narrative of Canadian progress and prosperity. It may even be a valid claim if we set aside the measurable numbers of Canadians who have continued for many years to live in poverty and insecurity.

But if the "bad old days" became less bad around 1951, the Guide gives little insight into why. It was hardly an accident that the wealth of the country increased substantially over time, or that some part of that wealth was redistributed in the interests of social and economic justice.

The choice of 1951 as a turning point makes some sense. In the previous ten years the federal government responded belatedly to the Great Depression by enacting major pieces of social legislation unemployment insurance, family allowances and universal old age pensions that were intended to provide some economic security for working-class families.

Also, in the space of the same ten years union membership in Canada tripled, reaching one million members and representing more than one-third of the work force. As employers agreed to negotiate contracts and governments enacted collective bargaining rights, the unions were making a difference in living standards.

Over the course of the past century, workers have managed to build up an established a tradition of "rights and responsibilities" in the workplace that is recognized in law and supported by the courts. Whatever their flaws and failings, unions have long been part of the Canadian way of life.

If Discover Canada is going to be the "official version" of Canadian history, it is worth pointing out that there are some missing pages. Labour Day is a good time to remember that the whole story has not been told.

*David Frank teaches history at the University of New Brunswick and is director of the New Brunswick Labour History Project. A more detailed account of this story, including pictures and illustrations, is available on the New Brunswick Labour History website at the URL below.*

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