

# Solidarity on Occasion:

## The Vancouver Free Speech Fights of 1909 and 1912

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THE SUPPRESSION OF RADICAL IDEAS and organizing has always been an important weapon of the ruling classes. The simplest form of suppression is the outright banning of public meetings and speaking, and in many cases, it has proved sufficient. In other cases, it has prompted a militant response that uses the rhetoric of the liberal state against the government — the free speech fight.<sup>1</sup> In the years before World War I, numerous free speech battles were led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), in cities and towns such as Paterson, New Jersey; Victoria, B.C.; San Diego, California; New Castle, Pennsylvania; and Missoula, Montana.<sup>2</sup> At times the fights were, as Philip Foner has suggested, “significant in cementing solidarity among IWW, Socialist Party, and AF of L members” against capital and the state. Canadian historians Paul Phillips and Ross McCormack have made similar claims about the Vancouver campaign of 1912. But if the Vancouver events promoted solidarity among individual members, they tended to drive the organizations apart as the city’s labour movement fought bitterly over tactics, strategy, and leadership. Labour had not yet decided upon, or been structured into, a path of reform, and the IWW, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the labour leaders represented in the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council competed to win workers

<sup>1</sup>See Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980), 402, for a free speech fight in 1891. Lita Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band: The Clashes between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment, 1928-1932* (Ottawa, n.d.), 23-46, describes free speech fights waged by the Communist Party of Canada.

<sup>2</sup>There is no complete accounting of the free speech fights of the IWW. In 1919, Paul Brissenden published a partial list of 26 fights from 1906 to 1916; his list does not include the two fights in Vancouver or the one in Toronto in 1906. The official IWW history points out that the last “large-scale effort” by the union was in 1927, at San Pedro. Wobblies also took part in the free speech movement in Berkeley in the 1960s. Paul Brissenden, *The IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism* (1919; New York 1957), 367. Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York 1969), 173. Frederick Thompson and Patrick Murfin, *The IWW: Its First Seventy Years, 1905-1975* (Chicago 1976), 141, 205. Philip Foner, “Fellow Workers and Friends:” *IWW Free Speech Fights as Told by Participants* (Westport 1981), 20.

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and advance their own programs. An examination of the Vancouver free speech fight of 1912 and the lesser-known battle of 1909 highlights the splits in the labour movement and challenges some assumptions about the radicalism of the SPC, the labourism of the VTLC, and the utopianism and decline of the IWW.<sup>3</sup>

Most free speech campaigns followed a similar pattern. City officials objected to IWW meetings in the streets, then passed a by-law prohibiting public speaking. The union ignored the by-law, and stepped up its efforts. The police would arrest the soap-box orators and put them in jail awaiting trial. IWW organizers then put out a call for all available members to travel to the city to carry on the battle. As the cells filled, the city's costs for feeding and guarding the prisoners mounted, until finally civic officials weakened and restored the right to speak in public.

This, at least, was the IWW theory, but too often civic officials, police, and vigilantes would instead resort to torture and beatings to silence the union. Such violence meant that the IWW paid a high price for its struggle to speak and organize, but the free speech battles were powerful ways to spread the union's message of solidarity and revolution. Furthermore, the Wobblies recognized that the repression and violence stripped away the state's pretence of being an impartial, neutral arbitrator between capital and labour and revealed it as a tool in the hands of the employers.

Though one historian has suggested that the free speech fights "were joined to preserve ... a right with a Constitutional article and a century of tradition behind it," the IWW was not engaged in a struggle for civil liberties. Melvyn Dubofsky has demonstrated that street speaking was the only way to organize men who would soon be shipped to distant camps where spies and stool pigeons could quickly spot and remove agitators. As one Wobbly wrote in 1913, for these migrant workers, "the street corner was their only hall, and if denied the right to agitate there, then they must be silent." Ralph Chaplin, the Wobbly poet who wrote "Solidarity Forever," had this to say about free speech fights: "Free speech for what? For a man to get up and try to organize a union. They weren't keeping free speech out — they were keeping unionism out." The value of street speaking was affirmed by Henry Frenette, an IWW organizer in Washington and British Columbia, who wrote from Vancouver Island in 1911 that "nearly all the men I have spoken to have heard of the IWW from speakers on the street."<sup>4</sup> The IWW placed a high value

<sup>3</sup>Foner, *Fellow Workers*, 20. Paul Phillips, in *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in B.C.* (Vancouver 1967), 55, implies that the IWW, the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council (VTLC), and the SPC worked together to defeat the ban on public speaking. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1979), gives the IWW the leading role in the battle, while Foner, in *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York 1965), 205-6, assumes a high degree of unity. Jack Scott, in his popular account of B.C. Wobblies, *Plunderbund and Proletariat: A History of the IWW in B.C.* (Vancouver 1975), 41-51, does point out splits in the radical movement, but assumes that the leaders of the "craft internationals" were inherently conservative and ignores the important political motives that divided the participants.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too: Studies of the Wobblies* (Westport 1969), 74. Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 174-5. The Wobbly is cited in Foner, *Fellow Workers*, 12. The quote from Ralph Chaplin is from

on street speaking not as an abstract right, but as a necessary weapon in the class war.

In Vancouver, 1909 was a prosperous year for organized labour. The Vancouver Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) was busy with plans for a new Labor Temple and had just started a monthly paper, the *Western Wage Earner*. But prices were rising quickly, and recent events in the city were cause for some alarm. April saw a strike of longshoremen against the CPR broken as police escorted scabs, some from as far away as Winnipeg, across the picket lines. The newly elected city council, headed by the American real estate developer C.S. Douglas, increasingly took on an anti-labour slant. Mayor Douglas refused to order the eight-hour day for civic workers even though the measure had been approved in a recent plebiscite, and in May he was to abandon the neutrality of the mayor's chair to ensure the passage of a motion that replaced city day labourers with contracting out.<sup>5</sup>

The city council was also concerned with an influx of migrants from the United States. As part of a clean-up drive for its upcoming Alaska-Yukon-Pacific exposition, the city of Seattle was forcing hoboes and transients from the area. Many of them headed for Vancouver. On a single day in April, Vancouver police prevented nineteen "undesirables" from landing off the Seattle ferry. Migrants who did land were tagged with vagrancy charges or harassed in other ways. To justify his actions, the Vancouver chief of police maintained that "these men have to be handled firmly right from the start or Vancouver will be overrun with them."<sup>6</sup> These fears and anti-labour sentiments set the context for the police campaign against free speech.

The section of Carrall Street between Cordova and Hastings Streets had long been established as a place for street speakers.<sup>7</sup> It was the logical place to speak to reach a working-class audience, for it was in the middle of the workers' community of Vancouver's skid road. A large number of hotels, shops, and boarding houses catered to migrants, "timber beasts," and the marginally employed. Several unions had offices in the surrounding blocks. The IWW headquarters was at 61 West Cordova, while the Socialist Party of Canada was located a few blocks away. The Labor Hall, home to several unions as well as the VTLC, was not in the core area, but it was still close to the action.

On Sunday, 4 April 1909, the IWW and the SPC addressed a crowd at the

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the Joe Glazier album *Songs for Woodworkers* (Portland 1977); Frenette is cited in McCormack, 105-6. He was in a particularly good position to comment on free speech fights, for his sister-in-law, Edith Frenette, was a friend of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and took part in the 1909 fight in Missoula and the tragic events of Everett in 1916. For details on Edith Frenette, see Flynn, *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography. My First Life, 1906-1926* (revised edition New York 1973), 104, 108, 221, and Foner, *The IWW*, 525-9. Robert L. Tyler, *Rebels of the Woods: The IWW in the Pacific Northwest* (Eugene 1967), 33, also holds that the fights were held to help organizing drives.

<sup>5</sup>Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 49, for general conditions. For the longshoremen's strike, see *Vancouver Province*, 5 April 1909; for the eight-hour day and Mayor Douglas's role, see *Vancouver World*, 17 April 1909, and *Western Wage Earner* (hereafter *WWE*), April and May 1909. On the issue of contracting out, see *World*, 11 May 1909 and *Province*, 11 May 1909.

<sup>6</sup>*World*, 5 April 1909.

<sup>7</sup>*Western Clarion* (hereafter *WC*) (Vancouver), 22 May 1909; *World*, 13 April 1909.

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corner of Carrall and Hastings. It was no different from scores of earlier meetings: even the competition, the Salvation Army, was at its regular post on the opposite corner. This time, however, Vancouver city police ordered the speakers to disperse. When the men refused, they were handed summonses and ordered to appear before the police magistrate two days later. The police held that "the streets are for people to walk on and people anxious to air their views should hire a hall."<sup>8</sup> The Salvation Army, however, was not asked to disperse. As a writer in the *Western Wage Earner* remarked pointedly,

Because workingmen should hold a meeting on a practically deserted thoroughfare and appoint pickets to see that traffic is not impeded, even though a large crowd should gather, will never be accepted as sufficient reason why they should be fined, when at the same time the Salvation Army hold meetings on busy thoroughfares and cause traffic to be blocked, and horses to take fright at the sound of their brass horns and are not molested.<sup>9</sup>

The two sides of the fight were clearly drawn, with the daily press siding with the police. Even the *Vancouver World*, which supported the campaign for the eight-hour day and published the socialist *Parm Pettipiece* in a weekly "Page for the Wage Earner," took the opportunity to denounce the speakers. The paper argued that "the blocking of traffic is a dangerous nuisance," and that the "Socialists" should find "some other space where they could spout to their hearts' content without annoying anyone."<sup>10</sup>

The left swung into action. A well-known socialist attorney, J.E. Bird, represented the arrested men, and on the day of the trial, SPC and IWW members packed the courtroom, only to find that the case was adjourned for a week. To the magistrate's hope that "the offenders would undertake not to repeat the offence in the meantime," Bird retorted that they "would undertake no such thing," and an open air meeting was held on Carrall Street the next evening.<sup>11</sup> The SPC set up a fund for the legal defence and vowed to "take the offensive on the street every evening .... Somebody will eventually have to lie down, and we don't know how." The *Industrial Worker*, Spokane paper of the IWW, noted that "the fight is on," and "the slaves are preparing for action.... There will be a 'hot time in the old town' before long — police or no police!"<sup>12</sup> The VTLC organized a rally at city hall, and though the meeting was primarily concerned with the struggle for the eight-hour day, it expressed its "sympathy and pledges its support in maintaining the right of free speech on the streets of Vancouver."<sup>13</sup>

On 13 April the trial of the six men resumed. Again the court was "filled with a strong revolutionary element long before his royal nibs representative took the

<sup>8</sup>*World*, 5 April 1909; *Vancouver Police Court Calendar*, Volume 11, 6 April 1909.

<sup>9</sup>*WWE*, May 1909.

<sup>10</sup>*World*, 6 April 1909.

<sup>11</sup>*WC*, 10 April 1909; *Province*, 7 April 1909.

<sup>12</sup>*WC*, 10 April 1909; *Industrial Worker* (hereafter *IW*), 22 April 1909.

<sup>13</sup>*Vancouver Trades and Labor Council Minutes*, 15 April 1909.

bench.” The socialists had prepared a legalistic defence. They argued that they had not in fact obstructed the street, that they were twelve feet away from the street line, and had put out wardens to maintain order and prevent obstructions. One SPC member even produced a map to show that the thoroughfare had not been obstructed. The defence held that it was clearly discriminatory for a constable to arrest leftists and yet ignore equally disruptive religionists because they preached a creed acceptable to the police.

The Wobblies counterposed a spirit of resistance to this formalized legal defence. William Taylor, exemplifying the kind of erudition common to many IWW members, took objection to swearing on the Bible, complaining that it could harbour germs. He then argued that he had not been ordered to disperse, but only to stop speaking. Armed with a dictionary, he contended that the verb “to disperse” meant “to cause to break up or to scatter.” This being the case, it was obviously grammatically and anatomically impossible for him to accede to the alleged police demand to disperse himself.<sup>14</sup> The case was again adjourned, this time until the following Wednesday. The defence attorney hinted that his clients would take jail sentences rather than pay fines, and he warned that “the game would be kept up until the jail was packed.”<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the battle on the streets continued. On 19 April the magistrate finally rendered judgement. Taylor was found guilty and ordered to either pay a fine of \$5 and costs of \$2.50, or to serve ten days in jail with hard labour. This was double the usual sentence for being drunk and disorderly. The magistrate advised that if Taylor’s conviction did not put an end to the IWW meetings, “the punishment will be much more heavier next time.” Tempering mercy with justice, the crown withdrew the charges against the other defendants. Attorney Bird appealed the conviction, but it was turned down.<sup>16</sup> The failure of the appeal had little effect on the militants; indeed, it scarcely came as a surprise to the IWW. The secretary of Vancouver Local 322 wrote, before the B.C. Supreme Court ruling, that

it matters not to us which way the decision is handed down: whether for or against us, we shall still uphold our constitutional right of free speech and the right to peaceably assemble for the purpose of discussing our views on this great social problem.<sup>17</sup>

True to their word, the Wobblies continued to protest in the streets. The Vancouver *Province*, with a cavalier rendering of the Industrial Workers of the World, reported on 2 May:

A mass meeting was held last night in the front of City Hall under the auspices of the United Workmen of the World. There was a fair attendance, and Mr. J. Jenkins [Arthur Jenkins of Local 322] was in the

<sup>14</sup>*WC*, 17 April 1909.

<sup>15</sup>*World*, 13 April 1909; *WC*, 17 April 1909.

<sup>16</sup>*World*, 19 April 1909; *Daily News-Advertiser* (Vancouver), 20 April 1909; *World*, 7-8 May 1909; *IW*, 13 May 1909.

<sup>17</sup>*IW*, 13 May 1909.

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chair. There were several speakers, who advocated most strongly the principles and ideas of the revolutionists.<sup>18</sup>

On 13 May, "local Anarchists and Socialists" gathered to listen to Lucy Parsons, widow of Haymarket martyr Albert Parsons and participant at the IWW founding convention in 1905. The daily newspapers were unimpressed with her "recitation [of] the unjust murder of her husband," but Parson's visit provided another rallying point for the Vancouver activists. William Taylor addressed the crowd despite the warnings of the police magistrate, and demanded the restoration of free speech. Two days later, the SPC called for another mass meeting at the city hall, and announced that James Hawthornthwaite, the fiery Socialist MLA from Nanaimo, had been invited to come and take part in the fray. The SPC's newspaper, the *Western Clarion*, also reminded readers that it was the duty of those who did not go to jail to help raise money for those who did.<sup>19</sup>

The same day, police charged T.M. Beamish, a Socialist real estate broker, with obstructing the thoroughfare. This time, the magistrate sentenced Beamish to a fine of \$100 or thirty days with hard labour. Beamish, copying Taylor's courtroom tactics, argued that he had climbed up on a water trough to address the crowd. This meant the order to disperse himself implied that he should drop to the ground and splatter on the pavement, something he was reluctant to do and that exceeded the constable's authority to order.<sup>20</sup>

To protest the outrageous sentence, the SPC organized a meeting at the city hall for 17 May. The large crowd was addressed by Beamish; J.H. McVety, a machinist who was president of the VTLC, manager of the *Western Wage Earner*, and a member of the SPC; E.T. Kingsley, proprietor of a print shop and a prominent socialist; and L.T. English, a printer who belonged to the International Typographical Union and the SPC.<sup>21</sup> The following night, upwards of one thousand people gathered on the traditional battlefield of Carrall and Hastings for a meeting sponsored by the SPC. The speaker refused to give his name to the police, and at this point, a sergeant and four constables "moved off like the whipped curs they always are when they run up against a person who has the manhood or womanhood to stand true to their convictions," as the *Industrial Worker* put it. The *Western Clarion* contented itself with noting that the five "waddled solemnly up the street like a flock of fat ducks."<sup>22</sup>

The following day, 19 May, one case brought before the court was dismissed, while later that night, an IWW-led meeting at Hastings and Carrall was observed but not disrupted by the police. They attempted to take the name of one speaker, but when he refused, the police simply moved on.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup>*Province*, 2 May 1909; *IW*, 13 May 1909.

<sup>19</sup>*World*, 14 May 1909; *WC*, 15 May 1909.

<sup>20</sup>*Daily News-Advertiser*, 16 May 1909; *World*, 17 May 1909.

<sup>21</sup>*World*, 18 May 1909; *WWE*, July 1909; *WC*, 22 May 1909; *IW*, 24 June 1909.

<sup>22</sup>*IW*, 24 June 1909; *WWE*, July 1909; *WC*, 22 May 1909; *IW*, 24 June 1909.

<sup>23</sup>*World*, 19 May 1909; *IW*, 24 June 1909; *Vancouver Police Court Calendar*, Volume 11; 19 May 1909.

This signified the end of overt police harassment. The Crown did not press the arrests to the full extent of the law, the police backed down quickly, and the progressive forces could claim a clear-cut victory.<sup>24</sup> It even appeared that solidarity in the face of a common enemy was possible, that the labour movement, the SPC, and the IWW could forget their ideological differences and work together. But the solidarity was more imagined than real. The socialists, trades unionists, and Wobblies differed greatly on ends and means, and the three groups reacted in conflicting ways. In examining these differences, we learn more about each group and the strands that made up the B.C. labour and left movements of the period.

The reaction of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council was by far the most restrained. The minutes of its bi-weekly meetings reveal that the free speech issue was far down on the council's list of priorities. The public meeting held by the council on 10 April was primarily aimed not at securing free speech, but rather the eight-hour day for civic workers. At the council meetings, much was made of the Laurier government's proposed naval bill, and the pages of the minutes are filled with stirring speeches against it, many made by the council secretary, Parm Pettipiece. The upcoming May Day celebrations were of vital concern, but even these were overshadowed by another event. Nearly one third of one council meeting was devoted to a discussion of a football that had been lost by or stolen from a visiting union team. Free speech was mentioned only once in the VTLC minutes: as noted above, the issue was tacked on to a resolution condemning the actions of Magistrate Williams. This resolution, including the free speech clause, and the appointment of two delegates to deal with the fight, was moved on 20 May — one week after the arrests had stopped and the battle won save for the withdrawal of the charge against English.

The VTLC paper likewise paid little attention to the events on the city streets. The April issue made no mention of the fight, while an article in May gave only the sketchiest of details. It contained no hard facts and did not give the names of those arrested; it mentioned neither the SPC nor the IWW. Instead of a call for action or a plea for funds, the May issue weakly expressed the "hope that the case will be fought to the last ditch ...." It made no suggestion as to who should fight to the last ditch or how labour should contribute.<sup>25</sup>

An article in the June edition of the *Western Wage Earner* tied the campaign for free speech to the dismissal of unpopular police Magistrate Williams, just as the VTLC resolution of 20 May had. The magistrate certainly needed a reprimand: men who had slept in a CPR boxcar were sentenced to six months in double leg irons, while a scab who assaulted a seventy-year old man with a hammer received only thirty days. But it is clear that the VTLC saw the free speech agitation simply as another way to discredit the official. The *Western Wage Earner* was unequivocal:

The feeling against the police magistrate has at last taken definite form, thanks to the men who use the  
<sup>24</sup>VTLC Minutes, 20 May 1909; *World*, 21 May 1909; *WC*, 29 May 1909; *World*, 28 May 1909; *Police Court Calendar*, Volume 11, 28 May 1909.

<sup>25</sup>VTLC Minutes, 15 April, 6 May, 20 May, 1909; *WWE*, May 1909.

streets of [sic] a forum, and probably had such unjust punishment not been inflicted on street speakers the juvenile offenders might have been subject to the caprice of Mr. Williams for years to come. The mass meeting in the city hall decided in no uncertain manner the course necessary to remedy matters....<sup>26</sup>

The manner, of course, was to circulate the meeting's resolution to other unions and city officials.

The minutes of the Vancouver city council further demonstrate the VTLC's apathy towards free speech. During the fight, the labour body sent two communications to the city council. The first was "re eight hour day and entertainment of Japanese squadron," the latter point stemming from city outlays to wine and dine officers of visiting Japanese warships. The second letter was concerned with the establishment of a juvenile court, and was part of the agitation against Magistrate Williams. Significantly, neither of these communications — the only ones sent by the VTLC to city council — even mentioned the free speech fight.<sup>27</sup>

The VTLC was at best marginally interested in the free speech issue. The trades union movement had already established its political program, and it stuck to it doggedly during the battle. Some members, especially those connected with the SPC, did address public meetings, but the council as a body did little to confront the city officials or support the men who did. Instead, the VTLC preferred to petition the mayor in private. The council meeting of 3 June heard a report from James McVety in which he stated that a joint VTLC/SPC committee had met with Mayor Douglas and alleged that the police were discriminating against the workers. The committee had made it known that "no objection would be taken if everyone was prevented from speaking," but that strong objections would continue until equal privileges were given to all.<sup>28</sup>

The wording of this report is interesting. It outlines a unity between the SPC and the trades union movement that is not apparent from a reading of the newspapers, including the *Western Wage Earner* and the *Clarion*. It further suggests that the VTLC/SPC committee was prepared to accept a total ban on public speaking, for it sought only equitable treatment before the law. This was a much more moderate demand than the demand for free speech. It also implies an acceptance of the right of the state to ban public speaking, an argument that the IWW and some elements of the SPC were not prepared to grant. The joint committee's threat to the mayor is also illuminating. The promise to continue "strong objections" in the face of police harassment pales beside the *Western Clarion's* vow to fight in the streets and the IWW's call to fill the jail with agitators. The threat implies a reluctance on the part of the trades unions' leadership and their allies in the SPC to maintain a campaign of direct action. The haste with which the free speech issue was tied to the council's own program of the eight-hour day and judicial reform further suggests that on this occasion the most influential and

<sup>26</sup>VTLC Minutes, 15 April, 6 May, 20 May, 1909; *WWE*, April, May, June, 1909; *World*, 17 April 1909. The quote is from the *WWE*, June 1909.

<sup>27</sup>Vancouver City Council Minutes, 10 May, 25 May, 1909.

<sup>28</sup>VTLC Minutes, 3 June 1909; *WWE*, July 1909.



powerful labour leaders were eager to use the street agitation for their own ends.

It is noteworthy that McVety claimed that the VTLC's quiet diplomacy was more important than the IWW's resistance in the streets and courts. He reported that the VTLC/SPC committee had conferred with Mayor Douglas, who had "taken action and no further trouble had resulted."<sup>29</sup> A notice in the *Western Wage Earner* was equally inflated. In the July issue, the paper reported that

prompt action on the part of the Trades and Labor Council and the Socialist Party saved a lot of trouble over the question of street speaking. The two bodies appointed a committee who waited upon the chairman of the Police Commission and alleged that the police were discriminating against the workers and in favour of the Salvation Army. The matter has been investigated and police have apparently been instructed not to allow their personal feelings to influence them in the matter.<sup>30</sup>

But from the experience of the dozens of free speech fights waged across North America, it is unreasonable to assume that these labour statesmen had the power they attributed to themselves. It is more likely that the police were acting largely on their own initiative rather than on orders from the city council, probably as part of the campaign against American migrants. But some of the rank and file of the SPC and the IWW were able to spark a stiff resistance among men assumed to be easy targets. Both groups were able to mount a rapid counter-attack as they organized defence committees and large open-air meetings. In this respect, they were far superior to the trades unionists, and given that the VTLC/SPC committee met with the mayor after the fight had been effectively won, it seems apparent that it was this spontaneous reaction that in fact won the day.<sup>31</sup>

The role of the SPC leadership is more confused and contradictory. Despite the party's propaganda against trades unionism, its leaders were quick to join with their trades council counterparts and seek the same compromise solution. There is also a suggestion that the leadership of the SPC was willing to cut a deal with the city fathers in order to allow both sides to retreat gracefully. The *Vancouver World* reported on 28 May that a charge against Socialist Party member Leo English was dropped because "the Socialists have agreed to conduct their meetings in the future so that the street will not be blocked." The *Western Clarion* denied this charge a week later, claiming the "Socialists had agreed to do nothing of the kind, though they do make a practice of conducting their meetings with a little decency ...."<sup>32</sup> Their recalcitrance at the end of the fight is odd when compared to their elaborate

<sup>29</sup>VTLC Minutes, 3 June 1909; *WWE*, July 1909.

<sup>30</sup>*WWE*, July 1909.

<sup>31</sup>That the police were operating on their own initiative is further suggested by a comparison of arrests for vagrancy in April-May 1909 and 1910. If the police had been acting on the orders of council in 1909, it is reasonable to assume that arrests for vagrancy would have increased during the free speech fight, as they did in 1912. This would have been an effective way to break up the crowds and harass workers, but it would have required the city council's approval, as it would place a great strain on the jails and budget of the city. But the number of arrests in 1909 is similar to that of 1908, and is markedly less than that of 1910.

<sup>32</sup>*World*, 28 May 1909; *WC*, 5 June 1909.

contentions during the trial that tried to show that the party did not obstruct traffic. While it is difficult to know what to make of the assertion that their meetings were held with "a little decency," the willingness of SPC leaders to join with VTLC officials to seek a compromise, even after the fight had been won in the streets, suggests that they were uneasy with the rough and tumble approach taken by the IWW and rank-and-file SPC members. The party appears to be torn between those who sided with the labour organizations and others who were prepared to back up radical rhetoric with militancy in the streets. Of the three organizations involved, only the IWW had a clear plan of direct action, and its picture of what was being fought for was the least compromising.

The events of the 1912 free speech fight show the reactions of the three organizations even more dramatically. The context of this next and better-known round of the struggle was markedly different. Unlike 1909, the winter of 1911-12 signalled the beginning of the end of the pre-war boom. Unemployment reached critical levels as workers laid-off from railway construction and logging made their way to Vancouver. At the same time, the Salvation Army, government officials, and civic "boosters" encouraged migrant workers to head to the province to ensure a cheap labour supply for the planned spring railway construction. One contractor observed that "in all my experience in railway construction, I never saw the supply of labor so ample as it is this winter. For several weeks I have been turning down over 100 applicants daily."<sup>33</sup> The city was responsible for the existing, primitive forms of welfare, but it did little to alleviate the situation. The civic labour bureau was swamped with more than five hundred applicants, but could find only temporary part-time work for fewer than one hundred. In an attempt get better benefits for the unemployed, the IWW held a number of street meetings to organize protests.

The response of the city was to crack down on vagrants and transients. Twenty-three men were "vagged" on a single day, and the chief of police complained that "the city is at present over-run with undesirables."<sup>34</sup> But the street protests increased, and alarmed citizens elected James Findlay, a law-and-order candidate and former head of the Vancouver Conservative machine, to the mayor's office. Findlay was regarded as a pro-business candidate, and he did not disappoint his backers. He called for an "iron hand" to deal with the unrest on the streets, and the city council passed a by-law forbidding all outdoor meetings. On 20 January, the Saturday following the passage of the by-law, the IWW held a meeting at the corner of Cordova and Carrall. At this meeting, four men were arrested: three were charged with vagrancy and one with assaulting a police officer. The following day, six more were arrested during a meeting on Powell and Carrall.<sup>35</sup>

The arrests galvanized the unionists and leftists of Vancouver. The IWW and the SPC called another meeting for the following Sunday. The VTLC decided to

<sup>33</sup>*World*, 20 February 1912; *B.C. Federationist* (Vancouver), 20 January 1912; McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 106; *WC*, 27 January 1912.

<sup>34</sup>*World*, 10 January, 22 January 1912.

<sup>35</sup>*World*, 22 January 1912.

support the move, to prove that "freedom of speech in the British Empire is guaranteed by higher authority than any city administration."<sup>36</sup> On 28 January, a crowd of several thousand gathered to hear R.P. Pettipiece report on his meeting with the provincial government on the issue of unemployment. Both the *Western Clarion* and the *B.C. Federationist*, the VTLC paper which had replaced the *Western Wage Earner*, noted that the meeting was called largely to test the city by-law. The deputy chief of police declared the meeting illegal, and arrested Pettipiece. When protests were made, the deputy chief signalled to a waiting line of policemen. Mounted and foot patrolmen waded into the crowd, swinging clubs and horsewhips. The reporter for the *Province* newspaper noted that "those not fortunate enough to get out of the way went down like ten-pins before the irresistible onslaught of the officers .... The Powell Street Grounds looked something like a battlefield ...."<sup>37</sup> Nearly thirty people were arrested, and bail was set at five hundred dollars apiece. While James McVety and J.W. Wilkinson, the president of the VTLC, bailed out Pettipiece, the outrageous bond kept many in jail: fourteen were still imprisoned three days later.<sup>38</sup> Authorities moved to seal the border to keep Wobblies from flooding the city, and even the inter-urban B.C. Electric Railway was carefully watched to prevent the feared invasion.<sup>39</sup>

Subsequent meetings were broken up by the police. Arrests for vagrancy also increased markedly as authorities used the vague wording of the criminal code to harass the workers. In one attempt to evade police, Wobblies and SPC members rented boats off Stanley Park and spoke to the crowds through a huge megaphone. But the strong currents and police worked together to break up the tiny armada; the megaphone was scuttled and the protestors were arrested when they finally docked. A plan to augment the Wobbly navy with an air force of a hot air balloon did not come to fruition.<sup>40</sup>

On 12 February, a delegation met with Mayor Findlay and the police commission to discuss the problem. Headed by Socialist MLA James Hawthornthwaite, the delegation received assurances from the mayor that free speech would be allowed in public squares when the present unrest ended.<sup>41</sup> Soon after, Wilkinson and McVety met with Premier Richard McBride and his cabinet to bring about an end to the free speech fight.<sup>42</sup> The closed meeting apparently reached a satisfactory conclusion, for the next open-air meeting, held on 18 February, went unmolested by police. On 21 February, Mayor Findlay met with IWW, VTLC, and SPC delegates to announce the end of the police campaign against public speaking.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Cited in Foner, *The IWW*, 206. This refutes McCormack's curious assertion that the battles for free speech had a "peculiarly American construction," McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 106.

<sup>37</sup>*Province*, 29 January 1912.

<sup>38</sup>*World*, 29 January 1912; *Daily News-Advertiser*, 29 January 1912; *World*, 1 February 1912.

<sup>39</sup>*Province*, 2 February 1912.

<sup>40</sup>*IW*, 22 February 1912; *Province*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>41</sup>*World*, 12 February 1912; *Province*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>42</sup>*World*, 16 February 1912.

The 1912 free speech fight has been interpreted as a victory for the left/labour movement that illustrates the solidarity and willingness to overlook sectarian politics in the face of a common enemy. Indeed, at the 1 February meeting of the VTLC, Parm Pettipiece told delegates that "it was up to them to associate themselves with the IWW, as a large number of the members of this organization were coming to the city for the purpose of compelling the authorities to show their hand."<sup>44</sup> Later in the meeting, a committee was named to "co-operate with [the] committee from [the] Socialist Party and the IWW in [the] fight for free speech and work for the unemployed."<sup>45</sup>

But the VTLC and SPC were not willing to work with the IWW as equals. The two organizations had done little to organize the first protests among the unemployed, preferring to petition the local and provincial governments. These governments were quite prepared to ignore the requests of these respectable groups, as Pettipiece made clear during his speech of 28 January, but neither the trades union movement nor the leaders of the SPC were prepared to organize the unorganized in the manner of the IWW.<sup>46</sup>

Only four days after Pettipiece's call for unity the *B.C. Federationist* started to back away from the free speech fight by denying the importance of street meetings:

The edict goes forth that no more street meetings are to be held. As this has evidently applied to all organizations which have been in the habit of using the streets for such purposes, there is no reasonable ground for complaint. Street meetings, of whatever character, have always been a nuisance, and it is more than doubtful that enough good ever accrued to any cause through such meetings .... If the edict clearing the streets is made permanent and enforced against all alike, there should be no complaint from anyone.

Further in the editorial, the paper began to separate the respectable labour leaders of the VTLC from the IWW members who had begun the fight:

The speakers who were to address the gathering [of 28 January] mostly belonged to Vancouver, some of them being officials of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council, and among the most widely known men in the labor movement in Canada. In spite of all this, however, it was ordained by the government that this gathering must not be allowed ....<sup>47</sup>

The editorial makes clear that the issue for the trades unions was equal treatment under the law, not free speech. This stand reflects the fact that it was the IWW, not the VTLC, which was attempting to organize the unorganized where they lived and gathered. The streets were important places to organize migrants and unskilled workers, but these were not the people the trades unions sought. In

<sup>43</sup>*World*, 23 February 1912.

<sup>44</sup>*World*, 2 February 1912.

<sup>45</sup>*B.C. Federationist*, 5 February 1912.

<sup>46</sup>Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 55.

<sup>47</sup>*B.C. Federationist*, 5 February 1912.

emphasizing that the speakers of 28 January were, unlike most speakers at previous demonstrations, local union officials rather than “foreign” agitators, the article hints that a campaign against the IWW would not be strongly protested, but that the harassment of other, less militant leaders was another matter. Finally, the VTLC resolution passed at its 1 February meeting was strong in its condemnation of the police riots, but weak in its call for action: the meeting resolved only that council members were to bring the matter before their unions and ask that they purchase postcards of the police charge. The meeting further resolved to ask the provincial government to select a commission to investigate the administration of the city police.<sup>48</sup>

The stance of the IWW stands in stark contrast to that of the VTLC. The *Industrial Worker* heralded the apparent solidarity in the radical movement, writing that

The Trades and Labor Assembly [sic] has gone on record as being in favor of free speech and assemblage and as being willing to back up that right. The SP of C are also backing the men, and this co-operation of forces regardless of differences, means that Vancouver will be in receipt of the dose that made other cities sit up and take notice.<sup>49</sup>

Instead of calling for a commission, the IWW called for men and money to come to Vancouver and join the battle. It hinted at rumours of a general strike and opined that “that such a strike would be accompanied with the workers’ weapon — SABOTAGE — there is but little doubt.” J.S. Biscay, an IWW organizer who would play an important role in the Canadian Northern strike later in the year, declared that “if they want to down free speech in Vancouver they will have to bury us with it.” Another Wobbly announced that “we will have free speech in Vancouver or else make the grass grow in the streets.” The IWW’s response to the repression was direct action and confrontation through intensifying the pressure on civic authorities, typified by its threat to have members “keep travelling to Vancouver until the city gets enough and is willing to say so.”<sup>50</sup>

The SPC did not have a unified reaction. Some rank-and-file members made it clear that “when the real fighting takes place, there you will find us striking out, shoulder to shoulder for a common cause.” One letter writer drew parallels with the Russian nihilists and proclaimed that “every Cossack’s whip that makes a mark on any part of my anatomy will be avenged by me if there is life left in my body to avenge it.”<sup>51</sup> But Wilfred Gribble, party strategist and organizer, advised audiences that the proper response was “to become interested in the question of organization ... and to send members of their own class to parliament.” Another

<sup>48</sup>For the importance of speaking on the streets, see Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 174-5, and McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 105-6. For the resolution of the VTLC, see *B.C. Federationist*, 5 February 1912.

<sup>49</sup>*IW*, 1 February 1912.

<sup>50</sup>*IW*, 8 February, 15 February 1912.

<sup>51</sup>*WC*, 10 February 1912.

writer repudiated direct action completely, asking, "What can you do? Just one thing: Be the State."<sup>52</sup>

The leaders of the SPC and the VTLC agreed that political action, not direct action, was the appropriate weapon. They moved quickly to back up their policy with actions geared to move the protests away from the streets and into government chambers. On 11 February, Hawthornthwaite announced that the SPC and the VTLC would send a joint deputation to the mayor. In doing so, he argued, the SPC

was following along the lines of reasonable political action. They would ask for the right which was being denied them of meeting, not on the crowded thoroughfares of the city, but in some square or park. If those rights were refused, they would consider what other steps to take. As far as the Socialist Party of Canada was concerned, it would do its level best to win that right.<sup>53</sup>

On the weekend of 10-11 February, both Pettipiece and Hawthornthwaite cancelled scheduled appearances at the street meetings, preferring instead to work on plans for the meeting with the mayor. When questioned about his absence, Pettipiece replied, "it isn't good warfare to put the generals in the front of the battle."<sup>54</sup>

On the morning of 12 February, the meeting with the mayor and police commissioners took place. The representatives of the VTLC and SPC were Hawthornthwaite, James Wilkinson, J. McMillan, James McVety, and Victor Midgley, all high-ranking members of the labour council and supporters of the SPC. No rank-and-file members were included; nor were representatives of the unemployed.

The IWW was explicitly excluded from the meeting. Two Wobblies representing the union went to city hall at the time of the meeting and demanded to be admitted. Wilkinson, president of the VTLC, came out and attempted to mollify the men by telling them that "I told them [the police commissioners] that the trades and labor people wanted to interview them, and so they do not want to have you in just now." He promised to try to have the commissioners meet with them later, and returned to the meeting. But it quickly became apparent that the labour leaders and SPC politicians wanted to cut out the IWW from the rest of the movement. When the commissioners were questioned by the press on the steps of the city hall after the meeting, the mayor outlined the arguments presented by the delegation. He reiterated the city's determination to "rid the city of the 'lawless element,'" and bluntly stated that the "unions had nothing in common with the men who were waging the fight for free speech." The VTLC and SPC decision to eliminate the IWW was made even clearer by one of the commissioners. Asked if they would meet with the IWW, the commissioner replied,

The Trades and Labor delegation repudiated the two Industrial Workers so that was why they were not permitted to join the conference. When the Workers tried to get in the labor men said they were not on

<sup>52</sup>WC, 3 February, 17 February 1912; *World*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>53</sup>WC, 17 February 1912; *World*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>54</sup>*Province*, 12 February 1912.

the delegation and had no rightful part in the morning's session. Therefore we told them that we could not see them.<sup>55</sup>

A story in the *Vancouver Sun* the following day suggests that the commissioner's account was essentially correct, and that the exclusion of the IWW was largely the plan of the labour/socialist delegation. The report noted that in contrast to the rough tactics and stance of the IWW, the delegates had "pointed out that if tact and sagacity were used there would be no disturbance on the part of the labor or socialist party." Three days later, Victor Midgley, secretary of the B.C. Federation of Labor, made a statement that helps confirm the suggestion that the leaders wanted to separate the VTLC/SPC coalition from the IWW. Denying that the delegation had repudiated the IWW, Midgley went on to assert that "the real reason the IWW was not admitted was because they [sic] did not figure on the committee."<sup>56</sup> This circular logic explains nothing, and suggests that in fact the delegation wanted to discredit the IWW and make a separate peace.

The delegates were prepared to be eminently reasonable and to seek a compromise. Wilkinson was careful to ask only for the right of free speech on public squares, not public streets.<sup>57</sup> This apparently trivial distinction was actually a vital one. The IWW, just like the Salvation Army before it, found it more effective to hold meetings and speeches on street corners rather than in public parks and squares. By holding meetings on the corners, Wobblies had a better chance of reaching the workers as they walked to and from employment offices, bars, jobs, and homes. The ability of the union organizers would be hampered if they were restricted to the squares and parks that were on the edge of the downtown community. Since the VTLC was not interested in organizing this constituency, it could afford to forego the right to speak on street corners.

Despite the unassuming request of the delegation and its desire to reach a quick, peaceful settlement, the authorities were not prepared to compromise. The commission expressed a desire to allow free speech on the Powell Street grounds "just as soon as conditions in this city became normal again," but it would not give assurance that the meetings planned for 18 February would be unmolested. This could not be accepted even by the less militant representatives, and they prepared to go to Victoria.<sup>58</sup> They planned to use the threat of a rabid IWW as the main bargaining chip to effect a compromise. In a statement to the press, the delegates indicated that

<sup>55</sup>*Province*, 12 February 1912; *World*, 12 February 1912; *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1912.

<sup>56</sup>*Sun*, 13 February 1912; *World*, 16 February 1912.

<sup>57</sup>*Province*, 12 February 1912.

<sup>58</sup>*Province*, 12 February 1912. Scott suggests that the VTLC/SPC delegation asked only for free speech at some future date. This is based on the remarks to the press made by a police commissioner (incorrectly attributed to the mayor by Scott), who claimed that the delegates wanted "open air meeting privileges at some future date, meaning after the troubled situation of the present had settled." *Province*, 12 February 1912. Scott contends that this was indeed what the delegates had asked for, but immediately after the meeting they realized that this could not be sold to the membership and then decided to deny that they had asked for so little. While this scenario would strengthen my argument, it seems unlikely.

if the dictates of the labor body are carried out the momentous question will be fought to the last ditch by all the legal machinery available. and not by the more drastic measures urged by other organizations outside the labor party .... [Pettipiece] contended that the truth of the matter was Canada had been made the dumping ground of the world ....<sup>54</sup>

On 17 February, Wilkinson and McVety met with Premier McBride and his cabinet. They told the government that the city's repression had only strengthened the IWW, that

granting that the IWW men were all that their most persistent maligners made them out to be, the proclamation prohibiting open-air meetings was most ill-advised and inexpedient since it had simply been recognized by troublemakers the continent over as an invitation to come to Vancouver. The man in the street, they averred, had scarcely heard of the IWW until Mayor Findlay entered into a conflict with the people who wanted to hold open-air meetings.<sup>60</sup>

This statement strongly suggests that the leaders of the SPC and the VTLC were not willing to join with the IWW, and that they in fact preferred to join with the Conservative government against the Wobblies for their own ends. While the labour and socialist leaders were opposed to the municipal repression, they were eager to compromise, even though the result would weaken the position of the IWW in Vancouver.

On 18 February, another mass meeting was held at the Powell Street grounds, significantly, not in the streets. This time, however, it went undisturbed by the police. It was clear that McBride had settled with the delegation and had instructed Mayor Findlay to end the campaign against free speech. The premier was hardly responding to an abstract appeal to the rights of British democracy: he had several pragmatic reasons for settling the dispute. The government was about to introduce several controversial bills in the legislature, bills that would create a new railway, the Pacific Great Eastern. Loans for construction, guaranteed by the province, would have to be raised in foreign money markets. In addition, the latest provincial budget called for a deficit of six million dollars, while the city of Vancouver was just about to issue three million dollars of municipal stock. All of this money would have to be supplied by international lenders. But the free speech fight was already

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The delegates denied the commissioner's remarks immediately; if they knew then that the members would reject such a vague request, surely they knew that before the meeting with the commissioners. And if the delegates had asked only for free speech in the future, why didn't they accept it when offered and negotiate from that position? Furthermore, the delegates had arranged a meeting with the premier before the conference with the commissioners, precisely in the event that a suitable compromise could not be reached. Scott is too quick to paint the VTLC/SPC leaders as conservative bureaucrats of U.S.-dominated unions. They did seek a peace treaty, but not at any cost. They knew before the commissioners' meeting that the immediate restoration of free speech was the minimal acceptable demand, and they offered that. When Findlay rejected it, they were already prepared to go over his head, and they did so.

<sup>55</sup>World, 16 February 1912.

<sup>60</sup>World, 17 February 1912.



making headlines in Britain — according to the premier, papers there carried reports of four thousand rioters in the street and men killed in the tumult. This publicity hardly presented a picture of stability and prosperity to investors. Furthermore, a provincial election had just been called, and though the Conservative government had no fear of losing the elections, riots and police brutality would not help the Tories.<sup>61</sup>

But if Premier McBride wanted a quick, peaceful end to the free speech fight, so too did the socialists and trades unionists. Both groups had high hopes for the upcoming election, and their tactics during the struggle were intended to aid their political aims. Throughout the battle, VTLC and SPC speakers urged the crowds to “go to the ballot, that is the remedy. Get on the voters’ list.” The *B.C. Federationist* set out the parliamentary line clearly:

Provincial elections set for early date in April. What can we do about it? There is only one thing we can do just now. Educate and organize the working class to the end that they may seize the powers of the State and get behind the guns instead of in front of them. To meet the violence of the police with violence would be the most foolish and suicidal policy possible.<sup>62</sup>

No doubt meeting violence with violence would have been suicidal. But no one, save a lone letter writer in the *Western Clarion*, had advocated violence. Equating the direct action tactic of flooding the jails with the use of violence was simply another way of repudiating the IWW. The socialists and their trade union allies needed to whip up emotions to strengthen their support, but needed to channel those emotions away from the street and towards the ballot box. Committed to electoral politics, the SPC and the VTLC sought a compromise as proof of the effectiveness of their strategy. In order to shift the fight to the provincial election, and afterwards perhaps to treat with the Conservatives if a minority government resulted, the two groups had to disown the IWW and discredit its policy of direct action. This would allow them to appear to be leaders of the struggle and garner votes. The *Vancouver Sun* outlined the reasons SPC candidates had for seeking a political resolution of the free speech fight:

... the alliance formed between Mr. Hawthornthwaite and Premier McBride some years ago, when the government of which Mr. McBride is the head was compelled to depend upon Socialistic support for its existence has never been entirely dissolved .... An election is to take place very soon and Mr. McBride and Mr. Hawthornthwaite both wish to capture all the votes they can. Mr. Hawthornthwaite will of course be a candidate for Nanaimo and his election will depend upon the Socialists of that constituency .... Mr. Hawthornthwaite will receive from the Socialists of Nanaimo credit for his attack upon the Vancouver police and he will have it spread ... that it was owing to his intervention that free-speech of the soap-box variety is allowed here.<sup>63</sup>

On 21 February, after his own trip to Victoria, Mayor Findlay met with the free speech delegation. This time, IWW leaders were included and presented with

<sup>61</sup>*World*, 19 February 1912; *Sun*, 20 February 1912; *World*, 23-24 February 1912.

<sup>62</sup>*Sun*, 20 February 1912; *B.C. Federationist*, 20 February 1912.

<sup>63</sup>*Sun*, 20 February 1912.

*a fait accompli*. The terms of the peace treaty were outlined. No meetings were to be held on public streets, but public squares were free for open-air meetings. The mayor would move to quash the indictments against the arrested men, and the prisoners would be released. In return, the defendants were to promise not to take legal proceedings against the city. But the city authorities soon reneged even on this watered-down resolution. While free speech was allowed, the charges were not dropped and the prisoners were not released. Only the IWW protested the betrayal, vowing to continue the fight until the promises had been met. While there is some evidence that they did protest, the local became involved in conflicts it acknowledged to be more important — the Lawrence strike and the San Diego free speech fight.<sup>64</sup>

This signalled the end of this episode in the battle for free speech, but it did not end the divisions in the radical movement. The arrests and trials of those involved shed more light on the fragmented nature of the B.C. working class. On 1 March 1912, five of the men arrested on 28 January were tried. Four of the men were Wobblies. Both McVety and Pettipiece were called to testify, presumably by the defence, but their testimony was carefully weighted to separate the labour and socialist movements from the IWW. McVety testified that “I believe in free speech, but I do not believe that force will avail against the constituted authorities. I believe that free speech is now established in this province.”<sup>65</sup> This statement implies that the IWW had in fact advocated violence, and could not have helped the men on trial. Pettipiece was even more forceful. Despite his early appeal for solidarity, at the trial of the Wobblies he held that “the organization known as the IWW is a product of existing social conditions. I do not approve of them ....” Asked if he approved of the IWW’s existence, Pettipiece replied, “No; but they are like the trusts and other big aggregations. I don’t approve of those, but I have to take them.”<sup>66</sup> This statement is particularly interesting, for a few months later Pettipiece was to address the VTLC and announce that “workers must get wise to the fact that what was needed is bigger unions and less unions.”<sup>67</sup>

An examination of the arrested men shows that it was the IWW and the rank-and-file of the SPC who mounted the campaign for free speech in the streets and who were the main targets of repression. The names of 42 men arrested for violations of the street by-law can be gleaned from the newspapers of the day. Of these men, eleven cannot be identified with any political organization. Seventeen can be positively identified as IWW members; two more were identified as Wobblies, but denied it at their trials. Nine men were identified as SPC members, while two others were named as “Socialists.” Only two trade union officials were among the arrested men, including Parm Pettipiece. This cataloguing of the arrested participants suggests that while VTLC and SPC leaders were prepared to give

<sup>64</sup>*World*, 23 February 1912; *IW*, 7 March 1912.

<sup>65</sup>*World*, 2 March 1912; *Province*, 2 March 1912.

<sup>66</sup>*World*, 2 March 1912; *Province*, 2 March 1912.

<sup>67</sup>*IW*, 29 August 1912.

speeches and serve on delegations, they were not prepared to go to jail. Despite his arrest, Pettipiece himself gives strength to this argument through his actions at the trial of the IWW men. Furthermore, at his own trial on 19 May 1912, he testified that when he attended the 28 January meeting, he "did not know anything about it being a free speech fight," even though both the *Western Clarion* and the *B.C. Federationist*, which Pettipiece edited, had made a point of announcing that the meeting had been called largely to protest the free speech ban.<sup>68</sup>

The leaders of the labour movement and the SPC chose to occupy a very different position in the struggle than the militants of the IWW. Opposed to direct action, they placed all their faith in the upcoming election, and quickly abandoned the common front urged by the Wobblies. Instead, they hoped for the return of a healthy socialist slate, and they admonished workers that "the weapon wherein lies your salvation is your pen ... use this peaceful weapon at the ballot box."<sup>69</sup> But the parliamentary socialism of the VTLC and the SPC proved to be every bit as utopian as the IWW's direct action. The Conservatives swept into power on 28 March; the Liberals were eliminated from the provincial parliament, and the socialists returned but two MLAs. Most of the eighteen SPC candidates did not gather enough votes to reclaim their election deposits.<sup>70</sup> Unable to achieve anything on their chosen battleground of electoral politics, the actions of the VTLC and SPC weakened the IWW and hampered the organization of the unemployed. The "pragmatic" politics of the socialists and labour leaders split the working class movement and gave back little in return.

How may such a split be explained? I believe the answer lies in two places: first, in the conscious decisions working class leaders made to pursue certain objectives and strategies, and second, in the specific class and cultural location of these leaders, a location that would heavily influence their world-view, ideology, and decisions.

The strategies of the SPC in this period are fraught with contradictions. Most of the literature on the party describes it as "the most radical tendency" in the B.C. movement, as McCormack has it. Bryan Palmer refers to the "vanguard" position of the SPC, while R.A. Johnson's dissertation on the party, still the most comprehensive work on it, suggests that it held firm to an impossibilist position of "no compromise — no political trading."<sup>71</sup> This analysis, however, may be challenged on historical and theoretical grounds.

The actions of the party during the free speech fight indicate its willingness to disavow militancy and direct action in favour of its parliamentary project. This supports McCormack's contention that the party "considered [the state] the vehicle

<sup>68</sup> *Province*, 29 May 1912.

<sup>69</sup> *WC*, 23 March 1912.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1932*, (Toronto 1972), 123.

<sup>71</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 17; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980*, (Toronto 1983), 164-5; R.A. Johnson, "No Compromise—No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia," (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975).

whereby the means of production would be socialized, and thus, the exploitation of the proletariat would be ended. They relied on political action to achieve the revolution." Committed to using parliament to make the revolution, the SPC held that the "ultimate revolutionary action" consisted of "striking at the ballot box."<sup>72</sup> This stance meant accepting, at least tacitly, the legitimacy of the capitalist state, for in order to take part in the electoral process, the party had to abide by the rules of parliamentary democracy. This in turn meant the party would reject the direct action of the IWW. Indeed, less than two weeks after the founding convention of the IWW, the *Western Clarion* assailed the new organization as a "living picture of a mental vacuity on the part of its parents ...." A week later, the paper denounced the Wobblies as "ignorant asses" and "gabblers," and suggested that the "Chicago affair will go down in history as the most ridiculous and impotent fiasco that ever happened in the name of labor."<sup>73</sup> Attacks on the IWW appeared regularly in the *Western Clarion*. A few months after the Vancouver 1912 free speech fight, the paper re-printed an article from the *Los Angeles Citizen* that forcefully attacked the union, claiming that "the time is 'ripe and rotten ripe' for a complete showing up of the traitors who are exploiting the struggles of the workers and undermining the institutions erected at infinite sacrifice for their protection and advancement." Later, the *Clarion* argued against direct action, claiming that only political action would free the working class. Decrying the IWW as an anarchist organization, the writer concluded that "if the IWW is not financed by the capitalist class, it ought to be!"<sup>74</sup> During the IWW strikes on the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific railways in 1912, when upwards of 8,000 men struck for better pay and conditions, the SPC continued its attacks and its insistence on political action. While commending the union for its conduct of the strike, the party went on to argue that the IWW was "so anarchistic, and therefore reactionary, as to clearly stamp it as an enemy of the peaceful and orderly process of the labor movement towards the overthrow of capital and the ending of wage servitude." Another article argued that while the strike had cost the IWW thirty thousand dollars, the "strikers had nothing but sore heads to show for it." The money would have been better spent, he argued, on the nomination fees of fifty Socialist candidates, and the remainder used to "smother British Columbia with Socialist literature, and the results would be 10 or 15 working class representatives in Victoria."<sup>75</sup>

But the SPC's parliamentary record was neither revolutionary nor very successful in obtaining reforms. In 1905, for example, its election platform called for the abolition of election deposits, an anti-lobbying law, a tax exemption for settlers who had improved their lots, and a law to force joint stock companies to publish annual returns.<sup>76</sup> Once elected, Socialist MLAs formed a minority in the house. In order to accomplish anything, they were forced to prop up the Tory government of

<sup>72</sup>McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 58.

<sup>73</sup>WC, 15, 22 July 1905.

<sup>74</sup>WC, 6 July, 31 August 1912.

<sup>75</sup>WC, 6 July, 8 June 1912.

Richard McBride “from reasons of expediency.” The result of their compromise and political trading was “a mild flow of labour legislation principally lacking in teeth,” one observer has noted.<sup>77</sup> As Allen Seager has approvingly remarked, “the radical Marxism of the SPC coexisted with its practice of democratic socialism,” though social democracy might be a better term. Gerald Friesen has similarly argued that while rank-and-file members may have advocated direct action (and the free speech fights suggest they did), the “SPC leaders advocated short-term reforms, sought to avoid outbreaks of violence, and assumed the continued relevance of their political party.”<sup>78</sup> Despite the party’s “impossibilism” and its refusal to affiliate with the Second International, its practice was in essence reformist. If actions indeed speak louder than words, we must conclude that whatever its role in other provinces, the socialism of the SPC was not the most radical tendency in B.C.’s labour movement. The free speech fights are the most vivid, but hardly the only, evidence of the party’s emphasis on political action and reform over militant direct action.

The position of the VTLC must also be carefully delineated. While the AFL in many areas opposed industrial unionism this was not the case in British Columbia. Indeed, the premier issue of the *Western Wage Earner* called for increased solidarity and the federation of craft unions. At the 1911 AFL convention, the VTLC sponsored a resolution that called for the federation to “go on record as favoring industrial unionism and proceed to organize all employes [sic] working for one company into one central body ....” The motion was defeated, but western delegates to the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress of 1911 managed to pass a resolution calling for industrial unionism. In August 1912, the VTLC voted to endorse industrial unions, and as noted above, Pettipiece himself argued for bigger and fewer unions. Members of the AFL affiliates even joined with IWW activists in attacking Samuel Gompers during a visit to the city: in an oft-quoted passage of his memoirs, the AFL chieftain complained that they had “denounced me in the vilest language I have ever heard.” It should also be noted that both the VTLC and the B.C. Federation of Labor were important players in the creation of the One Big Union in 1919.<sup>79</sup>

But the willingness of the trade union bodies to endorse industrial unionism did not translate into support for the revolutionary industrial unionism, or syndicalism, of the IWW.<sup>80</sup> Both organizations preferred to move towards parliamen-

<sup>76</sup>WC, 16 December 1905.

<sup>77</sup>Robin, 94.

<sup>78</sup>Allen Seager, “Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21,” *Labour/Le Travail* 16 (Fall 1985), 23-59; the quote is from 35. Gerald Friesen, “‘Yours in Revolt’: The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labour Movement,” *Labour/Le Travail* 1 (1976), 139-157; the quote is from 140. Friesen’s comments are about the party in 1919, but I suggest that the SPC’s turn away from radicalism started long before that.

<sup>79</sup>WWE, February 1909; *B.C. Federationist*, 23 December 1911; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 46-51; McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 114; *IW*, 29 August 1912; Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (1925; Reprint edition New York 1967), 425-6.

tary socialism. The *Western Wage Earner* noted in 1909 that "workers who disregard and belittle the value of the franchise are neglecting the only thing of value the workers possess." Later in the year, the VTLC resolved to confer with the SPC "with regard to taking common action at the forthcoming elections." The work to bring the two organizations together culminated in 1912 when the B.C. Federation of Labor voted to endorse the SPC as the political party of the working class. A little later, a symbolic gesture illustrated the alliance, as the offices of the SPC were transferred to the new Labor Temple.<sup>81</sup>

The labour council's support for parliamentary progress necessarily brought it into conflict with the IWW. In 1910, the *Western Wage Earner* attacked the union as disruptive and anarchistic:

In nearly every instance where the unorganized revolt against existing conditions and secure even a semblance of victory, a number of organizers appear on the scene in time to claim a victory for the Industrial Workers of the World, allegedly an Industrial union, but in reality nothing but a number of sharp fakirs who are able to temporarily enthuse the half-starved incredulous workers, thereby securing per-capita tax for a brief period .... Unlike the craft and industrial unions, this aggregation, better known as the Infant Wonder Workers, has no real mission, except the disruption of existing organizations, both industrial and political ....

The important issue was the supremacy of political action, for only with the ballot could labour free itself. The writer charged that direct action would

<sup>80</sup>Larry Peterson, in "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 7 (Spring 1981), 41-66, gives a helpful definition of syndicalism. Briefly, its tenets are an emphasis on local autonomy; opposition to political parties and parliamentary politics; advocacy of the general strike as the "supreme revolutionary strategy;" a vision of a new society as a federated economic organization, based on "local units derived from the structure of craft and industry," 55. Peterson then goes on to argue that this definition excludes the IWW. He is mistaken. His arguments for suggesting that the IWW was not syndicalist are taken from Conlin, who has tried to make the IWW evince "a commitment to traditional American liberties." Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too*, 90. In order to fit the IWW to his Procrustean bed, Conlin makes several errors. He holds that the IWW was essentially a union, not a revolutionary organization, when in fact it explicitly set out to be both. Conlin distorts the IWW's position towards political action, and presents an incorrect picture of centralization in the organization. He makes too much of the French syndicalist tactic of "boring from within," raising it to a fundamental characteristic of syndicalism; he ignores the specific conditions of North American unionism that led the IWW to reject it. It is illustrative that Conlin uses William Z. Foster's attempt to break away from the IWW and establish the Syndicalist League of America as proof that the IWW was not syndicalist. Conlin does not point out that in later years, Foster held that the IWW was syndicalist, and that the difference between the two organizations was merely one of tactics, most especially "boring from within." Peterson's easy acceptance of Conlin's flawed argument leads him to misinterpret the IWW. He is quite correct, however, to hold that the OBU was not syndicalist.

<sup>81</sup>*WWE*, March 1909, August 1909; *WC*, 17 February 1912. The closeness of the VTLC and the SPC is explainable, despite the incompatibility of unionism and "impossibilism." McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 56, suggests that union members may have made up as much as 90 per cent of the SPC. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 164, plays down this figure, suggesting that it was 40-60 per cent, but see *WWE*, July 1909, which considers 60 per cent a conservative estimate. This suggests a rift in the SPC between the impossibilists and the trade unionists; more research is needed to verify this tantalizing speculation.

appeal only to those who through lack of intelligence, imagine that the power given the capitalist class by the ballot can be summarily transferred to the working class by way of the general strike or by allowing their heads to be battered by the armed minions of the law ....<sup>82</sup>

During the CN/GTP strikes, the VTLC eventually supported the IWW, but its first impulse was to stifle the unrest. In April, the council sent a delegate into the IWW camps to try to convince the men to return to work. The effort failed, and as the strike grew, the VTLC was forced to take action. An appeal for help was investigated first, and, some three months after the strike began, the council issued a call to its affiliates for help.<sup>83</sup> In the logging industry, the IWW tried to organize the timber beasts, but again ran into opposition from the craft unions. In 1913, the *B.C. Federationist* suggested that the IWW's logging unions were little more than a remnant, and insinuated that all the monies raised by the locals went to pay organizers. The *Industrial Worker* icily pointed out that the IWW had at least six times more loggers signed up than the AFL had, despite the fact that the AFL had been making half-hearted attempts to organize the woods for thirty years. The paper also noted that the "lowest wage paid to an AF of L organizer is as large and generally much larger than the highest paid to the IWW organizers."<sup>84</sup> During the Vancouver Island miners' strike of 1912-14, the Miners' Liberation League was greatly influenced by the IWW. Wobblies helped to guide the strike, and IWW tactics such as parades and direct action were used. The union's call for a general strike was greeted enthusiastically but the refusal of the VTLC to support such a strike prevented it from taking place.<sup>85</sup>

Placed in this context, the actions of the VTLC and the SPC in the free speech fights become part of a pattern based on the decision to concentrate on political reform even at the expense of quashing rank-and-file militancy and direct action. Their refusal to extend solidarity to the IWW, which occasionally became attacks on the union, was in large measure a reflection of their ideology of parliamentary socialism. And indeed, this made some sense, for direct action and the call for revolution would interfere with their political program.

The next question, then, is why was this particular reform ideology chosen by leaders of the SPC and the VTLC while the IWW held to a more revolutionary course that stressed direct action? The different approaches reflect the different constituencies each sought to organize, and more importantly, the specific class backgrounds of the members of each organization. Clearly one reason the IWW eschewed the ballot box was that its members, usually migrant workers who could not meet property and residency requirements, and immigrant workers who were

<sup>82</sup> *WWE*, February 1910.

<sup>83</sup> *IW*, 11 April 1912; *B.C. Federationist*, 22 June 1912; Phillips, 53.

<sup>84</sup> *IW*, 29 May 1913. Robert Babcock, in *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism before the First World War* (Toronto 1974), 139, suggests that AFL efforts in the B.C. woods were largely undertaken to diminish IWW influence. The IWW agreed with this analysis.

<sup>85</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 101; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 60.

not citizens, could not vote. During the 1909 B.C. election, the *Industrial Worker* commented on the SPC's call for electoral support by pointing out acidly that of the 5,000 Wobblies in the area, only 75 were eligible to register and vote.<sup>86</sup> (It is also noteworthy that the parliamentary line of the VTLC and the SPC would necessarily cut out large numbers of workers from effective action.) But the Wobblies' anti-political stance in the west also reflected their analysis of trade unions and politicians as an emerging new ruling class. The proceedings of the IWW founding convention are filled with attacks against "labor fakirs" and the "labor lieutenants" of the captains of industry. An early IWW paper held that

*The freedom of the workers from the slavery of capitalism will never be accomplished by the jealousies, ambitions, and intrigues of politicians — even of politicians of that stripe calling themselves Socialists, and the movement is full of them.*<sup>87</sup>

Another editorial remarked,

The "Western Clarion" of Vancouver, B.C., has the following patriotic notice: "It matters not what political faith you profess, it is your duty to get your name on the voters' list." In other words, you must help support the capitalist state or the world will go to ruin. You have a vote in the industrial union, workingman. That is the future government. Then why should you worry about which set of robbers rule over you, or what political party?<sup>88</sup>

In 1913, another Wobbly suggested that the better income of the skilled workers organized into the craft unions made those workers something of a labour aristocracy who were no longer vitally concerned with the social revolution. Writing in the *Industrial Worker*, the Wobbly argued that

If you are in the woods and find three men camped, one of whom has a good bed roll, one has one blanket, and the last has no blanket at all, you don't need to stop and ask who will tend fire. The blanketless man will likely set fire to a dead tree and before morning the other two will be complaining about sparks in their blankets as the act is "too radical." It is the propertyless worker who must keep the fire of revolt burning, let the sparks fall where they may.<sup>89</sup>

Editorials in the VTLC newspapers suggest that the labour body was similarly eager to separate itself from the propertyless migrant workers. One asked, "What shall we do with the tramp?" The answer was plain: "Let him continue to hit the grit. It is more healthful for him to tramp all over the country than to loaf in one town, and better for the town."<sup>90</sup> Another applauded the fact that New Westminster bartenders were being licensed by the municipal government, and noted that many believed the fee should be higher — around twenty-five dollars — to keep out tramps, improve the class of men in the business, and "protect local men who live

<sup>86</sup>*IW*, 8 July 1909.

<sup>87</sup>*Industrial Union Bulletin*, 17 August 1907.

<sup>88</sup>*IW*, 22 July 1909.

<sup>89</sup>*IW*, 22 May 1913.

<sup>90</sup>*WWE*, July 1909.



in the city and have their homes and property here."<sup>91</sup> The paper often printed anecdotes that took swipes at transient workers. In one, "Plodding Pete" asked, "'Is it true dat yous is offering work to anybody that comes along?'" 'Yep,' replied farmer Corntassel, 'jes' take off your coat an '—' 'Not me, I'm jes' a scout sent ahead by de other fellers to verify a terrible rumour."<sup>92</sup>

Further evidence of intra-class divisions can be found if the men arrested in the 1912 free speech fight are traced in the city directories and compared with the SPC and VTLC leadership. As Figure A shows, eight of the fourteen Wobblies who could be identified in city directories were never listed for the years 1909 to 1914. The longest any was in the city was four years; the average length of residency, admittedly an artificial figure, was 1.3 years. Figures for rank-and-file SPC members are similar: many were never listed, and few were settled in the city. But tracing the leaders of the SPC and VTLC shows a very different pattern. Wilkinson is listed for two years, but Midgley is listed for four, Kingsley for five, and McVety for six. Pettipiece is listed for five years, but is on the voters' list for the one year he is not in the city directory. Kingsley is not listed for 1912, but the *Western Clarion* places him in Vancouver for that year. Furthermore, all were skilled workers — Kingsley and Pettipiece were printers, Wilkinson a carpenter, Midgley a lather, and McVety a machinist. As workers with a trade, they could expect to make between 30 and 40 per cent more annually than the so-called unskilled workers of the IWW.<sup>93</sup>

While most of the IWW men lived in hotels or rooming houses while in Vancouver, the VTLC and SPC leaders tended to own their own homes and live outside of the downtown core area. Pettipiece, for example, owned his home at 2349 St. Catherine's Street, while McVety lived at 1876 West 11th Avenue. Hardly the high-tone areas of town, the addresses nonetheless represented better neighbourhoods than the Waldorf Rooms in the heart of Vancouver's skid road, home to a number of Wobblies.<sup>94</sup>

Given their significantly different niche in Vancouver's working class, it is hardly surprising that the VTLC and SPC leadership favoured a more gradual political program than the IWW. Their moves to channel the protest movement of the free speech fights reflected their stability and relative prosperity as skilled workers with ties to the city, and was part and parcel of their larger dream of liberation through the ballot. Though they were more radical than "liberals in a hurry," it might be fair to call them socialists who could afford to wait.

<sup>91</sup> *WWE*, February 1910.

<sup>92</sup> *WWE*, October 1910.

<sup>93</sup> See Robert McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver, 1886-1914—Urbanism and Class in British Columbia," *B.C. Studies*, 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986), 33-69, for wage figures.

<sup>94</sup> For more extensive figures that support this finding and reveal that an important percentage of SPC and VTLC members and delegates were petit bourgeois shop keepers and business owners, see J. Mark Leier, "Through the Lense of Syndicalism: Fragmentation on the Vancouver and British Columbia Left Before the Great War," (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1987).

What was the effect of this split in the working-class movement? The ability of the SPC and VTLC to hamper the IWW meant the syndicalist union could not establish a stable, secure base among urban workers. Dependent on the migrant workers, the union's fortunes shifted as they did. Isolated on the left, the IWW was less able to maintain itself in the face of government repression, and by the end of World War I, it represented less of a formal structure than an *ad hoc* movement.

The sidelining of the IWW before World War I also had important repercussions for the rest of the labour and left movements. Though the Wobblies continued to challenge the leadership and strategies in different unions, notably mining and logging, labour's course increasingly reflected the class position and parliamentary politics of the skilled, established workers and the white collared "brainworkers" who were their spokesmen. By 1919, the founding of the OBU did not signify the triumph of syndicalism and the IWW's vision of workers' control. Instead, it illustrated the joining of industrial unionism and parliamentary socialism. The B.C. leaders of the OBU — the Winches, the Midgleys, the McVetys, and the Kavanaghs — had already rejected the more revolutionary ideology of syndicalism in the years before the war, and were determined to push working-class protest in certain directions. The Vancouver free speech fights bring to light their platform, their ideology, and their tactics. In later years, labour would unite to fight new battles, but the organization of the unskilled would be delayed by nearly a quarter of a century, while the IWW dream of the commonwealth of toil would be effectively shunted aside.

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**FIGURE A**  
Men Arrested in the Vancouver Free Speech Fight of 1912 and Listed in the City Directories, 1909-1914

	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
Bodnar, Mark	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Brown, John	IWW	CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Carras, John		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Carson, John		CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Coates, John		NL	NL	NL	L	L
Coombes, W.H.	IWW	NL	NL	NL	L	NL
Cormier, John	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Danavitch, M.		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Dickson, Sam	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Doyle, Michael	IWW	NL	NL	NL	L	L
Fisher, James H.	SPC	CI	CI	CI	CI	L
Flood, George	IWW	NL	L	L	L	NL
Hayes, Dennis		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Horne, William	IWW	NL	NL	NL	L	L
Hudson, Frank W.	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Hurst, Percy		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Jenkins, Arthur	IWW	L	L	L	L	NL
Johnson, Peter	IWW	NL	L	L	CI	L
Leah, Alfred	SPC	L	L	L	NL	NL
Lester, Charles	SPC	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Lotzcar, Leon	SPC	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL

	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
Love, William		L	L	L	L	L
McAuliffe, Patrick	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
McClinton, Thomas		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
McDowell, William	SPC	L	L	NL	NL	L
Morris, John	IWW	CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Nicholls, George	VTLC	L	CI	CI	CI	CI
O'Brien, William	IWW	CI	CI	CI	CI	L
Oxley, Fred	SPC	NL	NL	L	NL	NL
Parker, Gordon	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Parm, Albert	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Pettipiece, P.	SPC	NL	L	L	L	L
Picken, Arthur	IWW	NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Read, Walter	SPC	NL	NL	NL	L	L
Roberts, William		CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Schultz, Paul		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Simpson, John	SPC	CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Smith, Alexander		CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Soberman, Sam		NL	NL	NL	NL	NL
Taylor, John		CI	CI	CI	CI	CI
Watts, William	SPC	CI	CI	CI	CI	L
Wilson Charles	SPC	CI	CI	CI	CI	CI

L
NL
CI

L                    Listed  
NL                    Not Listed  
CI                    Cannot Identify

FIGURE B

Percentage of Men Arrested in the Vancouver Free Speech Fight of 1912 and Listed in the City Directories, 1909-1914

