

**A PARTNERSHIP FOR PROGRESS**

# Years of U.S./

*Part I In December 1999 the IBEW celebrates the centennial of the inclusion of Canada into the IBEW. In honour of this IBEW milestone, we present a two-part history.*

**1812**

Some New Brunswick tradesmen form unions.

**1816**

A Nova Scotia law makes unions illegal.

**1820**

Industrial expansion creates a labour shortage in Canada; immigrants begin organizing and fighting for decent wages and working conditions.

**1833**

Printers, carpenters and tailors organize in Montreal.

**1849**

British Columbia miners strike at Fort Rupert.

**1854**

Hamilton, Ontario, tailors strike to protest mechanization.

**1860**

Some Canadian unions begin to affiliate with U.S. organizations; first labour organization pension plan set up by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (members in Canada and U.S.).

In 1991, the IBEW proudly celebrated the centennial of its 1891 origin in St. Louis, Missouri. As many members learned during that time, the “I”—for International—in IBEW did not come about at the union’s founding. The organization was the National Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (NBEW) for the first eight years of its existence, becoming an international union in 1899 when the first Canadian local was chartered.

For several years NBEW leaders had encouraged local unions to combine their unionization efforts with like-minded electrical workers in Canada. However, solidarity was not immediately forthcoming. A resolution to accept Canadian locals into membership was rejected at the 1897 NBEW Convention but passed at the Convention in 1899 and approved by membership referendum.

Some local unions had already tested the waters by helping organize electrical workers in Canada. *The Electrical Worker* of November 1898 reported that “Mr. James Burgess, a member of Local 41, Buffalo, New York, has succeeded in forming a local of electrical workers in Toronto, Canada; and our Brothers across the water are very desirous of having the Brotherhood made international. ...It would not do to have rival labor organizations; they would jeopardize each other’s chances of success. But for us all to join in one body would be of mutual benefit to all concerned.”

Grand Secretary H.W. Sherman presented the argument for formal unification at the 1899 Convention in Pittsburgh. He said, “The time has come... when the American eagle and the British lion are friendly, when Old Glory and

the Union Jack are floating side by side representing the two greatest nations on earth. ...We should extend our hands... and say... ‘Come with us, your fights shall be our fights, your defeats ours, and your victories ours.’ ”

He argued that the 1897 rejection was “the most serious mistake made at [that] convention,” because “a great many men in our Brotherhood who in the past could not see any benefit in an International Organization,... today are the most ardent advocates of it. I would like therefore to see our organization made The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.” Sherman cited a number of letters from organizers for the American Federation of Labor in Canada “scoring us for not accepting their locals.”

## *Early Years of Cooperation*

Between December 1899 and May 1900, several Canadian IBEW locals were chartered in Ottawa, Hamilton, Montreal, Toronto and London (Ontario). Grand President Thomas Wheeler appointed John H. Maloney as the Vice President with jurisdiction over Canada. H. J. Hurd of Local 114, Toronto,

# Canada IBEW Unionism

*Union of Canadian electrical workers into the Brotherhood of Canadian labour and Canadian IBEW members.*

Ontario, was elected Canada's Vice President at the 1901 Convention.

Despite occasional economic downturns, the demand for the skills of electrical workers grew rapidly in the early years of the 20th century. Americans and Canadians benefited from an explosive growth of amenities—such as running water, in-house gas and electric power—once only found in the wealthiest homes. As railroads, highways and airmail routes linked cities and towns a continent apart, the United States and Canada were bound into networks of interdependence, where information, and with it a modern way of life, flowed across areas where life, until then, had changed little in 300 years.

While true rural electrification was unrealized for several decades, more small towns across North America were producing power and joining up with neighboring communities to provide sewer, electric power, and telephone and telegraph services.

## *Political Activism Helps Achieve Goals*

The industrial advances in North America brought many new products into people's homes. But these advances came at a great price—the oppression of workers at a magnitude never before imagined. It would take a strong, united labour movement to bring social justice, job safety and humane working conditions to the working people of North America.

One way to achieve these goals is through political activism—lobbying government officials for beneficial legislation or becoming a

government official and promoting labour's agenda. Organized labour's legislative interests (then, as now) were pretty basic: voting rights, shorter hours, dispute settlement, job safety, employee rights, fair-wage clauses in government contracts, use of prison labour, taxation and immigration. A major problem facing workers was getting paid by their employers. Sometimes an employer would disappear after a job was done without paying the workers. In other cases, workers took a back seat to other creditors if a company went bankrupt. To provide redress for workers in the case of bankruptcy, the first Mechanics' Lien Act was passed in Ontario in 1873.

Through its efforts in the political arena, the Canadian labour movement gradually improved the wages and working conditions of workers in Canada. The Industrial Disputes Investigation Act of 1907 established a dispute-resolution system for employees in industries under federal jurisdiction (coal mining, transportation and communications). While disputes were being investigated, workers couldn't strike and employers couldn't lock out. The law had its weak points, but it was the first of many pieces of federal labour legislation that evolved into the Canada Labour Code.

The rise to power of organized labour didn't occur without opposition, in either country. Strikes and labour organizing brought out the absolute worst in factory, mine, mill and company owners and managers. While it dealt with legislative battles and clashes with employers

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1861

**U.S. National Molders Union organizes Montreal molders.**

1871

**Toronto Trades Assembly formed; British Trade Union Act legalizes trade unions.**

1872

**Toronto Typographical Society strikes for a 54-hour week, \$10 weekly, 25 cents an hour overtime.**

1873

**Canadian Labour Union founded.**

1880-83

**Miners in British Columbia strike over wages, discrimination against members of the union and reinstatement of men discharged for membership.**

1881

**United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners organizes in Hamilton, Toronto and St. Catharines.**

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1886

**Factory Act (Canada) asserts government's right to inspect businesses for labour-law violations; Canadian Trades and Labour Congress formed, first lasting national labour organization.**

1891

**National Brotherhood of Electrical Workers formed in U.S.; Vancouver Building Trades Federation formed; Federated Association of Letter Carriers founded, first public-sector union in Canada.**

1894

**Labor Day designated in U.S. and Canada; central labour organization established in Winnipeg, Manitoba.**

1899

**NBEW changes to IBEW with inclusion of Canadian locals.**

1900

**Canadian Department of Labour created.**

1903

**Royal Commission investigates B.C. labour troubles, recommends incorporation of unions (and assessment of civil damages), prohibition of boycotts, elimination of picketing.**

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over labour issues in two different countries, the IBEW was mired in an intensely divisive internal conflict that resulted in a faction of angry, dissatisfied members breaking away from the Brotherhood.

### *Dissension Within the Ranks*

**T**he IBEW was prospering before what came to be known as the Reid-Murphy Split, named after the two disgruntled members who led the breakaway. Under the full-time leadership of Grand President Frank J. McNulty and Grand Secretary Peter W. Collins, the Brotherhood had expanded its membership and consolidated and centralized its structure. But lingering problems from a rift between inside wiremen and outside linemen, combined with personal differences, led to a call in 1908 for a special convention. Rumors, speculation and outright lies were printed in letters circulated around the IBEW by dissident forces. Without following procedures set out in the IBEW Constitution, the dissidents called a special convention to be held in St. Louis. President McNulty refused to recognize the convention and called on members not to attend. A good number of members, however, did attend; and they elected J.J. Reid as president and J.W. Murphy as secretary. President McNulty and the Reid-Murphy group filed suit against each other to prevent the taking of IBEW property and assets they both claimed as their own.

President McNulty appealed to Samuel Gompers and the AFL, which gave the original union its blessing and support. On several occasions President McNulty arranged

to have the AFL sponsor mediation for the Brotherhood. But the Reid-Murphy group refused to abide by arbitration decisions. Despite the difficulties caused by the fact that neither side had access to the IBEW treasury, and therefore no operating money, both sides tried to carry on the normal functions of the electrical union. Both called their own conventions in 1911 and reelected all principal officers. But the division was hurting both sides very badly.

Finally, on March 21, 1912, Judge John Phillips in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Court decided the claim to IBEW assets in favor of the AFL-recognized, McNulty-led group. The judge held that the special convention called by the Reid-Murphy faction was unconstitutional, and therefore all actions taken by that rival group were neither legitimate nor proper. By the 12th Convention held in Boston in 1913, most of the dissenting Reid-Murphy members had rejoined the Brotherhood. President McNulty was reelected; and he worked with the newly elected Secretary, Charles P. Ford, to mend the wounds caused by the split.

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**Samuel Gompers, President of the AFL, recognized the group led by Grand President McNulty during the Reid-Murphy Split.**


## Daniel O'Donoghue

The first unionist elected to office in Canada as a labour candidate was Daniel O'Donoghue, a printer from Bytown (Ottawa). He is often referred to as the "Father of the Canadian Labour Movement." Born in 1844 at Tralee in Ireland, he and his parents emigrated to Canada in 1852. Upon completing his apprenticeship, he traveled to the United States and was impressed with the spirit of trade unionism he witnessed in the cities he visited. He returned to Ottawa, and his efforts at union organization culminated in the founding of a printers' group in 1866.

In 1869 O'Donoghue pioneered the idea of fair-wage legislation when he protested the unfairness of the government practice of accepting the lowest tender regardless of wage rates. He also inaugurated the practice of labour officials visiting the prime minister each year to discuss matters important to working people.

A firm believer in political action, O'Donoghue felt workers would receive justice only when their own representatives sit in the legislative halls. In 1874, with Conservative support in a provincial by-election, he was elected to the Ontario legislature. He was returned to office the following year in the general election.

Among his accomplishments were a bill easing voting restrictions and extending the right to vote in Ontario, and his efforts to expand educational opportunities through free schools and compulsory attendance. He is credited with being one of those responsible for the Toronto Technical School, one of the first institutions of its kind in Canada.

In 1900 O'Donoghue accepted the post of first fair-wage officer of the newly created federal Department of Labour at the invitation of William Lyon Mackenzie King, deputy minister of the department. O'Donoghue died in 1907, still working to improve the lot of his fellow workers. 

# Workers Struggle To Survive


For over 200 years workers in Canada have tried to secure better wages and working conditions through concerted action. According to legend, a group of Québec voyageurs were the first strikers in Canada. They pulled their paddles from Lac la Pluie in 1794 as a protest over low wages.

**The first strikers in Canada were voyageurs who pulled their paddles from the water in protest.**

Concern over the amount of wages wasn't the only incentive for calling a strike. Getting paid at all was a potent reason to strike. In 1833 carpenters in York struck to force employers to pay them. A workers' committee presented the case to the employers and asked for \$5.00 in advance on account and the earned balance paid at the end of the month. When the employers refused, the workers felt justified in not returning to their jobs.

Hamilton, Ontario, tailors employed by Lawson and Brothers struck in 1854 against mechanization. The company tried to hire strikebreakers, some from the United States. (The U.S. workers left when they realized a strike was in progress.) The tailors eventually won out, but coping with mechanization and high technology continues today.

The general attitude of Canadian employers toward employees forming unions was, "We won't let them." An early coal miners' strike in British

Columbia illustrates the problems unions faced in receiving recognition. The Hudson's Bay Company rewarded Robert Dunsmuir for his refusal to participate in an 1855 strike against one of the company's mines by giving him rights to mine 1,000 acres of coal in the Nanaimo fields. He discovered the Wellington seam in 1869 and started building a coal empire. When he cut wages from \$1.20 a ton to \$1.00 a ton, the workers struck and formed a union. In response, Dunsmuir placed an ad in the newspaper which said, in part, "We wish to state publicly that we have no intention to ask any of them to work for us again at any price." The striking miners convinced most of the strikebreakers not to cross the picket line; subsequently, the strikers were evicted from their company-owned homes. Their refusal to leave prompted Dunsmuir to arrange the dispatching of a government ship with militia to enforce the evictions. After a four-month struggle, the strikers lost. 

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**1904**

Provincial Workmen's Assn. of Nova Scotia strikes Sydney Steel Mill, company calls in troops, strike collapses.

**1905**

Industrial Workers of the World founded; ILGWU organizes first local union in Canada.

**1906**

Sawmill employees at Buckingham, Québec, strike for wage increase; violence ensues when company tries to move logs with private police on guard; strike is lost.

**1908**

Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (Canada), first federal labour legislation, evolved into the Canada Labour Code; IBEW affiliates with Trades and Labour Congress of Canada; Reid-Murphy split in IBEW.

**1910**

Canada's first Workmen's Compensation Act adopted in Manitoba.

**1911**

UMW organizational strike at Dunsmuir mines on Vancouver Island eventually involves 7,000 men, lasts two years; companies agree to allow union membership but still don't recognize or deal with unions; B.C. Federation of Labour formed.

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### *Many Canadian Members Supported Reid-Murphy*

**T**he relationship between Canadian IBEW members and the International was always complicated. Canadians at first welcomed support from the better organized and richer union to the south. As Canadian unions became more established as industrialization increased, divisions arose between members who supported international unions and those who felt they couldn't get a fair shake from American-dominated unions.

These conflicts became most apparent in the IBEW during the Reid-Murphy split. A majority of Canadian members from all but one local joined the dissidents. Many of these members sought national autonomy, which the Reid-Murphy group promoted. So, the dissident Canadian members believed an alliance with the breakaway electrical workers would bring them this autonomy.

However, a unified Canadian IBEW point of view was difficult to achieve in the face of regional, ethnic, political and generational differences, as well as craft-based dissension. Some members felt Canadian locals could not organize their territories as long as they shared a vice president with Americans. Other members advocated an international-regional partnership to strengthen class solidarity and counteract efforts toward a divisive nationalism. As a member of Local 348 in Calgary, Alberta, noted, "It has always seemed strange to some of us here why we are not included



with some of our neighbouring states as regards organizing. The...Western style holds in Alberta and British Columbia the same as it does in Montana and Washington." These emotion-charged debates died down soon after World War I, as those Canadians most disaffected with IBEW policies joined politically radical industrial unions or local unions established along craft, ethnic or religious ideals.

Many Canadian IBEW members worked hard to rebuild the membership in Canada. Such leaders included Vice President Ernest Ingles (the first International Vice President for the First District) and International Executive Council member John L. McBride. Rank-and-file members like lineman Frank Shapland of Local 230, Victoria, British Columbia, attempted to boost morale within the Brotherhood. Under the byline "Shappie," Brother Shapland published tales of early industrial strife and triumph.

However, economic depression and the growth of the Canadian labour movement limited expansion of the IBEW in Canada. By 1947 the Brotherhood could claim only 8,157 members in 79 Canadian local unions. ❏

*Watch for the next part of our Canadian IBEW and Canadian labour history in an upcoming issue of the IBEW Journal.*

