

David G. Flynn Memorial Bursary

Canada's Fight for Labour Unions and Worker's Rights:
The Profound Impact of Arthur 'Slim' Evans

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In Canada, our education system in middle and high school heavily revolves around human strides and dynamic revolutions occurring mostly in the United States. I have learned of Martin Luther King Jr, Rosa Parks, John F Kennedy, Henry Ford, Woodrow Wilson, just to name a few, instead of learning about some of the greatest heroes in Canadian History. When learning about the movements in Canada, we students learn very little about the people who actually impacted the country, but instead focus on the events themselves. Thus, I wanted to dig deeper into the true heroes pursuing the change behind these big movements. There is a man who played an imperative role in the future of labor unions. This man has taken countless strides against all odds in order to change Canada for the better. His name is Arthur 'Slim' Evans.

Born in 1890 and raised in Toronto, Evans started out working on odd jobs, such as delivering newspapers or farming, then finally he found carpentry. In 1911 he travelled to the United States to start working and soon found himself involved in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Here he was involved in the 1913 miners' strike in Colorado and survived bullet wounds from a machine gun (Sheils & Swankey, 1977). This shooting was known as the Ludlow Massacre where machine gun fire was sprayed into the crowds of protestors leaving twenty-five people, including children, to die (Dehler, n.d.). Although Evans suffered from this incident, through the devastation of it all, he now saw first hand how necessary it was to pursue the rights of these workers and how important it was for them to have a voice.

Evans was passionate about pursuing these changes, leading him to return to Canada. He had many important positions here, first as the leader of "One Big Union" for local coal miners in Drumheller, Alberta (Kenning, 2013). He spent three years in prison for leading a strike here, and then another 18 months for leading a coal miners' strike in Princeton (2013). The Coal Miners' Strike in Princeton took place in the midst of the Great Depression where workers were fighting against both the government, police and local business leaders. There were 30-strong BC Police leading horse-back charges on the miners and their families (Barlett & Ruebsaat, 2016). Their courage was implausible. These protesters were threatened by the likelihood of being arrested, deported, or physically hurt. Fortunately, Evans had allies too. He contacted men living in Prime Minister R.B. Bennett's Relief Camps and called them to join the strike. Evans was kidnapped in order to stop him from collaborating with the workers, but he quickly escaped and caught the next train right back to Princeton (Kenning, 2013). The provincial police ignored this incident which truly shows how afraid they were of the strides Evans was making. If any one person could generate change, it was Evans. This was proven when the miners won the protest leading the company to assign better wages and recognize the unions demands for mine safety (Hannant, 2016).

Besides physical displays of protests, Arthur 'Slim' Evans' had a political side which can be recognized through his contribution to the Communist Party of Canada (Sheils & Swankey, 1977). After he affiliated with the organization in 1921, he soon became the leader of the 'trade union' section called the Workers' Unity League (WUL) in 1929 (Bartlett & Ruebsaat 2016). This position is what allowed him to play such crucial roles in the 1932 Coal Miners' Strike in Princeton and the On-to-Ottawa Trek in 1935. Because of Evans' strong and immutable political position, this put him in the negative spotlight with local paper editors, mine managers, local boards of trade, provincial police, the Federal government and the government of British Columbia. Among all of his troubles,

Evans prevailed. During the Depression years and further on, people saw Evans as “a lever to change the course of history, in the hopelessness of the Great Depression” (2016).

As mentioned above, another critical incident in Evans’ career was when he led the On-to-Ottawa Trek. The purpose of this trek was to improve conditions in the relief camps. The strike started in Vancouver and included thousands of men from the Workers’ Unity League (Waiser, 2003). Stops included many places loved by Canadians today such as Kamloops, Golden, Calgary, and Saskatchewan. Once they reached Saskatchewan they had over two thousand workers involved. As hope increased, so did confidence and ambition. Evans was able to meet with Prime Minister R.B. Bennett but unfortunately heated words were exchanged leading to a halt of the trek and police involvement. They were armed with guns, tear gas, clubs and more but thankfully Evans was able to escape jail time (Kenning, 2013). Although this trek came to a halt, the movement did not. Bennett’s government was discredited, laborers were paid higher wages, and then numerous other demands of the Trekkers were finally met! This movement also gained the public’s support, paving a path for the future of labor unions.

Finally, the last influential stride Arthur ‘Slim’ Evans had made was when he founded the Local 480 of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. After months of quietly spreading information about the union, he had signed up one thousand workers for the 480 (Kenning, 2013). The Local 480 still exists today.

None of the progress made for workers would be possible without the support and organization of one Arthur ‘Slim’ Evans. He had endured a life full of obstacles; a life that would make the average person give up. After being shot, spending over four and a half years in prison, being kidnapped, and despised by every form of government, Evans continued to fight for workers’ rights. This is what makes someone a hero. In the face of adversity, he continued to fight for what he and others believed was right. He “gave heart and political direction to men who would remember it throughout their lives” (Bartlette & Rübsaat, 2016).

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