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Constructing the ‘Great Menace’: Canadian Labour’s Opposition to Asian Immigration, 1880 – 1914



ABSTRACT Canadian labour’s agitation against Asian immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has received a considerable amount of scholarly attention. Many historians have highlighted labour’s concerns about Asian competition in the labour market, while others have explored the pervasiveness of anti-Asian racism in most segments of Canadian, and especially British Columbian, society. But these factors – while important – do not sufficiently explain labour’s antipathy to Asians. They particularly fail to account for the unity against Asian immigration between unionists in different regions, the influence of campaigns for exclusion in other countries, and the class content of labour’s anti-Asian rhetoric. Another under-explored issue is whether unionists approached Asians in the same way as other immigrants, minorities, and oppressed groups.

Drawing on the growing literature on racialization, and focusing primarily on the 1880s, when labour’s views on Asian immigration became well established, this article shows how Asians were set apart from any groups with whom labour might have sympathy or common cause. Asians were associated with oppressive forces, particularly of the emerging industrial capitalist system. This association can be seen in many of labour’s stereotypes of Asians as industrial slaves, ruthless competitors in the economy, and threats to white women. These stereotypes also set Asians up as polar opposites to the basic class, race, and gender identity that labour leaders sought to foster.

L’agitation parmi les travailleurs canadiens devant l’immigration asiatique à la fin du XIX^e et au début du XX^e siècles a fait l’objet de maintes études. De nombreux historiens ont fait ressortir les inquiétudes qu’avait ressenties la main-d’oeuvre canadienne devant la perspective de la concurrence asiatique sur le marché du travail, tandis que d’autres ont examiné l’étendue du racisme anti-asiatique dans la majorité des segments de la société canadienne, tout particulièrement en Colombie-Britannique. Bien qu’ils soient importants, ces facteurs ne suffisent pas, cependant, à expliquer l’aversion de la main-d’oeuvre canadienne pour les Asiatiques. En particulier, il n’est pas tenu compte, dans ces explications, de la solidarité qui a uni les syndicats de diverses régions dans leur opposition à l’immigration asiatique, ni de l’influence des campagnes d’exclusion des Asiatiques qui ont été menées dans

d'autres pays, ni du contenu du discours anti-asiatique de la main-d'oeuvre canadienne. On a également rarement examiné si les syndicats avaient eu le même type d'échanges avec les Asiatiques qu'ils ont eus avec les immigrants d'autres origines, les minorités ou les groupes opprimés.

À partir de la littérature de plus en plus abondante sur la question de la racialisation et en se concentrant essentiellement sur les années 1880, époque où le point de vue de la main-d'oeuvre concernant l'immigration asiatique s'est implanté, cet article illustre de quelle manière les Asiatiques ont été tenus à l'écart par rapport à tous les autres groupes avec lesquels la main-d'oeuvre aurait pu partager des affinités ou une cause commune. En effet, les Asiatiques ont été associés à des forces d'oppression et, tout particulièrement, au système industriel capitaliste émergent. Cette association se reconnaît à nombre de stéréotypes des Asiatiques, considérés comme esclaves industriels, concurrents économiques impitoyables, et comme une menace pour les femmes blanches. Ces stéréotypes ont placé les Asiatiques aux antipodes de la classe, de la race et de la politique des sexes que les dirigeants de la main-d'oeuvre s'efforçaient de favoriser.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one of the top priorities for Canadian labour leaders was demanding the exclusion of Asian immigrants. At the inaugural convention in 1883 of the labour central that would become Canada's largest, the Trades and Labor Congress, the first resolution adopted read: 'the future welfare of the working people of this country requires the prohibition of further importation of Chinese labor.' During the debate of the motion, a series of speakers assailed Chinese immigrants as 'uncivilized,' 'unassimilable' into Canadian society, 'immoral,' 'unsanitary,' 'criminal,' 'idolatrous,' 'nothing less than slaves,' and, above all, as 'forcing the working people out of industries . . . [by the] cheapness of their labor.'¹

Another demonstration of this priority came when the congress received delegates from British Columbia for the first time in 1890, and slowly expanded its regional scope throughout the decade. The primary goal of the first delegation from the Pacific West was to enlist the support of central Canadian unions in the campaign against the Chinese, and through the 1890s official correspondences from British Columbian organizations were dominated by the 'Oriental labor question.'² Moreover, labour leaders frequently identified Asian

1 1883 *Canadian Labor Congress Proceedings*, 12; Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 437.

2 1890 *Trades and Labor Congress Proceedings* (hereafter referred to as *TLC Proceedings*), 25-6; 'Communication from Vancouver TLC,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1891, 11; 'Communication from the Vancouver TLC,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1893, 18-19; 'BC Executive Report, *TLC Proceedings*, 1896, 10-14.

immigration as the most pressing issue facing Canadian workers. In his opening address to the 1895 congress, TLC president Patrick Jobin declared immigration to be foremost among 'the questions that will be presented,' and especially urged strong action against the 'unmitigated curse' of Chinese immigration.³

In 1898, when the congress set its 'Platform of Principles,' delegates unanimously adopted 'Principle No.9 – Exclusion of Chinese.' This 'Principle' was expanded in 1909 to become 'Exclusion of Orientals,' so as to cover the Japanese, and again in 1911, becoming 'Exclusion of Asiatics,' to cover South Asians.⁴ The congress's platform should put to rest any doubts about whether Asian exclusion was a fundamental goal of mainstream Canadian labour or not.

Historians have explored many aspects of labour's antipathy to Asians. Peter Ward has presented anti-Asian racism as the product of the 'social psychology of race relations.'⁵ Others, including a number of labour historians, have explored labour leaders' protests against 'unfair competition' from Asians in the job market. They emphasize that union leaders in the Pacific West viewed exclusion as crucial to the economic interests of Canadian workers.⁶ Gillian Creese's study of anti-Asian agitation by Vancouver unionists stands as the most successful effort to develop an analysis that integrates economic and ideological factors. She shows the extent to which labour leaders saw race as both a criterion for membership in the working class and a dividing line in the workplace and the wider community.⁷ Other studies have situated labour's views in the broader pattern of

3 'President's Address,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1895, 5.

4 *TLC Proceedings*, 1898, 1 and 31; *TLC Proceedings*, 1909; *TLC Proceedings*, 1911, 90.

5 Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever – Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978).

6 See, for instance, Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: BC Federation of Labour/Boag Foundation, 1967); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Labour Movement, 1899–1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); David Bercuson, 'Labour Radicalism and the Western Frontier: 1897–1919,' *Canadian Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (1977), 154–75; Robert Wynne, *Reactions to the Chinese in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia* (New York: Arno Press, 1978); Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885–1917* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979); Rennie Warburton, 'Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment,' *BC Studies* 49 (Spring 1981), 79–85.

7 Gillian Creese, 'Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the "Oriental Problem,"' *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988–89), 24–5.

anti-Asian racism, mostly in British Columbia. They have highlighted, in particular, how anti-Asian agitation was joined by groups representing different classes and interests, an array of media sources, and politicians of various parties and at municipal, provincial, and federal levels.⁸

This article builds upon themes that have been emphasized in the existing literature, but it also contends that key aspects of labour's anti-Asian agitation have not been sufficiently appreciated or explored. In particular, an interpretation based solely on job competition fails to account for many of the specific stereotypes foisted upon Asians (such as their alleged moral and social habits), the vast differences in labour's attitudes towards Asians and other immigrant groups, and the strong agitation for exclusionary policies in cases where the number of Asians was minimal. Moreover, the prevalence of racist attitudes in Canada does not explain why labour leaders assailed Asians but often expressed sympathy with other marginalized peoples such as Aboriginals and blacks, or why labour's anti-Asian rhetoric was often plainly different from that of other interest groups.

Undeniably, unionists portrayed Asian immigration as a threat to the general welfare of Canadian communities, but they saw the issue as linked to the particular struggles of Canadian workers. There was an unmistakable class component to labour leaders' agitation for Asian exclusion, and much of their anti-Asian rhetoric fit neatly with their rhetoric against employers and political elites. The links were also manifested in labour's stereotypes of Asian migrants. The portrayal of Asians as 'degraded' and 'docile' reflected labour's fears about the impacts of a fully developed industrial system of labour exploitation on Canadian workers. Labour's images of Asian workers as misers, ruthless schemers, parasites, 'drug fiends,' and hyper-sexualized menaces to white women were connected to the social and moral impact labour expected from capitalist development gone out of control. These stereotypes made Asians into Others, in contrast to which labour leaders often defined their movement as one of white working men. The strength of anti-Asian agitation in other countries strengthened unionists' convictions about the need to take action against the supposed 'Oriental menace.'

8 Patricia Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989); Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995); David Cheuyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns Within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995).

By engaging with the recent work of anti-racist and post-colonial scholars on the construction of racist ideologies and the formation of racial identities, this article expands upon attempts to explore how particular minority stereotypes were, in part, projections of the anxieties, beliefs, and agendas of different segments of dominant white societies.⁹ By doing so, it adds to the growing literature showing how Asians were not necessarily 'racialized' in the same ways as other minorities or immigrant groups, and how the white, working-class male identity formed in contrast to Asians similarly had many distinct characteristics.¹⁰

It proceeds from the position that the construction of Asians as a 'great menace' became firmly established during the 1880s and then endured in the minds of labour leaders up to the First World War. Space does not allow for a complete exploration of the continuity in labour's approach, which this author has done elsewhere, showing how unionists were not swayed from their basic views of Asians by changes in the economy, the political context, or the structure and composition of the labour movement itself. The Chinese were the first group of Asians to come to Canada and face hostility, and although groups that arrived later – the Japanese and South Asians – were not portrayed in precisely the same manner, they were mostly lumped together into an undifferentiated 'horde' allegedly

- 9 David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness* (New York: Verso, 1991); David Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the American Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, vol. 2, *The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1997); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Timothy Stanley, 'Bringing Anti-Racist Theory into Historical Explanation: The Victoria Chinese Student Strike of 1922–3 Revisited,' *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 13 (2003), 141–66.
- 10 Thomas Almaguer, *Racial Fault-lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Karen Dubinsky and Adam Givertz, 'It Was Only a Matter of Passion: Masculinity and Sexual Danger,' in *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity*, ed. Kathryn McPherson, Cecelia Morgan, and Nancy Forestell (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

waiting at Canada's gates.¹¹ Hence, the focus is primarily, although far from exclusively, on the 1880s, when organized labour began to view Asian immigration as a serious concern.

Before launching into the main arguments, however, the scope of this article should be delineated. The focus here is on organizations that were associated with Canada's largest national labour central from the 1880s to 1914, the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC). The key sources are the labour press, and proceedings and other reports from national congresses. The central figures are leaders of craft unions and the Knights of Labor up to 1902, when the Knights and other 'independent' unionists were expelled from the TLC at the Berlin convention and the international craft unions and American Federation of Labor asserted their power over the Canadian labour movement. In the particularly important decade of the 1880s, craft unions grew in strength and the Knights of Labor enjoyed a stunning expansion before starting a sharp decline around 1887. Not covered in this discussion are independent labour groups in Quebec, the Provincial Workingman's Association in Nova Scotia, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Knights of Labour after 1902.

AN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL 'MENACE'

The primary focus of anti-Asian agitation was economic, and on competition in the labour market in particular. There was a consensus among labour sources that white labour simply could not compete with 'Orientals.' Unionists complained constantly that Asian workers 'accepted' low wages and 'degraded' working conditions that white workers would not tolerate. Hence, Asian immigration was perceived as undercutting the standards of living of Canadian workers, or 'driving them out' of industries altogether. Exclusion of Asians, therefore, was presented as essential for the protection of the white working class.

While such economic concerns were crucial, they should not be viewed as the sole reason for labour's hostility towards Asians. Indeed, a solely economic analysis has a number of deficiencies. First, as Gillian Creese has noted, labour leaders assumed that Asian workers were impossible to organize, and therefore felt they had no choice but

11 See David Goutor, *Guarding the Gates: The Canadian Labour Movement and Immigration* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), chapter 4, which also traces the signs of increased solidarity with Asians among a minority of unionists during the First World War, and a few signs of the moderating of anti-Asian sentiment during the late 1920s and early 1930s.

to demand exclusionary policies. Creese shows that unionists simply ignored instances in British Columbia of Asian 'involvement in labour militancy,' and continued to insist that exclusion was the only means of protecting the jobs of 'native' workers.¹²

Another problem is that labour leaders' complaints about competition from Asian workers rested on much more than straightforward comparisons of prevailing pay rates. Rather, they rested on an elaborate construction of Asians as 'inferior races.' The lower standard of living of Asians was one manifestation of their allegedly 'less civilized state.'¹³ Canadian labour leaders went to great lengths in describing the 'inherent' standards of Asians, standards that Canadian workers could never bear. They provided graphic descriptions of 'Mongolians' as 'sunk in unspeakable degradation,' trained to 'live on garbage,' sleeping 'packed like sardines,' and 'herd[ed] like cattle.'¹⁴ For labour leaders, these 'habits' and living standards were so deeply ingrained in the character of different races that it was physically impossible for whites to live at the 'level' of 'Asiatics.' The Victoria Knights asserted that whites would actually starve on the 'fare' the Chinese 'lived on.'¹⁵ Similarly, 'Ah-Sin,' the pseudonym of the author of a notorious series of anti-Chinese letters to the *Palladium of Labor* argued, 'we cannot possibly feed and clothe ourselves for forty or fifty cents a week and they can.'¹⁶

Moreover, a number of the key characteristics of labour leaders' anti-Asian discourse contradict the interpretation that their attitudes were based solely on economic competition. Labour's arguments against Asian immigration went far beyond job competition and beyond economic concerns in general, and many labour leaders saw themselves not only as advocates of the economic interests of workers, but as guardians of Canada's moral and social fabric.¹⁷ A number of

12 Creese, 'Exclusion or Solidarity?' 24–5.

13 Lawrence Glickman, 'Inventing the "American Standard of Living": Gender, Race and Working Class Identity, 1880–1925,' *Labor History* 34 (Spring-Summer 1993), 232; Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

14 *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884; *Toronto Daily News*, 16 Jan. 1884.

15 *Victoria Industrial News*, 23 Jan. 1886, 14 Aug. 1886.

16 *Palladium of Labor*, 24 May 1884.

17 See, for instance, Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor In Ontario* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Christina Burr, *Spreading the Light: Work and Labour Reform in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late*

scholars have highlighted different ways in which Asians were portrayed as major threats to this fabric, and were constructed as extraordinarily ruthless, hyper-competitive, and willing to abandon basic standards of civility in order to get ahead. The Japanese in particular were portrayed as 'frauds' and clever 'imposters,' who would give the appearance of assimilating into Canadian society only to 'get a footing in the country and, consequently, wedge out rivals ever loyal to the Crown.'¹⁸

Labour leaders also contributed to the image of Chinatowns as rife with drug use, gambling, and prostitution.¹⁹ The Chinese were also regularly portrayed as sexual predators who sought to take advantage of white women. In the early twentieth century, unionists were key parts of successful efforts to lobby the provincial governments of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario to enact laws prohibiting 'Orientals' from employing white women. A resolution passed unanimously by the 1911 TLC convention claimed that the legislation was necessary because 'Orientals employing white girls have . . . seduce[d] and destroy[ed] all sense of morality by the use of drugs and other means, bringing them down to the lowest depths of humanity.'²⁰ As James Walker has observed, labour leaders demanded these laws even though they would serve to increase job competition by damaging Chinese businesses and thereby pushing Chinese migrants back into the job market.²¹

As with standards of living, labour leaders were adamant that the alleged moral character of Asians was not the result of particular conditions, but part of the intrinsic character of the race. They not only rejected the notion that Asian 'habits' could be improved, but they furiously attacked anyone who raised the possibility. One of the best examples of these attacks is labour's assault on the Presbyterian Church when it became a vocal supporter of welcoming and

Nineteenth Century Small-Town Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

- 18 *Independent*, 12 May 1900. See also 'Communication from the Vancouver TLC,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1893, 21-2; 'BC Executive Report,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1896, 12-13; *TLC Proceedings*, 1901, 10.
- 19 Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995).
- 20 *TLC Proceedings*, 1912, 107. See also *TLC Proceedings*, 1914, 119; *Industrial Banner*, 6 Feb. 1913; *Voice*, 13 Feb. 1913; Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded*, 132-46.
- 21 Walker, 'A Case for Morality: The Quong Wing Files,' in *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 206.

'Christianizing' the Chinese. TLC President Patrick Jobin accused the church of putting 'the dollar before the man,' while the Toronto Trades and Labor Council submitted a lengthy petition to the governor general denouncing the church's leaders.²²

A further problem with viewing labour market concerns as the overriding source of anti-Asian sentiment is that they hardly treated all immigrant competitors equally. Although space does not allow for a detailed treatment of how labour leaders constructed a hierarchy of immigrant groups, certain key patterns can be identified. Labour leaders vigorously denounced the immigration of workers from British Isles, and especially from continental Europe. In particular, unionists argued that immigration from the 'Old Countries' also served to lower the wage rates and overall standards of living of 'native' workers, and to stress the social and moral vitality of Canadian communities.

But while they opposed immigration coming across the Atlantic, unionists often avoided vilifying the immigrants. In fact, labour leaders often expressed sympathy and solidarity with people coming from the 'Old Countries,' even while assailing the policies that brought them to Canada. Labour leaders often portrayed many British workers as 'honest' and 'worthy' people who had been duped into coming to Canada and thus 'forced' to compete with 'native' workers.²³ They displayed considerable ambivalence toward paupers and impoverished children, dismissing them as 'offscouring' and 'street arabs' from London, but also denouncing the 'unjust system' in Britain that had created their poverty.²⁴

22 'President's Address,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1895, 5; RG 20, vol. 20, file 2955, 4, NAC. John S. Moir, *Enduring Witness: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Canada* (Toronto: Bryant Press, 1975), 150–2 and 167; Ruth Brouwer, *New Women For God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions, 1876–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 6, 30.

23 See, for instance, *Palladium of Labor*, 24 Nov. 1883, 29 Sept. 1884; *Voice*, 11 Feb. 1898, 13 Jan. 1905, 16 Nov. 1906; *Industrial Banner*, January 1904, July 1906, July 1907; *TLC Proceedings*, 1924, 132.

24 See, for instance, *Toronto Daily News*, 8 Aug. 1885, 24 Aug. 1885; *Palladium of Labor*, 19 Jul. 1884, 26 Jul. 1884, 16 Aug. 1884; *Canadian Labor Reformer*, 24 Jul. 1886; *Voice*, 21 Mar. 1896; *Toiler*, 10 Jul. 1903; *Industrial Banner*, July 1906, March 1907, August 1908, April 1912; *Voice*, 2 Mar. 1906; *BC Federationist*, 5 Apr. 1912; Susan Houston, 'Waifs and Strays,' in *Childhood and Family in Canadian History*, ed. Joy Parr (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 129–42; Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869–1924* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980), 53–6.

When it came to these types of immigration, the anger of labour leaders was directed primarily at the agents and promoters who treated migrants as 'so much filthy lucre' and often used 'bribery' or 'misrepresentation of the most heartless kind' to 'induce' people into coming to Canada.²⁵ Although there was undeniably a self-serving aspect to this approach, labour leaders devoted an impressive amount of energy and resources to campaigning against immigration agents. For instance, the TLC sent its own agent to Britain from 1907 to 1909 to expose cases of misrepresentation by agents and to combat 'myths' about Canada spread by promotional literature.²⁶

Canadian labour was extremely hostile toward immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, calling them 'foreigners' who undermined Canadian living and working standards. Unionists often lumped these Europeans together with Asians into one large group as a 'menace' to Canada. However, eastern and southern European immigrants were not perceived as 'menaces' of the same magnitude as Asians, and the *extent* of the racialization of these migrants was much more limited. Labour committed much less energy to portraying Italians, Hungarians, or Poles as dangerous sexual predators, drug fiends, or transmitters of deadly diseases – although some of these characteristics were doubtless implied when they were likened to Asians.

Labour leaders often displayed an ambiguity regarding European 'foreigners' that was notably lacking in their approach to Asians. For instance, unionists sometimes applied to Europeans the narratives of the 'honest' immigrant 'duped' out of a good situation into becoming 'heartlessly exploited' in Canada.²⁷ Another difference with labour's treatment of 'Orientals' was that labour leaders did not have an unshakeable belief that eastern and southern Europeans could not be organized. TLC unionists were hardly vigorous in pursuing this option, but even at the highest points of their anger over European immigration, they did not dismiss it as a possibility.²⁸ In 1911, for example, as the influx of immigrants into Canada was setting new records, the TLC convention supported a request from the Amalgamated Carpenters to have some union material translated into 'Ruthenian' and Polish.²⁹

25 Quotations from *Industrial Banner*, March 1908.

26 Goutor, *Guarding the Gates*, chap. 6.

27 See, for instance, *Voice*, 10 Aug. 1906, 6 Jun. 1908, 6 Jun. 1913, 23 Jan. 1914; *Industrial Banner*, September 1909, 17 Jul. 1914; *Toiler*, 19 Jun. 1903.

28 See for instance, 'Executive Report,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1907, 9; *Industrial Banner*, September 1909; Avery, *Reluctant Host*, 69.

29 *TLC Proceedings*, 1911, 86.

Probably the clearest articulation of the distinction in labour's view of Asians and any group of European immigrants came in the report of the Immigration Committee at the 1906 congress. This report organized the TLC's policies into a neat package that was reissued in subsequent years, and the third plank of its policy was a general demand for exclusiveness based on ethnicity and character. It demanded 'the exclusion of certain nationalities and classes of people who, either by temperament, non-assimilative qualifications, habits, customs or want of any permanent good their coming brings to us are not a desirable acquisition to our citizenship.' But its fourth plank singled out 'Chinamen, Hindus and all other Asiatic peoples' to be 'among the classes that are not desirable.' The fifth supported the Chinese Head Tax and insisted that 'Hindus' 'should be altogether excluded.' The committee did not make any specific request for the exclusion or even restriction of European immigrants – an especially instructive omission, given the massive influx from Europe and the relatively small influx from Asia in this period.³⁰ Even at times when other immigrant groups were creating far more economic competition, labour leaders still identified Asians as a particular menace.

Another problem with the position that labour's hostility towards Asians was grounded mainly in concerns about the economic security of white workers is that unionists whose members faced little or no competition from Asians were nevertheless adamant proponents of exclusion. Of course, anti-Asian agitation was strongest in British Columbia, where the Asian population was the largest, most established, and most familiar to labour activists. However, a number of scholars have shown that general interaction between whites and Asians in British Columbia had pronounced limits due to the extent of social and occupational segregation.³¹

Labour leaders east of the Rockies consistently expressed similar convictions about Asian migrants, although they may have felt them less forcefully. Even though many acknowledged they had never met an Asian worker, labour leaders in these regions had no doubt that any influx of Asians would have disastrous consequences. Labour leaders in central Canada and the Prairies were acutely aware that the Asian presence in their regions was miniscule – and they were determined to

30 'Report of the Immigration Committee,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1906, 80.

31 Roy, *Province*, 38–9; Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*. Alexander Saxton makes a similar argument about the agitation in California in *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 260–71.

keep it that way.³² They continually pledged support for unionists in British Columbia, endorsed and reprinted their anti-Asian material, promoted similar constructions of the alleged menace, and sought to spur all workers in the Dominion to greater activism on the issue. 'The moan of white Labor in Vancouver, and all along the Pacific Slope is pitiful to hear,' stated the *Palladium*. 'Brothers, is there no help?'³³

Unionists in central Canada and the Prairies were also convinced that their regions were vulnerable to a 'flood' of Asians. As President Carey put it to the 1897 TLC convention, 'the continued importation of these people to British Columbia will be felt in the Eastern Provinces, and if not stamped out at once our country will be honey-combed with [them]'³⁴ These fears proved remarkably resilient through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and became particularly evident when there was any perceived encroachment by the 'Oriental' hordes. For instance, the *Industrial Banner* went into an uproar in late 1905 in response to the opening of a few more Chinese laundries and the first Chinese-run restaurant in the paper's hometown of London, Ontario. The paper declared that the city might as well 'make preparations for a Chinese mayor' unless local workers took swift action against the growing 'menace.'³⁵

'A UNIQUE CONCERN' FOR LABOUR

Labour leaders, of course, were far from alone in agitating against Asian immigration. The pervasiveness of anti-Asian racism in this period had a profound impact on the view of Canadian unionists. Labour leaders not only drew ideas and inspiration from anti-Asian agitation by mainstream politicians, the popular press, and other interest groups, but sometimes entered into broader alliances against the supposed Asian hordes. For instance, labour activists played roles in Asiatic Exclusion Leagues, and some labour leaders, such as Ralph

32 For examples, see *Toronto Daily News*, 16 Jan. 1884; 1883 *Proceedings*, 13; *Voice*, 23 Jun. 1894, 9 Jan. 1897; *Industrial Banner*, February 1906.

33 *Palladium of Labor*, 6 Jun. 1886. See also *Wage Worker*, 5 Apr. 1883; *Palladium*, 12 Apr. 1884, 27 Sept. 1884, 12 Oct. 1884, 28 Feb. 1885, 26 Apr. 1884; *Toronto Daily News*, 9 Oct. 1884, 20 Sept. 1884, 9 Jun. 1885.

34 'Presidential Address,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1897, 7; 'Presidential Address,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1895, 5; *Voice*, 23 Jun. 1894, 1 May 1897, 11 Mar. 1898, 23 Sept. 1898.

35 *Industrial Banner*, November 1905. See also 'Communication from Moose Jaw TLC,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1906, 74; *Voice*, 17 Jul. 1906, 5 Oct. 1906, 4 Jan. 1907; *Labor's Realm*, 1 Oct. 1909; *Industrial Banner*, November 1905, March 1909, May 1911.

Smith, raised their public profiles substantially by participating in anti-Asian campaigns. One of the most brazen instances of labour seeking the support of other classes against Asian immigration was when the Victoria Knights of Labor welcomed to its ranks 'substantial businessmen and property owners as well as workingmen' in the late 1880s. It is, therefore, not surprising that scholars such as Patricia Roy have concluded that anti-Asian sentiment 'transcended' class boundaries.³⁶

As with the labour competition argument, however, there are several serious problems with viewing the pervasiveness of racism as a sufficient cause of labour's agitation. First, labour leaders, especially during the era of the Knights of Labor, believed that it was their mission to challenge the hegemonic culture. Gregory Kealey and Bryan Palmer have shown that, in Ontario, the Knights were both insightful critics of prevailing social norms and effective proponents of alternative values, such as cooperation.³⁷ For historians unwilling to dismiss the commitment of Ontario Knights and other labour leaders to challenging the economic and social order, their embrace of virulent anti-Asian racism requires specific explanation.

This is an especially serious consideration because labour leaders believed that a central part of their assault on the hegemonic culture was breaking down divisions it created among the masses on the basis of 'race, color, or creed.' Canada's most articulate labour reformer, Phillips Thompson, was particularly determined to show workers that forging a 'world-wide fraternity' was the only adequate response to a capitalist system that 'has no patriotism and no prejudices... [and] will levy its tribute from black or white, European and American, Protestant or Catholic with indiscriminating impartiality.'³⁸

The desire for a wider movement and a broader sense of solidarity among all victims of the ruling elites can be seen in labour leaders' views of a number of marginalized peoples. In the labour press, one can find powerful condemnations of the 'unrighteous wars' in Africa and Asia waged by European imperial powers.³⁹ Labour leaders also expressed sympathy with the plight of Aboriginals in Canada.

36 Roy, *A White Man's Province*, xiii, 61, 93-5, III-12.

37 Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, passim.

38 Phillips Thompson, *The Politics of Labor* (New York: Bedford, Clarke and Co. Publishers, 1887), 176-8; *Palladium of Labor*, 17 Jan. 1885. See also Hann, 'Brainworkers,' 35-5; Christina Burr, *Spreading the Light: Work and Labour Reform in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 32-55.

39 *Palladium of Labor*, 14 Feb. 1885. See also *Palladium*, 3 Jan 1885, *Industrial Banner*, July 1899; *BC Federationist*, 24 Jul. 1914.

For instance, at the 1906 convention, the TLC made it a special order of business to welcome a new union local composed of Cowichan native people from Vancouver Island. The congress pledged its support to the efforts of the Cowichan people to gain land rights and a government-funded education system.⁴⁰

Labour leaders' approach to blacks provides the most striking contrast to their approach to Asians. Labour leaders often declared that they wanted no part in the widespread racism against blacks in Canada. Unlike those faced by Asians, the hardships and discrimination blacks faced were not seen as a product of their 'uncivilized' character. In fact, labour leaders frequently supported blacks' efforts to make both Canada and the United States adhere to their often-stated principle that 'all are supposed to be equal before the law.'⁴¹

Labour leaders claimed to have common cause with people fighting against 'unrighteous' imperialist wars, Canadian aboriginals, and blacks. In particular, Canadian labour often identified these peoples as victims of the same 'monopolistic' forces that oppressed workers in the Dominion. Labour papers denounced military campaigns in Africa as mostly for the benefit of 'usurers, speculators and bond thieves.'⁴² They also put the blame for the Riel uprising in the North West on 'the Ottawa government and their ring of greedy, dishonest officials and land-grabbers, who have stolen themselves rich at the expense of the natives of the soil.'⁴³ Moreover, important lessons for workers in Canada were drawn from the plight of colonized people and Aborigines. Labour papers suggested that Canadian workers might soon 'take a leaf out of Riel's book' and mount their own revolt.⁴⁴ According to the *Palladium*, 'Hindoos and Egyptians' had to recognize that 'unitedly [sic] they would be stronger than their

40 *TLC Proceedings*, 1906, 53-4.

41 *Toronto Daily News*, 17 Jan. 1884. See also *Toronto Daily News*, 18 Oct. 1883, 1 Feb. 1884; *Palladium*, 4 Oct. 1884; *Toiler*, 24 Jun. 1904; *BC Federationist*, 25 Apr. 1913; David Goutor, 'Drawing Different Lines of Colour: The Mainstream English Canadian Labour Movement's Approach to Blacks and the Chinese,' *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2005), 63-4.

42 *Palladium of Labor*, 24 Jan. 1885. See also *Toronto Daily News*, 6 Feb. 1885; *Palladium*, 14 Feb. 1885.

43 *Palladium of Labor*, 11 Apr. 1885, 8 Aug. 1885; *Toronto Daily News*, 1 May, 4 May, 8 May 1885.

44 *Palladium of Labor*, 18 Apr. 1885, 11 Jul. 1885; *Toronto Daily News*, 24 Mar. 1885.

conquerors... And just so, as regards the grip of monopoly on the resources of industry [in Canada], the toilers united would have everything in their power.'⁴⁵

The strongest sense of connection for labour leaders was with the struggles of blacks. Especially during the era of the Knights, labour leaders claimed their campaign to free workers from the 'shackles' of industrial capitalism was following the same path as the effort to free blacks from chattel slavery. They insisted the 'corporate bondage' of the industrial era and the 'slave systems' of the Caribbean and, especially, the American South, were essentially the same: In both people were made to work 'for a bare existence [so] that others may reap the benefit of their toil.'⁴⁶ Labour leaders believed they would eventually be seen as heroes, much like abolitionists were, because 'just as surely as chattel slavery passes away, the industrial serfdom of the supply-and-demand system will vanish from the earth.'⁴⁷

Canadian unionists were far from consistent in giving support to colonized people, natives, and blacks, although a more elaborate treatment of labour's views of these groups is not possible here.⁴⁸ Many labour leaders were supporters of the British Empire, and even the sources most committed to building the 'common bonds of humanity,' such as the *Palladium of Labor*, sometimes promoted stereotypes of blacks and aboriginals.⁴⁹ Moreover, with the decline of the Knights of Labor and the increased influence of more conservative craft organizations, unionists did not remain as engaged as they had once in the effort to create a broader solidarity. Labour generally became more narrowly focused on 'bread and butter' issues, although a significant

45 *Palladium of Labor*, 26 Apr. 1884.

46 *Palladium of Labor*, 2 Aug. 1884.

47 *Palladium of Labor*, 2 Feb. 1884, 19 Jul. 1884, 25 Sept. 1886; *Canadian Labor Reformer*, 5 Mar. 1887; *BC Federationist*, 25 Apr. 1913; Goutor, 'Drawing Different Lines of Colour,' 55-76. On the complex relationship between American labour and the plight of black slaves, see David Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987); David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York: Knopf, 1967); Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

48 For a more detailed treatment of labour's approach to these groups, see Goutor, *Guarding the Gates*, chap. 3 and 4.

49 See, for instance, *Victoria Industrial News*, 19 Jun. 1886 (the paper's editor, J.M. Duval, was a noted imperialist), *Palladium of Labor*, 16 Jan. 1884, 9 May 1885.

number of leaders and papers continued to denounce 'our Glorious Empire' and draw parallels with abolitionists.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, labour leaders' attitudes towards some other marginalized and oppressed groups provide an instructive contrast to their attitudes towards Asians. There were several international factors that encouraged Canadian labour leaders to set Asian migrants apart as a particular threat, and labour leaders were heavily influenced by hostility toward Asians in other countries. Since their own knowledge of Asians was limited, many Canadian labour leaders used 'the experience of other communities to guide us [in] the matter,' as the *Daily News* forthrightly stated.⁵¹ Although unionists in British Columbia had the most 'exposure' to Asians, they were often the most aware of events elsewhere. The Canadian source that reprinted the most anti-Asian material from other countries was the *Victoria Industrial News*.⁵²

Canadian unionists drew upon developments in an impressive array of locations. They contended that the experiences of Protestant missionaries and British officials in China provided further evidence that the allegedly 'degraded' standards of the Chinese could not be changed.⁵³ Labour papers reported on friction between Asians and resident populations in England, Hawaii, and the West Indies. They were especially attuned to anti-Asian agitations in other British dominions in the New World, particularly in New Zealand, Australia, and later, South Africa.⁵⁴

As the dominant organizations in the Canadian movement – the Knights of Labor and the international craft unions – were American-based, the influence of anti-Asian agitation in the United States was especially important. The Canadian labour movement emerged mostly

50 *Labor Advocate*, 16 Jan. 1891, 10 Jul. 1891; *Independent*, 12 Apr. 1901; *Voice*, 30 Aug. 1901, 2 Nov. 1906; *Industrial Banner*, July 1899, September 1907; *BC Federationist*, 29 Jun. 1912, 25 Apr. 1913, 24 Jul. 1914.

51 *Toronto Daily News*, 16 Jan. 1884.

52 Some examples are 'The Sin of Cheapness,' *Victoria Industrial News*, 26 Dec. 1885, and 'Anti-Chinese Movement,' *Victoria Industrial News*, 20 Feb. 1886, which were taken from the *San Francisco Bulletin*; 'Christmas Without the Chinese,' *Victoria Industrial News*, 16 Jan. 1886, which was taken from Tacoma, Washington; and 'Chinese Invasion,' *Victoria Industrial News*, 3 Apr. 1886, which was taken from a rally in Washington State.

53 See, for instance, *Trades Union Advocate*, 18 May 1882; 1883 *Proceedings*, 12–13; *Victoria Industrial News*, 2 Jan. 1886, 13 Feb. 1886.

54 *Toronto Daily News*, 4 Apr. 1884; *Palladium of Labor*, 26 Jul. 1884; *Voice*, 28 Mar. 1896, 21 Apr. 1899; *Industrial Banner*, May 1899, December 1905, February 1906; *Independent*, 21 Apr. 1900, 23 Jun. 1900; Resolution No. 23, *TLC Proceedings*, 1907, 65.

in the period after the Civil War, when American labour's sense of solidarity with blacks was especially strong. To be sure, racism hardly vanished in this period, and the image of blacks as inherently degraded labour endured. However, many unionists, including leaders of the AFL, showed new interest in organizing workers across 'the color line.'⁵⁵ The Knights of Labor in America were particularly committed to this cause, bringing in more than 90,000 black members by 1887.⁵⁶

In contrast, anti-Chinese sentiment was becoming generally and firmly entrenched in American labour circles in the postbellum period. Key leaders of the American Knights of Labor, such as General Master Workman Terrence Powderly, and of the American Federation of Labor, such as Adolph Strasser and President Samuel Gompers, were fierce opponents of Chinese immigration. One of the thinkers who had the most influence on the Knights, Henry George, was also a vocal advocate of Chinese exclusion.⁵⁷ In short, the Canadian movement was establishing itself during a period when the American movement's antipathy toward the Chinese was surging and its antipathy to blacks was significantly tempered.

For Canadian unionists, developments in America and other settings not only 'proved' that Asians were a particular 'menace,' but also supplied models of the exclusionary laws they wanted the government to replicate without delay. Ottawa's inaction relative to other governments was viewed as magnifying the threat of a flood of Asian migrants. Labour papers fumed that other areas protected themselves while Canada 'is supposed to stand still with folded arms and calmly tolerate this menacing invasion.'⁵⁸

55 Glickman, 'American Standard,' 232–3; Roediger, *Colored White*, 195–9; Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 260–71; Eric Arnesen, 'Specter of the Black Strikebreaker: Race, Employment, and Labor Activism in the Industrial Era,' *Labor History* 44, no.3 (Aug. 2003), 319–35.

56 Total membership of the American Knights peaked at over 750,000 in 1886. See Robert Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 7–8, 12; Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 81.

57 Takaki, *Iron Cages*, 240–8; Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 271; Henry George, 'Chinese Immigration,' in *Cyclopedia of Political Science, Political Economy, and the Political History of the United States by the Best American and European Writers*, ed. John Lalor (New York: Maynard and Mill, 1881), vol. 2, sect. 213 – 46; Stanford Lyman, 'The 'Chinese Question' and American Labor Historians,' *New Politics* 7, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 113–48.

58 *Industrial Banner*, November 1907. See also Roy, *White Man's Province*, 38; *Trades Union Advocate*, 18 May 1882; 'Victoria TLC,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1890, 21;

Canadian labour leaders were also inspired by the strength and influence that their 'brothers' in places like California, Australia, and South Africa achieved, particularly by using anti-Asian rhetoric as 'a powerful organizing tool.'⁵⁹ For instance, they saw a clear connection between San Francisco's position as one of the cities most affected by Asian immigration and as 'perhaps the greatest labour stronghold on the American continent.'⁶⁰ Unionists thus sought to use opposition to Asian immigration as a rallying point for Canadian workers, sometimes in ways that made the separation between Asians and other groups shockingly obvious. For instance, when the *Palladium of Labor* presented the Riel rebellion as an example to be emulated, it particularly urged white British Columbians to mount their own revolt to force the exclusion of Chinese immigrants.⁶¹

THE RACE STRUGGLE AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

The rousing tone of pronouncements like these highlight a further problem with viewing labour's campaigns for exclusion as consistent with broader patterns of racism in Canada: that key parts of the anti-Asian discourse by labour leaders were plainly distinct from the discourses produced by other social groups. Indeed, unionists furiously attacked other social groups, particularly employers and business leaders, as being responsible for the influx of Asians. Labour leaders viewed the racist campaign to exclude Asians as inextricable from their fight against Canadian employers. This was put most plainly by the petition from a Victoria workingman's rally: 'The struggle against the further admission of Chinese to this province is a struggle of labor against capital.'⁶²

The association between Asians and industrial capitalism can be detected in a number of aspects of labour leaders' agitation. While they continually vilified Asian migrants, labour leaders put the ultimate responsibility for their presence mostly on Canada's policy makers and the capitalists who were said to be controlling them. The links were

TLC Proceedings, 1893, 19; *Voice*, 23 Sept. 1898, 12 Sept. 1902; *Independent*, 21 Apr. 1900.

59 Quotation from Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 261–2.

60 *Industrial Banner*, May 1906. See also *Trades Union Advocate*, 18 May 1882, 29 Jun. 1882, 1 Feb. 1883.

61 *Palladium of Labor*, 18 Apr. 1885. See also *Labor Union*, 17 Mar. 1883; *Voice*, 23 Aug. 1901; *Industrial Banner*, February 1906.

62 The petition was reprinted as 'An Appeal – from Victoria,' *Toronto Daily News*, 8 Jun. 1885 – henceforth referred to as 'Victoria petition.'

especially clear between the Knights' anti-Chinese agitation and their growing challenge to the capitalist system in the 1880s. Stopping what the *Palladium of Labor* called 'the capitalist in his devilish scheme for forcing down wages by the aid of hordes of barbarians' was seen as a crucial front line in the struggle.⁶³

The anti-Chinese campaign served to bolster many of the Knights' critiques of the ruling elite, and provided a basis for their calls to action against the 'monopolists.' In the political realm, the government's encouragement of Chinese immigration was seen as proof that Ottawa 'only cares for monopolists and capitalists and nothing for the working class,' as the *Victoria News* put it.⁶⁴ Kealey and Palmer observe that, in Ontario during the 1880s, anti-Chinese agitation served to 'further independent working class political action.'⁶⁵ An assessment of labour leaders' anti-Chinese agitation allows us to develop their argument. The issue of Chinese immigration was a favourite means of showing the corruption and fundamentally undemocratic nature of Canadian politics, and a favourite launching pad for calls for workers to vote 'their own' into power.⁶⁶ Some editorials that opened as considerations of Chinese immigration would slide into indictments of established politicians. For instance, in the final third of one of the *Palladium of Labor's* most scathing diatribes on the subject, the Chinese were mentioned only once – their immigration had become the platform for an impressive rhetorical flourish against Canada's politicians: 'Appealing to Sir John and his venal gang of corruptionists or Blake and his windy incapables to stand by the rights of Labour . . . is a good deal like suing the devil and having the case tried in hell.'⁶⁷

The moral and social attacks against Asians also translated into criticisms of the Dominion's elites. The willingness of Canadian employers to 'inflict the Mongolians' – and all the problems alleged to come with them – on the Dominion was upheld as a premier illustration of the 'inhumanity, greed and heartlessness of monopolist

63 *Palladium of Labor*, 12 Apr. 1884, 13 Jun. 1885; Nanaimo Knights of Labor submission to the 1884 Royal Commission on Chinese immigration, 'Nanaimo Knights of Labor – British Columbia,' *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884 – henceforth referred to as 'Nanaimo Knights.'

64 *Victoria Industrial News*, 1 May 1886.

65 Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 150–1.

66 See, for instance, *Trades Union Advocate*, 18 May 1882; *Palladium of Labor*, 4 Oct. 1884, 8 Nov. 1884, 27 Jun. 1885, 6 Jun. 1886; *Industrial Banner*, October 1907, December 1907.

67 *Palladium of Labor*, 13 Jun. 1885.

miscreants.’⁶⁸ For pursuing his ‘devilish scheme,’ the capitalist was portrayed as an enemy of all that dignified workers should hold dear. According to the Nanaimo Knights, capitalists were traitors to the Dominion because they were ‘resolved to heap together a great fortune regardless of how the country prospers.’⁶⁹ The capitalists were also portrayed as traitors to their fellow whites, willing to ‘debase and degrade their own race and blight the hopes of future civilization . . . in order to enrich themselves.’⁷⁰ They were presented as gender criminals, willing to strip away both masculine and feminine dignity for the sake of greater profits. As the *Palladium* put it, employers were undeterred by ‘the prospect that tens of thousands of industrious workingmen may become tramps . . . and the streets of our cities be filled with harlots who might have been decent wives and mothers but for the ruinous competition of Mongolian slave labor.’⁷¹

Labour leaders not only indicted capitalists for bringing Asians to Canada, but sought at times to ‘Mongolize’ the ruling class, putting the elites at the same level as the ‘barbarians.’ For instance, after Ottawa disallowed one of British Columbia’s anti-Chinese laws, the *Daily News* assailed the ‘sniveling gang of corrupt legislators . . . [who] have no more principle or self-respect than the keeper of a Chinese opium joint.’⁷² Similarly, when Senator Gilmour of New Brunswick opined that the Chinese were ‘more moral’ than whites, the *Canadian Labor Reformer* responded that ‘if we are willing to accept [Gilmour’s] testimony as between himself and the denizens of the slums of Chinatown, we insist that he must not presume to speak for Canadian workingmen.’⁷³

This association of Asians and the ruling elite could also work in the other direction. In the minds of labour reformers, Asian immigrants were also ‘capitalized.’ Indeed, many of the particular stereotypes of Asian immigrants were heavily influenced by labour leaders’ visions of the damage they expected from the unrestrained development of industrial capitalism. This is not to say that labour reformers neatly repackaged each part of their platform into their construction of Asians. Racialization was not a sensible process whereby different parts of the dominant society formed stereotypes through thoughtful calculation and careful observation of minority groups. Rather, various interest groups made racialized minorities into embodiments of their

68 *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884.

69 ‘Nanaimo Knights.’

70 *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884.

71 *Palladium of Labor*, 13 Jun. 1885.

72 *Toronto Daily News*, 21 Oct. 1884, 3 Mar. 1885.

73 *Canadian Labor Reformer*, 15 May 1886.

fears, their desires, and the personal characteristics they hated most. The results were jumbles of contradictory stereotypes that were attached to a racialized group.

For instance, there is an unmistakable link between Asian immigration and labour's fears about the impact of industrial economies on working people. Asian immigrants were portrayed as the docile and degraded labour that was ideal for industrial capitalist exploitation. Some of the aspects that were explored above of Canadian labour's economic arguments against Asians immigration are especially instructive here. Note the extent to which it seemed hopeless for whites to compete with Asians. Labour writers continually reiterated their view that against Asians, 'Caucasian labour has no chance' or even 'need not bother competing.'⁷⁴ Similarly, observe the degree of control that Asian immigration was expected to have over white labour. In the competitive labour market, Asian migrants would change, or even 'regulate,' the standards and conditions of white workers.⁷⁵ This was critical to labour's claims that white workers would be 'brought down' to Asian standards. 'What does this kind of competition mean to whites?' asked the *Canadian Labor Reformer*. 'Simply that they will live on rice, wear the least expensive clothing, give up their families and homes and pig together in dens. In a word, become the ignorant barbarians their competitors are.'⁷⁶

It should not be surprising, then, that labour leaders connected Asians to their rhetoric about the emerging industrial order essentially being 'the slave system under another name.'⁷⁷ They regularly identified Asians as models of industrial slaves, highly coerced and disciplined, 'without manhood, without ambition, and without self-respect.'⁷⁸ Indeed, Canadian labour leaders probably used the terms 'slave,' 'virtual slave,' or 'slave labor' in reference to Asian immigration more than any other subject.⁷⁹ Unionists also drew Asians into their

74 *Labor Union*, 17 Mar. 1883.

75 *Labor Union*, 27 Jan. 1883.

76 Glickman, 'American Standard of Living,' 225-31; *Reformer*, 5 Jun. 1886; *Palladium of Labor*, 24 May 1884, 27 Sept. 1884, 4 Oct. 1884; *Toronto Daily News*, 9 Jun. 1885.

77 *Canadian Labor Reformer*, 10 Jul. 1886. See also *Labor Union*, 20 Jan. 1883; *Palladium of Labor*, 8 Nov. 1884, 25 Sept. 1886.

78 *Toronto Daily News*, 2 Oct. 1884.

79 For some examples, see *Labor Union*, 20 Jan. 1883, 17 Mar. 1883; *Wage Worker*, 19 Apr. 1883; *Palladium of Labor*, 2 Feb. 1884, 4 May 1884, 4 Oct. 1884, 28 Mar. 1885; 'Nanaimo Knights'; *Toronto Daily News*, 2 Oct. 1884, 8 Jun. 1885; *Victoria Industrial News*, 6 Sept. 1886; 'BC Executive Report,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1896, 11; *Industrial Banner*, December 1905, March 1912; *Voice*, 17 Aug. 1906.

argument that industrial servitude would become even more severe than plantation slavery. They argued that in the 'old' slave system, plantation owners, at least, would provide enough for the upkeep of their human property, but industrial masters seemed willing to let their slaves 'starve,' and to 'drive the girls into prostitution.'⁸⁰ As an illustration – and in one of the only cases in which they displayed any sympathy toward Asians – unionists pointed to how Chinese workers were 'turned loose' on British Columbia towns 'to starve or secure a living by improper means' after the completion of the Pacific Railway.⁸¹

Canadian labour's social and moral arguments against Asian immigration also reflected concerns about capitalism. The criminal activity ascribed to Asians noted above, such as drugs, gambling, and prostitution, was also among the chief problems that unionists said would increasingly afflict modern industrial urban centres. Regarding the portrayal of the Chinese sexual 'menace,' Karen Dubinsky and Adam Givertz argue that the particular characteristics attributed to the Chinese reflected the Knights of Labor's broader effort to present 'lascivious behaviour as one symptom of the disease of capitalism.' They contend that labour's portrayal of "'Chineseness' [as] a threat to young girls,' was heavily influenced by images of ruling class villains such as the 'aristocratic libertine.'⁸²

Another pillar of labour reformers' critique of capitalism, especially during the era of the Knights, was that its basic values were formed by 'the gospel of greed and grab.' They contended that basic standards of morality in Canada were breaking down as capitalist values of materialism, selfishness, and ruthless hyper-competitiveness gained ascendancy. Phillips Thompson argued that 'in the modern industrial and commercial world... the man who is sordid and penurious in his habits, unscrupulous in his transactions, but shrewd enough to keep within the law,' would reap unprecedented fortunes at the expense of the exemplar of 'true manhood... who is generous

80 *Palladium of Labor*, 25 Sept. 1886. See also *Canadian Labor Reformer*, 8 Jan. 1887; *Palladium*, 8 Nov. 1884, 4 Apr. 1885, 15 Aug. 1885. On similar claims by US labour leaders, see Glickman, *Living Wage*, 17–20; Foner, 'Workers and Slavery'; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 76–7.

81 *Victoria Industrial News*, 23 Jan. 1886. See also *Victoria Industrial News*, 6 Jan. 1886.

82 Karen Dubinsky and Adam Givertz, 'It Was Only a Matter of Passion,' 70–2; *Palladium of Labor*, 3 Oct. 1885.

and humane, who would scorn to take unfair advantage of a competitor.'⁸³

Naturally, unionists identified capitalists themselves as the primary carriers of these social problems, but Asians were also made into manifestations of the most anti-social characteristics bred by capitalism. Unionists' portrayal of the 'Oriental' character as cheap and ruthless to the point of having 'no regard for human life' is particularly important in this regard. The *Trades Union Advocate* claimed that the Chinese would 'murder' their own baby girls 'wholesale' simply because they did not want the expense of raising them.⁸⁴ We have also seen that Asians were described as using their 'cunning,' and 'deviousness' to gain any advantage against 'loyal' Canadians.

Given this construction of Asians as ideally suited to the degraded working conditions and the 'heartless competitiveness' of capitalism, it is not surprising that labour leaders also believed that Asians possessed extraordinary powers in the emerging industrial order. They were portrayed as 'miserable slaves' who could thrive in their servitude, who could 'horde' money and even 'grow rich' and 'live luxuriously' at the same time as they 'accepted' low wages and the most 'unwholesome' conditions.⁸⁵ The Japanese in particular were described as 'resourceful beggars,' who quickly adapted to new surroundings while 'living on almost nothing and laboring for the merest pittance.'⁸⁶ On one level, these twin images appear hopelessly untenable, but by making Asians into caricatures of fully dehumanized 'tools of capitalism,' labour leaders could find them credible.

In fact, this 'racial reasoning' was so compelling to unionists that they were convinced Asian 'slaves' could achieve dominance in a capitalist Canada. Unionists constantly claimed that Asians had 'taken over' certain industries, and were on the verge of taking over more sectors of the economy. For instance, the 'Chinaman' appeared as a

83 Thompson, *Politics of Labor*, 159. See also *Labor Union*, 3 Feb. 1883; Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, chap. 4; Burr, *Spreading the Light*, chap. 3; Dubinsky and Givertz, 'It Was Only a Matter of Passion,' 71-2.

84 *Trades Union Advocate*, 18 May 1882; See also 'Victoria petition'; *Victoria Industrial News*, 23 Jan. 1886; *Independent*, 12 May 1900, 'Communication from the Vancouver TLC,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1893, 21-2; 'BC Executive Report,' *TLC Proceedings*, 1896, 12-3; *TLC Proceedings*, 1901, 10.

85 'Nanaimo Knights'; *Toronto Daily News*, 29 Sept. 1884; 'Ah Sin' letter, *Labor Union*, 17 Mar. 1883.

86 *Independent*, 12 May 1900.

giant in labour cartoons, towering over white workers, Canadian unions, and even the prime minister himself.⁸⁷

These particular stereotypes were particularly important in making Asians into enemies against whom labour leaders tried to rally white workers. The *Palladium's* call for British Columbians to follow Riel's example was just one example of how Asian immigration sparked incendiary labour rhetoric against the ruling classes. Labour sources issued a number of warnings of a 'popular uprising' by white workers who were being 'crushed to the earth under a curse that can readily be lifted by the Government.' A speaker at a meeting of the Anti-Chinese Union in Victoria vowed: 'We will shed blood before we become slaves.'⁸⁸

Implied in most of the specific characteristics thrust upon Asian migrants were contrasting virtues of white workers. Against the 'Mongolian' who 'accepted' 'degraded standards' was the white worker who demanded 'civilized standards' of living. For instance, the *Palladium* issued a welcome to 'the men of the races akin to us and willing to preserve the same standard of civilization.'⁸⁹ Against Asian 'slave labor' stood free white labour that commanded respect in the workplace. 'White men demand the treatment of rational beings, while Chinese are willing to be treated as beasts of burden,' declared the Nanaimo Knights of Labor.⁹⁰ As we have seen, against Asian hoarding and miserliness stood the generous consumption of the white worker. Against Asian parasites and frauds stood the white working-class citizen dedicated to keeping his country democratic and to resisting the schemes of monopolists. 'An intelligent population is the best safeguard against the tyranny of capitalism,' stated the *Victoria News*. 'This is why monopolists and syndicates are endeavoring to force servile Chinese coolie labor on this community.'⁹¹

This process of the formation of a white labour identity meant Asians often served as a reference point in general discussions of labour's struggles. A prime example is the *Industrial Banner's* 1904 editorial entitled 'Trade Unionism Stands For A High Type of Civilization.' The first half of the editorial credited workers'

87 See for instance Burr, *Spreading the Light*, 75; *Labor Union*, 10 Mar. 1883; 'Nanaimo Knights.'

88 *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884; *Victoria Industrial News*, 23 Jan. 1886. See also *Palladium*, 8 Aug. 1885; *Toronto Daily News*, 24 Sept. 1885; *Independent*, 21 Apr. 1900; *Industrial Banner*, December 1905.

89 *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884.

90 'Nanaimo Knights.'

91 *Victoria Industrial News*, 6 Mar. 1886.

organizations for allowing Britain, the United States, and Canada, 'to stand at the highest in the scale of civilization.' To illustrate the difference unions could make, the paper claimed that 'there is an immense gulf fixed between the status of the Canadian workman and the Chinese coolie. The Chinese coolie accepts his lot and is content with his position. He has no aspirations; he is an animal. . . . The trade union has developed the Canadian workman. . . . He has higher aims and more manly aspirations than the Oriental.'⁹²

While the white/anti-Asian racial consciousness served as a rallying point for labour leaders, it also created deep contradictions and problems in Canadian labour's worldview. Not only were even the faintest gestures of support and solidarity with Asians ruled out of the question, but aggression against them – even though they were one of the most exploited and vulnerable segments of the labour force – was often sanctioned as a valid form of working-class self-action. Canadian labour defended violence against 'uncivilized' immigrants by claiming the right of white workers to protect their livelihoods. Although capitalist oppression was blamed for the violence, labour papers usually accepted that immigrants, rather than the bosses, were the primary targets.⁹³

In particular, belligerence against the Asian (particularly Chinese) 'menace' to the Canadian family was constructed as the duty of the white workingman. Indeed, against the Asian 'moral offal' stood the manly white worker who understood his patriarchal role as protector of his home, his family, and the morality of his community. Calls to action against Asian immigration often appealed to this sense of gender duty. 'Workingmen!' pleaded the *Trades Union Advocate*, 'if you love your wives and little ones, and want to keep a roof over their heads, then agitate at once for the abolition of Chinese immigration.'⁹⁴ Dubinsky and Givertz have shown that perceived threats to young white women from Chinese sexual 'villains' elicited a fierce response. In 1884, the *Palladium* alleged that white teenage girls 'noticed' in Chinese laundries had been 'plied with opium and taken advantage of.' The paper issued 'a note to parents of girls "to stay away from

92 *Industrial Banner*, May 1904.

93 See for examples, Thompson, *Politics of Labor*, 80; *Palladium of Labor*, 4 Jan. 1884, 3 Oct. 1885; *Toronto Daily News*, 24 Sept. 1885; Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 258–9.

94 *Trades Union Advocate*, 18 May 1882. On the connections between the Ontario Knights' anti-Chinese agitation and their sense of chivalry, see Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 151; Dubinsky and Givertz, 'It Was Only a Matter of Passion,' 70–2.

John Chinaman” and ‘a not-so-subtle threat to “Wah Lee” to “give up coaxing little girls” or else.’⁹⁵

Of course, exclusion was not one of labour’s ultimate goals, and not a ‘finality’ as Phillips Thompson put it. Thompson reminded labour reformers that campaigns such as the one for Asian exclusion could ‘give labor a chance to hold its own,’ but were helpless when it came to the ‘gigantic wrongs’ of the ‘spoilation’ and ‘robbery’ brought by the monopolists.⁹⁶ Although labour leaders in British Columbia were most absorbed in anti-Asian agitation, they also asserted that ownership of the province’s resources was the most important factor in entrenching ‘a few individuals’ in a position of power ‘beyond the reach’ of the rest of the population. Subjecting white workers to the ‘killing competition’ of Asian migrants was identified as the next – and the secondary – measure that ‘dispossessed’ the labouring classes of any means of resistance.⁹⁷

On the other hand, complete defeat on the issue appeared certain to entail the end of the Canadian labour movement. Labour leaders were certain that they would lose all hope if the ‘Mongolian swarm’ was allowed to overrun the Dominion. They particularly feared that white workers would have to abandon the Dominion or else join Asians in the ranks of industrial slaves. ‘Unless the plague be speedily stopped,’ declared the Nanaimo Knights, ‘in a very few years there will only remain a few immensely wealthy men, and a servile, slavish people, chiefly Chinese.’⁹⁸ Stopping Asian immigration, therefore, was viewed as a necessary precondition for the realization of the goals of Canadian labour leaders.

CONCLUSION

Altogether, labour leaders portrayed Asians as a ‘great menace’ to Canada, and to its working class in particular. Anxiety about competition in the labour market accounts for much of labour’s hostility, but unionists hardly limited their complaints to wage levels as they continually depicted Asians as irretrievably degraded workers, and put a major emphasis on social and moral issues. Moreover, the

95 Dubinsky and Givertz, ‘It Was Only a Matter of Passion,’ 71; *Palladium of Labor*, 23 Aug. 1884.

96 *Palladium of Labor*, 12 Oct. 1884.

97 *Palladium of Labor*, 27 Sept. 1884; 12 Oct. 1884; *Victoria Industrial News*, 15 Mar. 1886.

98 ‘Nanaimo Knights.’ See also *Canadian Labor Reformer*, 6 Jun. 1886; *Voice*, 26 Oct. 1906; *BC Federationist*, 31 Oct. 1913.

support for exclusionary measures in areas where the number of Asians was minimal, and the dramatically different approach taken to other groups of immigrant workers, show that more than a rational assessment of workers' economic interests informed labour leaders' agitation.

The widespread racism against Asians in Canada, and especially in British Columbia, was another crucial reason why labour leaders demanded exclusion. However, key aspects of labour's anti-Asian rhetoric, particularly its anti-capitalist component, were plainly different from the rhetoric of other social classes. Law enforcement officials, medical professionals, and middle- and upper-class commentators, did not continually describe the Asians as 'tools of the capitalists,' and use their immigration as proof of the 'inhumanity and greed' of Canadian employers.

Moreover, labour leaders in this period were hardly uncritical adherents of prevailing social norms, and particularly of prevailing views of many minorities or marginalized groups. But while some groups were associated with admirable struggles against oppression in earlier time periods or distant lands, Asians were seen as a new threat that arose largely with advance of industrial capitalism. Events elsewhere in the British Empire and the United States played a vital role in strengthening this view of Asians.

Indeed, far from showing interest in forging solidarity across this particular racial line, labour leaders saw their campaign against the Asian 'menace' as an important part of their broader struggle against capitalism. As a result, the agitation for exclusion could appear whenever labour leaders contemplated their political, social, and economic agenda. For example, a large proportion of the statements in Knights of Labor newspapers about Chinese immigration – most of them brief references – appear in general reports on labour's priorities, or in broad assessments of the state of the Dominion.⁹⁹

However, the racist campaign for exclusion put major limits on hopes for the creation of a broader working-class movement. Canadian unionists may have used constructions of the Asian 'menace' to bolster

99 Some examples are in *Trades Union Advocate*, 26 Oct. 1882, 11 Jan. 1883; *Wage Worker*, 19 Apr. 1883, 25 Aug. 1883; *Palladium of Labor*, 6 December 1884, 16 May 1885; *Toronto Daily News*, 19 Jul. 1884, 8 Aug. 1885; *Victoria Industrial News*, 29 May 1886. Particularly because of the frequency of references such as these to Chinese immigration, I would argue that Bryan Palmer underestimates both the number and the importance of anti-Chinese comments in the *Palladium of Labor*. See Palmer, 'Historiographic Hassles,' *Social History/Histoire Sociale* 33, no. 65 (May 2000), 120–1.

their rhetoric against political and economic elites, their calls on the rank-and-file to get active, and even their identity as leaders of a movement of white working men, but these constructions and the identities formed in opposition to them were fundamentally antagonistic toward many of Canada's, and many more of the world's, working people.