

Kautil

THE ORIGINS OF THE
CANADIAN FINNISH LABOR MOVEMENT

N. Viita

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N.B. I have underlined a few dates of which I am not absolutely certain. A.T.

From the Beginnings of the Canadian Finnish Labor Movement

The first Finns arrived in what is now Thunder Bay in 1882. The place was then known by the name of Prince Arthur's Landing. Among these arrivals are known names such as: Hali, Harri, Ainali, Hanson, Ranta, Blomquist, Erkkila, Johnson, Laukka, Wilppula and Paananen, and of course others. Mrs. Hali has related, that before their arrival two Finnish families were known to be here, but she does not remember their names.

There were no known common meeting places among these new arrivals until at the turn of the century a Finnish church was established on Wilson Street, where it still is located in a renewed condition. A little later a Finnish church was also erected in Fort William, which is situated in the coal dock area.

At about the same time a temperance society was established in Port Arthur, but it was short lived. A temperance society, Pohjankukka, was also established in Fort William beside the Finnish church. In 1901 its own hall was completed. On February 23, 1902 the establishment of a new temperance society in Port Arthur was discussed. At a meeting on March 2 it was given the name "Uusi Yritys" (New Start). In 1903 a lot was purchased for it on Wilson Street and the hall was completed the same year. The hall was said to have absolved its debts in 1906.

In the 1903 annual meeting minutes it is stated: "The temperance oath was broken by 66 persons and the oath maintained

by 90, whereby the membership was 156." Assistance was distributed from the treasury to ill members and in the occurrence of a death \$40. was donated for funeral expenses.

At the same time as the temperance society was established socialist ideas began anew to gain a foothold among the Finns.

A part of these had already acknowledged socialist principles in Finland. Since the activity of the temperance societies did not include the dissemination of these principles, the American Finnish Labour Organization was established. The founding meeting of this organization was held in Mariday Park, which was still forest. This was at the end of February 1903.

Participating in this meeting were: O. Heino, O. Sjoblom, Karl Nyman, Erick Korkola, Kalle Laine, H. Salminen, Alex Impola, Karl Manner, A. Forsgren, Matti Myllykangas, Asurias Röhr and Axel Wuorinen.

This meeting decided to send a membership request to the Imatra League, which had been established a little earlier in the United States. When the permit was received September 24, 1903 the actual first meeting was in the Impola residence, in which 24 members participated. The question discussed at this meeting was the construction of the group's own hall, and it was decided to do so. The hall was completed in October of the same year. It was situated on Dufferin Street and its size was 24' x 66'. The Branch organized a band, an athletics club and an illness and funeral assistance fund. This socialist activity began with brisk forward steps in Port Arthur.

In Fort William the number of Finns had also increased and these new principles gained sway there. A Finnish Socialist Branch was also established there, which founded its own hall, which was completed in 1906. There was also a theatrical society and other sub-organizations in full swing. In 1909 the S.S. Branch and the temperance society Pohjankukka were united, the latter terminating its activities. More about Port Arthur's and Fort William's activity later.

As early as 1891 an independent temperance society "Aallotar", was founded in North Wellington, B.C., demonstrating that the Finns were in B. C. from a very early date.

In Toronto in 1890 a taylor named Jaakko Lindala had arrived from the United States. Shortly Jussi Ranta and Reinhold Mikkonen also arrived. They are said to have paved the way for Finns settling in Toronto. Finnish taylors began immigrating into Canada during the so-called persecution years of Bobrikoff.

Lindala and Ranta founded a taylor shop in Toronto, which was later known by the name "Iso Paja". This was in 1902, and it was operating until 1913. "Iso Paja" had seats for 50 taylors. In this workshop the first socialist doctrines among Finnish Torontonians were born. Among them were names like:

J. W. Ahlquist, F. J. Syrjälä, R. Roine, K. Lehto, C. Tigert, W. Heikkinen, H. Pursi, W. Gröndahl, J. F. Lahti, A. Stenman, Minni Oksanen, Aino Mättönen, August Pakarinen and many more.

A Finnish Association was established in Toronto in 1902 and it was founded on "free principles". The temperance and workers organization, Tammi, was established in 1904. These

two joined in 1905 on the condition that after joining they would enter the Socialist Party of Canada which was founded the same year. On behalf of this united organization 15 persons were chosen for the Canadian Socialist party to make the rules clear, etc.

The actual union took place November 13, 1906, when other organizations, including the Port Arthur organization in 1907, joined the Canadian Socialist Party. The first provincial meeting of representatives of the Socialist Party of Canada was held in Toronto in October, 1908, at which Finnish branches represented were: Toronto, Cobalt, S. Porcupine, Port Arthur.

Within the following year the following branches belonged to the Canadian socialist party: The Bellevue, S.S. Branch, Coleman, Cobalt, La Oysmith, Nanaimo, Port Arthur, Port William, Sault Ste. Marie, Toronto, Nalalu, Red Deer, Sointula and Vancouver branched and perhaps others.

F. J. Syrjälä in his book "Historical Subjects of the Finnish American Labor Movement", says the Työkansa paper was founded in Port Arthur in 1906. It was part of the activities of the Port Arthur S. S. Branch. The paper was begun as a weekly and a year later it began to appear twice weekly and later as a daily paper. The first editor was Severi Alanne and Moses Hahl was business secretary. The paper was published on an English language press and the paper's business and office facilities were at 9 Court Street. Not until the Labor Temple was completed in March, 1910 were presses installed for Työkansa and situated downstairs in the Labor Temple as well as the offices. Later in 1912 a building was erected for Työkansa

beside the Labour Temple. A cartoon paper, "Väkäleuka" appeared with it. In the directorship of Työkansa were many persons other than those named already, such as Yrjö Mäkelä, J. A. Kustonen, etc. K. A. Suvanto edited "Vakaleuka" for the longest time.

Caretakers of the business included among others Mr. Sundell, K. E. Gronuahl, Wilho A. Kyrö, Paasikivi, Moses Hahl and J. V. Kannasto.

In 1907 there was a dispute between F. J. Syrjälä, who then lived in Toronto and toured Canada as a speaker for the socialist party, and Severi Alanteen. Syrjälä complained that the Työkansa had been established in Port Arthur without permission of the Torontonians. The matter was settled, however, and Työkansa was approved as the voice of socialist Finnish-Canadians.

As mentioned previously the first Labor building in Port Arthur was constructed in 1903. The Finnish population, however, continued to grow. In the minutes of the S. S. Branch for 1907 we read: "The year 1907 has been for our branch, especially rich in change and activity. Sacrifices, especially of a material nature have been made, almost beyond our powers. But hopefully time will heal the wounds as long as enthusiasm in our activity continues."

"As a milestone in this years activity especially worthy of mention is, that we have joined the Canadian national socialist party. Much additional tool was added to our operation by our recent acquisition of a newspaper. It has demanded much material sacrifice and still appears to demand it if we determine to succeed. On the first of July we showed for the first time our existence to the public here by setting

up a demonstration parade. We marched through town, past the most popular businesses."

"According to the old rules membership rights were enjoyed by 310. Economic operations were watched by the board of directors. Other regular activities were a drama club, women's sewing circle, social committee, agitation committee and athletic society. Of these, the dramatic society has been the most active. Meetings held by the dramatic society numbered 48. Its membership at the start of the year was 20. Plays presented during the year numbered 41".

"The economic condition of the branch is good. Its total assets amount to about \$6,000."

As already mentioned, the Labor Temple was completed in March of 1910. As the 1907 annual report reveals, plays had been presented in large numbers. The first, presented at the hall's opening was "Tukkijoella". Until 1907 plays were mainly directed by Viile Airola, who was well liked. There were also other directors. Now Felix Hyrske was chosen as director of the Labor Temple drama society and he was engaged in this activity nearly four years. Under his directions "Pirun Kirkko" was presented as the opening play. It gained its large audience's undivided support. The opening was March 17.

On behalf of the S. S. Branch a restaurant was established in the front part of the basement of the Labor Temple where the Hoito Co-op restaurant has operated since October 1, 1918. Also founded was the Co-operative Trading Co. Ltd. ^{already there in 1910} whose own building was completed in 1911. It is the same building, which is now owned by the People's Co-operative Port Arthur Ltd. The Osuussauna was also

never closed

constructed. Finns bathed there as well as others.

The years 1914-15 were fateful ones for all these enterprises. The restaurant was already discontinued and was now maintained privately, but all others became bankrupt. The same persons who had backed the Finnish Building Co. Ltd. had also backed the Co-operative store, and many paid their backing. Canada Permanent Mortgage Co. took control of the Labor Temple building, the Työkansa building, and the Co-operative store building. Thus the constructive efforts of years were in ruins.

C. P. Mortgage Company had given funds to the extent of \$30,521.12 and had been paid \$77,788.53, but now nothing remained. An individual named McLean took control of the Co-operative building from the mortgage company. When the O.B.U. support ring was founded in (1919) it took the Labor Temple building into its control for the price of \$29,000.00.

During this time directional struggle occurred between the old socialists and the industrial unionists, resulting in the independent functioning of both. The causes of this dispute are well enough known that I do not find it necessary to begin sorting them out here.

The Industrial Unionist Support League was established in Sudbury in 1920. It replaced the O.B.U. support ring and thus, gained the Labor Temple building and its debts. It operated there until 1961 when the Finlandia Club of Port Arthur was established. The Finlandia Club is now the largest shareholder in the Finnish Building Co. Ltd., and thus has controlling interest in the Labour Temple building. Presently it is undergoing \$50,000.00 in repairs and renovations in the hall portion of the building.

Let us return to the activities of the Canadian Socialist Party, to which at least the largest part of Finnish socialists belonged. Between the years 1908-1910 there occurred an angry quarrel between Finnish and English members. The Finns wanted certain improvements in the program of the Socialist Party of Canada, such as the shortening of the work day, improved wages and working conditions. This was strongly opposed by the leadership of the party depending solely on parliamentary-style activity. As a result, all foreign language groups, the Finns included, were separated from the party.

At the initiative of the evicted branches a temporary central committee was formed in Toronto. This committee urged branches to send representatives to a common negotiating meeting in Toronto. The meeting was held on the 15th and 16th of April, 1911, where a new party, which was named "Canadian Socialist Federation" was founded. A committee of this new party engaged in negotiations with discontent branches in the west, concerning their union into this new party. A united negotiation meeting was held in Winnipeg at the end of December, where regulations of the party were shaped and its name was approved as the "Social Democratic Party of Canada". This was the beginning of the current Canadian Finnish Organization which is held to have begun in 1911. This would be another story. The Social Democratic Party of Canada was terminated by order of the government in 1918, and did not revive afterwards.

Places such as Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury would require individual accounts. The Labor College Support League was established in Sudbury on December 25, 1916. By then many had been separated from the old S.S. Branch due to excessive radicalism. The group

rented Hussey Hall, where it successfully operated through many years. Among the groups activities, the Workers College and strike actions were strongly supported. As early as 1910 a branch of the Industrial Workers of the World were established in Sault Ste. Marie. November 11, 1917 the Rekryyti (Sleigh Drivers) Union branch was established. The Algoma line, where there were numerous camps, was then 100 per cent I.W.W. organized.

Copper Cliff, which is on the outskirts of Sudbury, established a youth club as early as 1903. Among the best known members then were John Virta, Arthur Snikken and Herman Lahti and others. At first there appears, at least from the minutes, to be nothing to suggest a confrontation by the classes -- thus wrote E. M. Jouppi in his day. It appears, however, that from this Youth Club finally developed a united front in the Sudbury area. I would hope that E. M. Jouppi would give further explanation here.

At the end of the world war the Canadian ruling class was in a hysterical condition, as was the capitalist class of other countries. Before the end of the war the Canadian government decreed -- by an Order in Council decision September 25, 1918, a total of 15 foreign organizations and groups -- under ban. Among these were our I.W.W. organization and also the Canadian Finnish Organization. Also forbidden were all foreign language newspapers. In 1917 a paper named Vapaus had been established in Sudbury to replace the Työkansa which had fallen into bankruptcy. It also was forbidden to publish. If the decrees were not obeyed a fine of \$5,000.00 and five years imprisonment was possible. The implications of the ban were far reaching, so that whoever was found with foreign papers

in his pants pocket or non-fictional literature was susceptible to the same penalties. Foreigners were to suffer considerably from this. Scores of Finns were imprisoned and fined, with fines varying from \$50. to \$2,000. Many were also deported.

The Canadian Finnish Organization was represented in Ottawa by Santeri Nuorteva and J. W. Ahlquist. The censured C. S. J.'s former secretary J. W. Ahlquist signed the requests of these representatives to the "Director of Public Safety" for permission to publish Vapaus, and for the Canadian Finnish Organization to re-commence activities.

This request included the following: "Canadian Finnish socialists are accused of being in league with the enemy, the I.W.W. and others. We have not denied our association with the parliamentary movement advocated by socialist parties and admit, that as workers we have firm participation with the unionist movement. We wish, however, to affirm that from the beginning of the Finnish Organization, we have been compelled in practical terms, to oppose the I.W.W. league. A large part of our organization's activity has been a continuous battle against syndicalist and anarchic-syndicate~~ist~~ precepts."

Let the reader make his own assessment of this.

December 13, 1918, the Finnish Organization received permission to operate as an independent organization, on condition that it could not participate in any workers' party in the country. Vapaus received permission to re-commence publishing somewhat later.

In 1919 the Finnish Organization declared itself the O.B.U.'s propaganda organization. However, in 1920 it separated from this, as the winds began blowing from the direction of Russian. In 1921

the Canadian Communist Party was formed and the Finnish Organization became a member as well as the Vapaus newspaper.

I.W.W. activity, following the governmental ban, began again in Canada in 1923. Due to work by forest laborers two branches were formed in British Columbia. There was also a tough bush workers' strike battle.

By 1924 the Ontario bush workers by general vote decided to leave the L.W.I.U. of the O.B.U. and join the I.W.W. bushworkers organization 120. There were several thousand members and the majority were Finnish. The bushworkers headquarters was then in Sudbury, from where they were later moved to Port Arthur. Connected with the Sudbury headquarters was also the Industrialisti news beaureau supervised by E. M. Jouppi and later John Luoma. At this time this writer became the general secretary of the bushworkers organization. The news beaureau was moved at the same time to Port Arthur with the organizational headquarters. That was, to the best of my memory, in 1927, and has operated continually since. I.W.W. activity in Port Arthur and the whole of Canada was very brisk at that time -- not only among Finns -- but among other language groups as well. Several strikes were held with good results. From their results at least the bushworkers benefit to this day.

Much more could go into this article. Here, however, is an attempt to bring out those initiators, who brought forward Finnish activity in Canada. First churches were founded, then temperance groups and later political parties and social groups. Undoubtedly with the united work of labor much has been achieve, but with solidarity and more mutual tolerance, results would have been ten times better.