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Jailed Heroes and Kitchen Heroines:
Class, Gender and the Medalta Potteries Strike in Postwar Alberta

by

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ABSTRACT

Buoyed by a new sense of entitlement stemming from their war experiences and postwar prosperity, men and women workers at Medalta Potteries in 1947 Medicine Hat, Alberta, challenged the power of their paternalistic and anti-union employer. The result was a long and bitter, but initially effective strike. The city's working-class community was stunned when seven male workers were jailed for thirty days of hard labour for their involvement in a picketline disturbance. Eight women workers convicted of the same charge were given suspended sentences. The court's harsh stance combined with the dramatically gendered outcome demonstrate that dominant notions about working-class masculinity and femininity influenced the court trials and the outcome of the strike. A construction of male workers as ignorant, yet dangerous, made the strikers an easy target for government allegations of insidious Communist influence amidst an escalating Cold War. An eerie silence about women workers signified societal discomfort with the 'spectacle' of women workers' militancy and, more fundamentally, an uneasiness about the reality of women's essential role in the 'male' domain of paid work.

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DEDICATION

For my brother Danny, who was never able to realize a dream.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFL – Alberta Federation of Labour

CCF – Cooperative Commonwealth Federation

CCL – The Canadian Congress of Labour

CIO – The Congress of Industrial Organizations

CPR – Canadian Pacific Railway

MHM – Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery Archives

Mine Mill – The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers

NAC – National Archives of Canada

PAA – Provincial Archives of Alberta

PC 1003 – Privy Council Order 1003 passed in 1944 recognizing unions

Socred – Social Credit

UBC – University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections and University Archives

UPWA – United Packinghouse Workers of America

WCB – Workmen's Compensation Board

CHAPTER ONE

A "sinister purpose" and "misguided individuals":[1] Introduction

Socred paranoia about the 'conspiracy' may not have been the government's sole motive in lashing out so strongly at this time against the labour movement. This was, after all, the year of the Leduc oil strike and Manning's government was determined that the large oil companies have the impression that Alberta was a safe place to invest.[2]

Alvin Finkel

In October 1947 a packed courtroom in Medicine Hat, Alberta received "with silent shock" the sentencing of seven male picketers to thirty days of hard labour in the Lethbridge "gaol".[3] The men had been involved in a "mauling" on the picketline during a strike at the local Medalta Potteries factory that sent one man to hospital with minor injuries. Eight women also charged in connection with this incident, received only suspended sentences. Local Magistrate T. O'B. Gore-Hickman said he "hesitated to send young women to jail" where they would be fingerprinted and their criminal file started.[4] The defence lawyer also asked for the leniency of the court "in the case of the female workers, the majority being 17 or 18 years of age." Neither party expressed such solicitude on behalf of any of the men, the oldest of whom was fifty-two and the youngest eighteen.[5]

Certain that the men's sentence was unjust, the union appealed to Medicine Hat City Council to support its efforts to have the sentence reduced by lobbying provincial and federal governments on the workers' behalf. Before council could debate the request, Mayor William Rae, reading a prepared statement, accused the union delegation's Calgary-based leader of being an agent of Moscow whose "sinister purpose" was "a calculated plan designed to make capital out of human misery." Calling the union leader "an individual with a deformed brain, a misfit, who admits receiving the gold of Moscow," Rae urged the council not to be deceived by "this dastardly scheme" and intercede in "political Chicanery." Rae was careful to distinguish between the union's leaders, who were the target of his attack, and rank-and-file workers, who were the "misguided individuals"

placed in an "unfortunate position."[6] Two days after the virulent attack the strike collapsed, ending seventy-two days of picketing that successfully kept pottery production at the Medalta factory to a minimum. Striking workers affirmed their support for the jailed men by holding a dinner for the "labour heroes" upon their return from incarceration three days early because of good behaviour.[7] Women workers, including some of those who were convicted, but who received only suspended sentences, worked together with the wives of male union workers to organize a home-cooked celebratory dinner and dance.[8]

It seems no coincidence that the striking workers conceded defeat two days after Rae's attack, returning to work on the company's terms without any protection against discrimination for union membership or activism. The strike, which remains the longest and most bitter in the history of Medicine Hat, dealt a severe blow to the legitimacy of workers' demands in the community. An image of unreasonable and dangerous male workers out of control on the picketline was fostered by the jail sentences. The power of this strike legacy was demonstrated in Medicine Hat's civic elections only a few weeks after the strike ended. A slate of labour candidates that included one of the jailed strikers was soundly defeated by a record turnout of voters.[9] The striking workers' jail sentences and the election contributed to a perceptible political shift to the right in the province in 1947. The shift made it possible for a restrictive amendment to The Alberta Labour Act to be passed in March, 1948 with little real opposition even from labour.[10] The ability to organize workers and to strike, two keystones of labour's power vis a vis capital, were severely restricted. The harsh new legislation made it illegal for workers to organize a union at their workplace without the explicit consent of the company and automatically voided any contract in the event of an illegal strike.

The Medalta strike holds significance as the most prominent example of an extraordinary year of labour unrest in Alberta that was centred in Medicine Hat. After priding itself on the low number of labour disputes in the province, Ernest Manning's Social Credit government was faced with a rash of illegal strikes and walkouts in 1947.[11] Six of these labour actions occurred in Medicine Hat, a major industrial centre in the province that had an extensive and diverse industrial base.[12] Nearly every business in the city's clay products industry, which employed 20 per cent of the local workforce, was

disrupted by labour action during this period.[13] When the workers at Medalta Potteries, one of the city's largest employers, brought in a particularly militant union in 1947 – The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (hereafter Mine Mill) – the labour action that resulted became a crucial battleground between pro- and anti-union forces during an era of significant economic and political change in the province. Effective picketing, which reduced plant production to zero for the first three weeks of the strike and to minimal production for the remaining six weeks, represented a serious threat to employer profits and control. One finding of this study is that there was a substantial core of rank-and-file workers at Medalta who were militant. Yet, although they were led by communist leadership within Mine Mill, these workers were not radical. They continued to support the existing political and economic system, but felt entitled to a greater share in its rewards.[14]

The level of labour unrest in Medicine Hat that year raises questions about contemporary interpretations of the Medalta strike that attributed it to aggressive and manipulative communist union leaders from outside the community. If genuine grassroots support for the union and the strike was lacking, why did the strike last so long and why was it so effective? Why did the union survive after the strike and go on to achieve modest gains for workers for nearly seven years – until the company went bankrupt?

In a recently published study, Anne Hayward examines Medalta's labour relations in terms of their impact on the pottery industry's success and ultimate failure, providing a valuable scholarly overview of the strike.[15] Hayward details the company's harsh attitude toward employees and the difficult work conditions that prevailed, particularly during the interwar period. A description of the manufacturing process and product development provides insight into the particular jobs workers performed. Her analysis of the art department's role in the company's success provides a framework for assessing the impact of gender, since women had exclusive access to art shop positions, apart from supervisory jobs. My research builds on Hayward's work to examine the impact of both the company's paternalistic and bottom-line approach to labour relations, and the gendered structure of the industry, linking them directly to the course of the strike.

This study is a departure from Hayward's industrial history in that labour conditions and labour relations are the focus. More specifically, I argue that cheap labour was as

important to Medalta's success as cheap gas, local clay and the railway, and examine the regional factors that shaped the city's labour market. The focus of the strike is expanded beyond the union leadership to consider rank-and-file support and the role of governments, the courts and the employer. Significantly, the main issue shifted during the course of the strike from wage increases to union recognition, signalling an assault on trade union rights by a paternalistic employer. In this light, communist allegations are seen more clearly as an attempt by business and government to reverse recent gains achieved by labour during the war.

An alternative view of the Medalta strike is also achieved by placing the intersection of class and gender at the centre of the analysis and focusing on relations of power. Oral interviews with eight former workers as well as union records and other textural sources reveal a substantial commitment to labour activism within the workforce at Medalta Potteries and within Medicine Hat's working-class community. This commitment was rooted in a sense of entitlement to the growing prosperity becoming apparent in the postwar era. Nevertheless there were important limits to labour activism that reflected a diversity of worker perspectives and experiences. Factors such as gender, military service, marital status and a rural upbringing strongly influenced worker attitudes toward their jobs, unions, and militancy.[16]

In more pragmatic terms the oral histories of former rank-and-file workers are primary sources that help capture an aspect of history that was not recorded at the time.[17] Admittedly the fifty-three-year memory filter must be carefully considered in assessing these workers' recollections of a failed strike. Nevertheless, the perspective of even a handful of workers provides insight into the degree of class consciousness and support for labour activism that existed within the Medalta workforce. Exploring the perspective of rank-and-file workers also demonstrates the degree of agency individuals exercised despite the powerful forces shaping their lives. One of the challenges of this study has been to identify ways in which a diverse group of workers equipped with varying degrees of power in a hierarchically ordered society were able to negotiate a space for themselves within a complex of structural forces.

This research yields a complex and nuanced picture of rank-and-file workers and their experiences that counters the simplistic notion of naïve workers led by "sinister" union leaders that was promoted at the time by industrialists, media and the state. Instead, the picture that emerges is of a pottery workforce and larger community strongly committed to labour activism at the outbreak of the strike as a means of improving the lives of Medalta workers and of those living in Medicine Hat. This commitment reflected a new sense of entitlement stemming from workers' wartime sacrifices and the evidence of postwar prosperity in which they wanted a share. It also reflected the strong position of workers in a booming provincial economy that was dependent on a stable labour supply. Throughout the strike, the business community, state institutions, and the media all strove to minimize and discredit labour unrest. A close examination of strike events and the particular construction of workers that emerged reveals a shift in the relative power of workers, the state, and capital. The immediate postwar era was a critical transition period during which labour shifted from an offensive position stemming from labour shortages and new labour legislation to a defensive position. This study provides insight into the factors that contributed to that power shift in Alberta.

The Medalta strike is a valuable fragment of Alberta's past in that it also offers us a window through which to see more clearly the cultural ideologies and material conditions that existed in the immediate postwar era. The court's harshness toward male workers and lenience toward women provides insight into how a profoundly gendered construction of male and female workers helped erode public support for legitimate worker demands. The pervasive notion of males as family breadwinners and female workers as economic dependents led to a focus on and exaggeration of male actions during the strike while the presence of women workers was ignored or underplayed. The union's masculinist culture and militant stance contributed to this effect, as did the values, beliefs and attitudes of rank-and-file workers, both male and female. The result was a construction of male workers as violent and dangerous yet at the same time naïve and ignorant – a public perception that the state was able to exploit using damaging allegations of communist influence. Women's credible demands for higher wages were obscured by their construction as innocent victims of either industrialists or male labour, depending on the context.

These gendered constructions of male and female workers, which drew on contemporary cultural stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, played a role in the strike's outcome. The credibility of reasonable demands for higher wages was more easily dismissed by a public offended by apparently brutish male behaviour. Women workers' lack of visibility, together with the expectation that they would not be militant, limited the impact of worker solidarity. Most importantly, the emphasis on worker ignorance or innocence made Medalta workers an easy target for allegations of insidious communist influence. Amidst the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War that gripped Alberta in 1947, these allegations seriously eroded the broad-based public support Medalta workers enjoyed at the outset of the strike. They helped cultivate a political climate that allowed the provincial government to restrict labour's power for decades to come.

The Medicine Hat pottery industry is a useful subject for studying labour relations in the Canadian West because it was one of the first manufacturing industries to emerge in the region. Medalta Potteries, in particular, was the first Western manufacturer to ship goods other than cereal products to Eastern Canada.[18] Medalta is also distinctive because at the time of the strike 42 per cent of its 220 unionized workers were women, which was unusual at the time, particularly in the West.[19] The pottery industry has a long tradition of employing women workers that makes it helpful for exploring gender as a structural force shaping labour relations. This tradition of employing women is linked to both cultural expectations about femininity and the economic advantages of hiring women who could be paid much less than men.[20] Although there are several in-depth studies of the pottery industry in Britain and the United States, none place gender at the heart of their analysis.[21] Even those that focus on labour relations use an analytic approach that does not explore the ways in which differences such as a worker's role in the family economy or gendered cultural expectations influenced workplace choices and opportunities for men and women. One exception is an article by Jacqueline Sarsby, which uses oral histories to examine sexual segregation in the British pottery industry.[22] Sarsby's study provides insight into the arguments used to justify sex segregation. It also reveals the crucial role of ideology, which created "informal restrictions" based on particular ideas about what type of work was suitable for women. Sarsby argues that notions about femininity have been used to

justify the concentration of women into certain types of work that ensure they were seen as less skilled or less valuable. Her article provides a helpful starting point for exploring the role of ideology in establishing and maintaining sex segregation at the Medalta factory.

My study of the Medalta Potteries strike is grounded in the tradition of working class social history, which seeks to probe and understand the consciousness and experience of ordinary people and everyday life to enhance awareness of power dynamics in a capitalist industrial system.[23] In labour history this approach has entailed shifting away from an exclusive focus on labour institutions such as unions, and incorporating society and culture into an analysis. This comprehensive approach encompasses all aspects of identity and examines social structures such as the family and culture as well as the economy and politics. I have tried to problematize sources, carefully considering the factors influencing textual and oral history accounts. Complicating the strike in such a way better captures the nuances that enrich historical understanding. The rewards are a more textured portrait of the strike and new insight into the values, beliefs and behaviour of individuals who shaped it. Such an approach also helps delineate the larger structural forces at play. A major focus of the analysis is the tension between structural forces that shaped the strike and the ways in which individuals made choices that ameliorated the effect of those forces on their lives.

The two central categories of analysis applied are class and gender. Class is used here to signify structured economic inequality, but not as a single, monolithic concept. Instead, drawing on Joan Wallach Scott's work, class is viewed as "a field that always contains multiple and contested meanings."[24] A strong materialist perspective that considers subtle economic differences among workers as well as the major difference between workers and owners and managers is blended with an analysis of ideology. The socio-cultural meaning for "masculinity" and "femininity" that has been ascribed to the biological differences of "male" and "female" is viewed as inextricably linked to class. In addition, as Scott has argued, gender is viewed as "a primary way of signifying relationships of power."[25] Gender metaphors and imagery are examined to explore power relationships within each gender as well as between men and women.[26] Accepting gender as socially constructed and the foregrounding of power dynamics reflects a feminist

perspective. Specifically, an attempt is made both to describe gendered relations and to probe them for insight into how power is exercised and the factors that caused it to shift.

My analysis of the Medalta strike draws heavily on the theoretical insights elaborated in two important Canadian labour studies, Joy Parr's postmodern analysis of male and female breadwinners in two Ontario towns, and Joan Sangster's richly textured study of women workers in Peterborough, Ontario, which operates from a materialist-feminist perspective.[27] Parr's analytic framework has inspired me to embrace concepts and categories as unstable and diverse entities. Postmodernism in this instance refers to an understanding of the world that is "pragmatic, contextual and local," and that rejects large overarching theories such as Marxism that try to "explain the whole movement of history and social life as a single interconnected totality."[28] Parr's emphasis on fluctuation, fragmentation, and multiplicity permits insight into historical factors that have determined sexual segregation of the workforce. Her close attention to the processes by which jobs have been assigned by gender and to the ways in which the "boundaries between tasks [were] forged in defined contexts by particular clashes of interest" reveals the diversity of understandings that can exist for one gender. Her analysis of various workstations in a furniture factory, for example, demonstrates that multiple forms of masculinity were recognized and experienced in wage work. The elaboration of such nuances helps us understand why these factory workers rejected the concept of a breadwinner wage. Similarly, Parr's insistence that "We exist simultaneously, rather than sequentially, in the social relations of class and gender" makes explicit the way analytic dualisms such as waged and non-waged labour, public and private life can obscure rather than enhance understanding.[29] Parr's study is also valuable in that it incorporates the study of both genders equally, which helps erode the notion of masculinity as monolithic and natural, and allows a comprehensive assessment of the sex and gender systems.[30]

In comparison, Joan Sangster's study of women workers in Peterborough, Ontario operates from a materialist-feminist perspective that resists significant aspects of poststructuralism. Unlike Parr, Sangster is committed to historical materialism, or class, as a framework that shaped women worker's choices and opportunities. This framework must, however, "be infused with an awareness of the operation of patriarchal social

structures and with attention to women's active creation in their own destiny." Sangster also chose the local and particular to examine the sexual division of labour and the construction of class and gender relations.[31]

Unlike Parr, however, Sangster's purpose is "to look for common themes and patterns in the organization of work, to explore the dominant ideologies shaping gender relations."[32] Comparing her work with Parr's, Sangster finds common themes: "domestic labour remained largely the worry of women; and, ideologically, working-class women were anxious to defend their good names as respectable and competent mothers."[33] For Sangster these similarities demonstrate "the importance of connecting local specificity to the larger story" – a larger story that Parr would deny exists. Similarly, Sangster's use of Gramscian notions of ideology, consent and hegemony also represents an important departure from Parr, who sees more advantage in "presuming less" connection between ideology and social practices.[34] Sangster's more materialist perspective can also be seen in her view that an ideology of sex differences rationalized and legitimized the sexual division of labour in a common sense way that women accepted because it was "reinforced in lived social practices."[35] Sangster's conclusion "that women's ambition was socially constructed ... by the economic and social structure of the local community and by the imperatives of the family economy" seems to demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating the material and the ideological in historical analysis.[36]

Finally, Sangster's focus on women workers, despite emphasizing the centrality of gender to all working-class history, represents another important philosophical difference from Parr. Although she "heartily" endorsed the practice of focusing on both femininity and masculinity, in this work Sangster said she was "committed to the recovery of women's stories" to prevent "losing sight of the extent to which women's stories are marginalized, trivialized, and obscured in our history and culture."[37] This more limited focus does not seem to hamper Sangster in her goal of extending our understanding of gender dynamics in the workplace, women's lived experience, and their relationship with unions. Perhaps this is because she included an analysis of important aspects of masculinity as they relate to these topics. One example is her discussion of domestic abuse, which she linked to a discriminatory economic system and "entrenched notions of male authority and control of

the family."[38] The absence of any discussion of domestic abuse in Parr's work, which also integrates workplace, family, and community life, as well as offering a comparison of male and female breadwinners, underlines a concern that gender historians must be careful not to reinforce or normalize male dominance.

One of the challenges of a poststructural approach to gender history has been to maintain sight of the power dynamics in gender hierarchies. Some of the most important debates about gender history have centred on the issue of power. Even those who are committed to the field stress that historians must "not lose sight of the power relations that constitute, and are constituted by, gender."[39] Critics, however, emphasize gender history's potential to undermine women's history as a vehicle for exposing forces that oppress women, and as a way of rendering women visible in the historical record. It has been argued that gender history, by embracing the study of men, "shifts attention away from real women and dulls our sensitivity to the full force of patriarchal power."[40] Gender history has also been criticized for instigating a dichotomy between itself and women's history that has resulted in a competition for scarce academic resources.[41] Nonetheless, as Parr and Mark Rosenfeld have stated, gender history is distinctive in its ability "to bring to light hidden but influential assumptions about gender," such as the welfare state's "assumption that male breadwinning and female dependence were the norm."[42]

My strategy has been to incorporate insights from both Parr and Sangster. This study is influenced by poststructural thought in that it explores sources such as company records, press coverage of the strike, union propaganda, and judicial comments as published in the press to examine ways in which discourse shaped and reflected identity and behaviour. Michel Foucault has defined discourse "as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation" which, in this case study, is primarily the language used in relation to organized labour and labour activism to construct knowledge/power.[43] Like Sangster, however, I try to explore "the power inherent in language and representation" without abandoning the material and the search for explanations of social transformation.[44] My analysis does not privilege one category of analysis in principle. Instead, I have remained alert to the constantly changing historical context that brings a particular aspect of identity or process to the fore with the understanding that they operate

simultaneously, not independently. This approach avoids binary analytic constructions which tend toward essentialism, and assume sexual conflict. At Medalta, masculinity and femininity, for example, tended to operate as counterparts, rather than in conflict.

One important similarity between these two historians is a broad conceptualization of 'work' and 'workers' that is equally central to this analysis. "Work" includes unpaid as well as paid, reproductive as well as productive roles, while "workers" refers to both male and female workers in terms of their marital status and role in the family economy, rather than only their status as autonomous wage earners. This approach has been used by numerous feminist labour historians to uncover working-class survival strategies, working-class culture and the consciousness of male and female workers.[45] By exploring the influence of community and region, particularly such factors as property inheritance patterns, job alternatives and educational opportunities it is possible to establish ways in which, for example, young women entered a different labour market than their brothers. Similarly, it is possible to see why working class sons and daughters began their work lives with lower levels of education than did their middle class cohort. In combination, these analytic tools and methodologies help delineate the sources of cohesion and cleavage among workers during the Medalta strike, providing a more nuanced understanding of the workers, the forces that constrained them, and the space within which they acted.

In 1947 Medalta employed an almost exclusively white workforce. The majority of workers were born in Canada and the predominant ethnic heritage was German.[46] The fact that the one or possibly two Metis women who worked at the pottery stood out in the mind of several oral interviewees suggests the significance of non-whiteness at the time. In this analysis attention is paid to the ways in which whiteness was normalized. As Ruth Frankenberg has pointed out, ethnicity and race are two important aspects of identity that are often overlooked when the historical subjects are primarily white and Anglo-Saxon. "White people have too often viewed themselves as nonracial or racially neutral."[47] Sangster's study provides a useful model for probing whiteness. She explicitly addresses it as an aspect of identity by considering "the way in which women and men constructed their racial and cultural identity as 'natural' and preferable."[48] Sangster said her informants' silence in interviews on questions of race signaled to her that "Anglo-Celtic background

was 'naturalized' and taken for granted as the dominant 'normative' culture ... [which] meant an implicit acceptance of one's privilege and predominance."[49] David Roediger's American study of whiteness as a source of power manufactured by the working classes to come to terms with their own economic exploitation and fears of wage dependency is also relevant to the Medalta situation.[50] Roediger's analysis has pushed me to consider the extent to which white workers constructed an image of Aboriginals and Metis "as 'other' – as embodying a preindustrial erotic, careless lifestyle that white workers hated and longed for."[51] I also consider whether the creation of a white identity acted as an important limitation on worker activism.

It is worth noting that in the same way heterosexuality is often normalized in labour studies. Here an attempt is made to notice the effect of social structures and ideologies on those who were marginalized in society, those who did not conform to the prevailing pattern. Lesbians and gays as well as single women, widows, and the handicapped have often paid the price for policies and practices based on the most usual patterns. Studying the Medalta Potteries strike sheds light on a crucial formative era in Canadian labour history, and particularly Alberta labour history, that established the legal and ideological framework for labour relations that endures in the province today. A national wave of strikes that occurred during WWII had resulted in new federal legislation that introduced compulsory union recognition and the right to collective bargaining (see figure 1). Privy Council Order 1003 (hereafter PC 1003) ushered in a new era of labour policy in Canada. Much historical debate has centred on the legislation's effect on the balance of power within the Canadian labour relations system.[52] But there is agreement that PC 1003 gave organized labour an unprecedented legitimacy that shifted the mainstream labour movement away from militancy and toward a more conservative, conciliatory style of negotiating with capital that would help secure its new respectability.

Very little has been written about Alberta labour in the post-WWII period, particularly the earliest years when PC 1003, and Alberta labour legislation modelled on it, established the legal framework for labour relations in the province that persists today. The focus of Western Canadian and particularly Alberta's labour historiography has been a period of worker radicalism that peaked in 1919 with the Winnipeg General Strike. A key

Figure 11.B
Number of Strikes and Strikers, 1891–1950

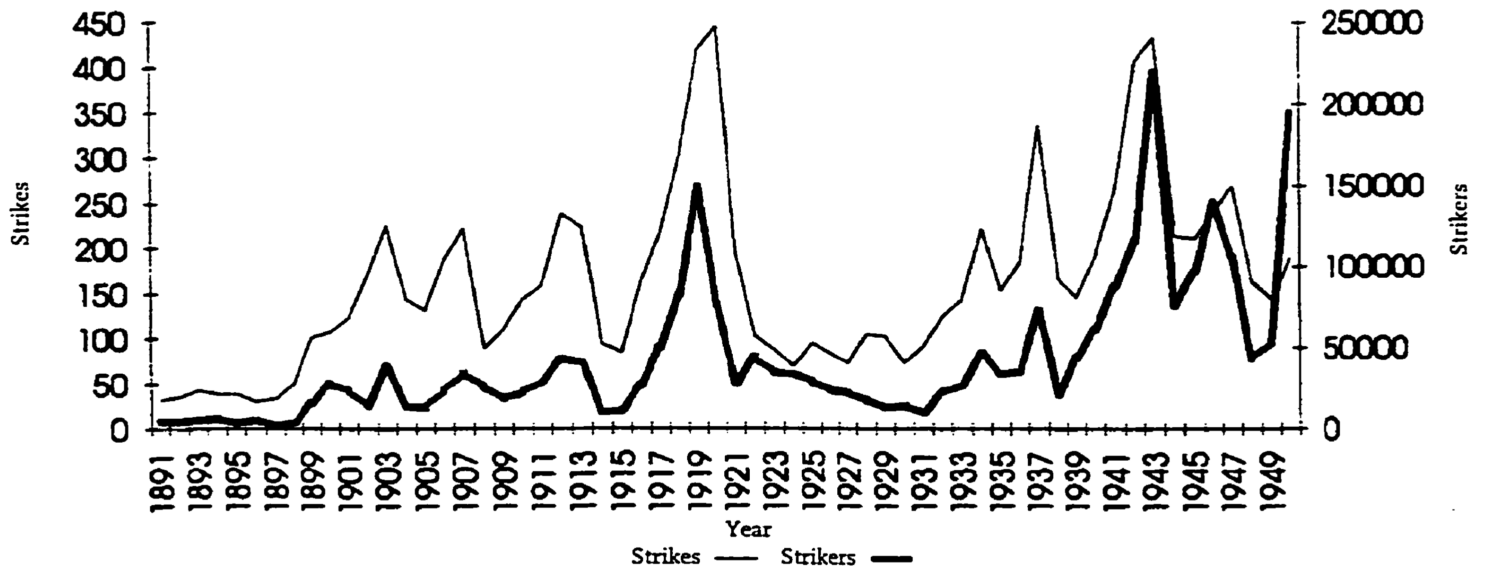

Figure 1: A wave of strikes occurred in Canada during WWII and immediately after the war ended.

Source: Gregory S. Kealey with Douglas Cruikshank, "Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950" in Workers and Canadian History (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 406.

debate within that literature concerns whether or not early Western labour radicalism was "exceptional" in Canada.[53] Due to the time period of this study, that debate is not directly relevant. The post-WWII era in Alberta was substantially different from the years immediately after WWI. Unlike in 1919, labour activism following WWII did not represent a significant threat to the existing political and economic system. More careful government planning and the progressiveness of new labour legislation mollified Canadian workers to some extent and helped prevent the large-scale unemployment and radicalism that disrupted the earlier postwar era.[54] A significant movement to overthrow the capitalist system, or even to achieve major change, never emerged. Instead, militancy was triggered in an essentially conservative Canadian labour force by fears about unemployment as well as the threat that labour would lose its wartime gains.[55] Also, the unrest in Alberta following WWII can be seen more clearly as part of a national phenomenon. It does not appear to have the strong regional aspect identified by David Bercuson in the post-WWI era that has been debated by historians.

A broader debate about the degree to which class conflict has shaped Alberta society, however, provides valuable context for the Medalta strike. The argument by John Richards and Larry Pratt that Alberta society has been much less homogenous than C.B. Macpherson claimed in the 1950s is reinforced by the story of the Medalta strike.[56]

Richards and Pratt point out the degree of conflict that is often overlooked between ranchers and farmers and urban and agrarian interests as well as between capital and labour throughout the province's history. Similarly, Roger Gibbins, who traces the dramatic social and economic transformation of the prairie provinces since WWII, argues that whatever degree of regional homogeneity existed earlier in the province's history has steadily been eroded since 1931. The region has become more like Central and Eastern Canada in terms of class differences.[57]

David Bright's study of class formation in early twentieth-century Calgary demonstrates the effectiveness of integrating culture, community, and to some extent gender, with class as categories of analysis.[58] Drawing on the census and an array of textual records relating to community associations and rituals, as well as more conventional union sources, Bright identifies culture as an important source of social cohesion that cut

across class lines inhibiting, rather than fostering, class conflict. His study confirms the importance of class in shaping the material conditions of workers' lives and points to some of the crucial factors mediating working class consciousness. His rather pessimistic assessment of class consciousness may have been modified or broadened had he used a less male-centred concept of "work" and "workers" by fully integrating unpaid domestic and reproductive labour into his analysis and more thoroughly addressing the impacts of gender and ethnicity. For example, a strike poem about fighting "a clean fight, Our manhood's at stake" is juxtaposed with a comment that this particular strike was "a moment in which divisions of ethnicity and gender appeared to dissolve in the common struggle against capitalism."[59] Bright substantiates this claim with the example of wives and mothers organizing a tag day to raise strike funds. Historical understanding could be enhanced by exploring how the construction of workers in exclusively masculinist terms affected working-class women's support. Moreover, the construction of working-class masculinity as "clean fighting" points to a multiplicity of masculinities, the analysis of which may also yield new insights.[60] As Bettina Bradbury has pointed out, male workers' "pride and paternalism seem inextricably combined and tied up with the perpetuation of [a gendered] division of labour," and, I would add, a gendered hierarchy of power.[61]

This study of the Medalta strike is focused on the struggle between a union and its employer using a culturalist analytic model that does not privilege class. Careful attention is paid to gender and culture as sources of identity that mediated class. As Patricia Roome has pointed out, in Alberta's labour historiography the lives of women workers are rarely examined.[62] Here women workers as well as men are central to the analysis. The impact of differences such as gender, marital status, life cycle, race, ethnicity, and a rural/urban experience are explored. At Medalta, strong patriarchal ideals strengthened social cohesion within the pottery, which enhanced class consciousness and limited division along gender lines. This only becomes visible when workers' lives are considered in terms of their place in the family economy and within the larger context of property inheritance patterns. A holistic approach to the strike is adopted to grasp the larger context within which individual workers' lives were shaped and choices were made. The result, I hope, is a richly textured

history of workers' lives and consciousness and new insights into this under-studied period in the evolution of Alberta's labour relations system.

The Medalta strike, which occurred only months after Alberta passed provincial labour legislation modelled on PC 1003, helped influence major modifications to the law soon after it was passed. To fully grasp the significance of these crucial years it is necessary to set them within the larger context of major economic and political change in the province. The sudden death of Social Credit Premier William Aberhart in 1943 brought Ernest Manning to power, a more conservative and pro-business Social Credit leader. Manning won a massive majority of seats in the 1944 provincial election on an anti-socialist platform, although he captured only 52 per cent of the vote. His anti-welfare-state stance, which emphasized self-reliance and free enterprise, bucked the post-war Keynesian consensus that was emerging across the country. The move to the political right became more pointed after the Leduc oil strike in February, 1947. The oil strike marked the beginning of a shift in the provincial economy from an agricultural base to oil, soon placing Alberta among the wealthiest provinces in the country.

Despite the importance of this transition era and the wave of labour unrest that erupted after the war, the most recent survey history of Alberta does not examine labour relations during this period.[63] The only survey text on Alberta labour history devotes only a few pages to the post-WWII era.[64] In his assessment of labour's relations with Social Credit, Warren Caragata accords the Medalta strike a major role, attributing "draconian" labour legislation passed early in 1948 to the long and bitter strike: "Social Credit was determined that such a situation would not again arise in a province that prided itself on maintaining industrial peace."[65]

Alvin Finkel's study of Social Credit also provides insight into the relationship between Alberta's labour movement and Social Credit during these years. Finkel highlights the role of Manning and key government members in cultivating an atmosphere of anti-communist hysteria as part of its offensive against labour. In addition, his analysis of the 1947-48 provincial Labour Acts provides valuable historical context within which to situate the Medalta strike.[66] Finkel attributes Social Credit's rapid and severe revision of the 1947 Labour Acts to a major and successful strike in the meatpacking industry that fall.

As Caragata's comments suggest, the Medalta strike, which occurred at the same time, also had an impact. The very phrases used by Mayor Rae in his vicious verbal attack on Medalta's union leaders echo the "conspiracy" rhetoric used by Manning and his public works minister in news accounts published only days before the Medicine Hat City Council meeting. Manning blamed labour unrest in the province on "those who deliberately are fomenting industrial unrest in furtherance of those philosophies which make capital of distress."[67] Three days later, in a manner similar to Rae, Public Works Minister W.A. Fallow exonerated rank-and-file union members, describing them as "helpless men and women browbeaten by a few."[68] The striking similarities between these published comments and Rae's verbal attack demonstrate that Social Credit's attempts to capitalize on and intensify anti-communist hysteria to undermine labour were remarkably effective.

Several academic works, as well as a recent popular history of the Mine Mill local at Trail, B.C., elaborate the effect of anti-communism within the labour movement, and particularly within unions with strong Communist leadership, which included Mine Mill. Irving Abella, writing nearly thirty years ago, blamed communist leadership within Mine Mill for the dramatic rise and fall of the union's fortunes during the 1940s.[69] Abella argued that this leadership, with few exceptions, placed Communist Party of Canada interests above those of the union and the members Communist union leaders served. Perhaps because he was writing during the Cold War, Abella's analysis seems to underestimate the impact of anti-communist sentiment at the time, although he does acknowledge the damage caused by the withdrawal of support and assistance by other unions.

Bryan Palmer provides a more balanced view in that he makes explicit the harm caused by postwar anti-communism within the Canadian labour movement.[70] Palmer elaborates the crucial role in the labour movement of Communists whose organizational skills, energy and commitment attracted the respect of many rank-and-file workers. Pointing to scholarship that dichotomizes "'a heroic democratic socialism' against the 'dark forces' of communism," Palmer casts doubt on evidence used to suggest that Communist union leaders disregarded workers' needs.[71] Similarly, in their study of Cold War Canada, Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse were unable to find evidence to justify the virulence of attacks on communist labour organizers in the postwar era.[72]

Former Mine Mill organizer Al King provides an irreverent and impressionistic account of how anti-communism affected Mine Mill's local in Trail, BC during this period.[73] King refuted accusations of Soviet sympathizing that were made when international events triggered intense hostility toward the union.

> Sure, a few of us were Communists. It was the Communists who played a vital role in creating some of the same unions who were now pointing fingers ... But we weren't organizing for Mother Russia, as some people insisted. We were organizing because we believed in the dignity of workers and their right, our right, to a fair deal.[74]

There are only glimpses of the internal workings of Mine Mill's Medicine Hat local in sources on the Medalta strike. The histories by Abella, Palmer, and King highlight important leadership and process issues about Mine Mill to provide a context for assessing those sources.

Julie Guard's work on the role of gender within the postwar union movement, helps situate the discourse and attitudes of Medalta's union leadership.[75] In particular, it sheds light on the construction of working-class femininity and on competing constructions of masculinity within the union movement. A number of studies examine the efforts of government, business, and unions to reinscribe patriarchal gender roles after the war.[76] They have been used to elaborate the material circumstances and cultural ideologies that created different choices for male and female workers. There is an ongoing debate about the extent to which these factors determined women's actual behaviour that provides a context for evaluating the extent to which gender roles were reinforced or challenged by Medalta workers.[77]

Although there are several popular studies of Medicine Hat and the surrounding region, there is very little analysis of the situation of labour in the area.[78] David C. Jones' popular yet scholarly book, <u>Empire of Dust</u>, makes an important contribution to this study by providing insight into the drought and economic devastation of the Medicine Hat region during the interwar years. This contextual information helps to explain why Medicine Hat

was a low-wage area relative to other major cities in the province.[79] Jones chronicles the "frothy boosterism, lightning expansion and utter miscalculation – of drought, destitution, and depopulation" that occurred in the decades before 1947.[80] The economic disaster that resulted from long years of drought helped propel the decline of agriculture in the area. The result was a constantly replenishing pool of farm workers, often the daughters of area farm families, to fill jobs in the potteries and other Medicine Hat industries and services.

This case study of a 1947 strike in Medicine Hat provides a complex picture of local workers, the community, and the nature of working class militancy during a period of significant labour unrest in the province. Its focus on the intersection of class and gender helps reveal the role played by constructions of gender, particularly working-class masculinity and femininity, at an important juncture in the ongoing struggle between capital and labour. In this way the Medalta strike helps expand historical understanding of the shifting balance of power among workers, their employers, and the state in Alberta.

Chapter Two elaborates the economic, political, and social context of the decades leading up to the strike to help establish the motivation and attitude of major stakeholders at the outset of the strike. Chapter Three provides an analysis of the strike events, focusing on the discrepancy between contemporary accounts that attribute the strike to "sinister" union leadership and evidence of substantial grassroots support. An important element of this analysis is a consideration of worker interpretations of the strike conveyed through oral histories recorded fifty-three years later. Chapter Four assesses the significance of the union's survival during the post-strike period before the company went bankrupt in 1954. Finally, a silence and implicit regret that surrounds the strike for some workers today is examined to find new historical meanings.

NOTES

[1] Medicine Hat Mayor William Rae's remarks to City Council October 20, 1947. City Council Minutes, October 20, 1947, M96.6, Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery Archives (MHM).

[2] Alvin Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 110.

[3] Anne Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 1912-1990: A Study in Western Economic Diversification (Hull, Quebec: The Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2001), 127.

[4] The Medicine Hat News, October 11, 1947.

[5] Medicine Hat Police Arrest Records, October 11, 1947, 452-453, M93.1.5, MHM.

[6] Medicine Hat City Council Minutes, October 20, 1947, M96.6, MHM.

[7] The Medicine Hat News, November 7, 1947.

[8] Dorothy Beierbach interview December 14, 2000.

[9] The Medicine Hat News, December , 1947.

[10] Finkel, Chapter Five: "Hot Economy, Cold War," in The Social Credit Phenomenon, 98-140; Warren Caragata, Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 197), 140-41.

[11] There were no strikes in 1944, there was one in 1945, and there were three short work stoppages in 1946. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 109.

[12] The city's industries included flour mills, a porcelain plant, brick yards, warehouses, a glass factory, Canadian Pacific Railway workers (who were among the first organized workers in the province), green houses and a booming construction industry, as well as several pottery factories. "Medicine Hat Becomes Unionized," undated CCL circular, approximately June, 1947, University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections and University Archives (UBC) Mine Mill 127/1-1a.

[13] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 119.

[14] The word "militant" is used throughout this study to indicate behaviour ranging from assertiveness to aggression and, at times, combativeness. It signals workers' willingness to incur employer hostility by pressing for wage and workplace concessions. In particular militancy indicates a rejection of paternalistic relations between workers and their employer. Militancy does not imply radicalism, which is the desire to change fundamentally or to overthrow the existing political and economic system.

[15] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry; Marylu Antonelli and Jack Forbes provide some factual and impressionistic detail about labour relations in Pottery in Alberta: The Long Tradition, (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1978), but they do not include footnotes and make only passing reference to the strike.

[16] See Appendix B for detail on methodology.

[17] Most analyses of Alberta labour history during this period have focused on economic, political and institutional change, for example, Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, Caragata, Alberta Labour: A

Heritage Untold, and, to a lesser extent, Hayward, whose study The Alberta Pottery Industry, includes oral histories with rank-and-file workers.

[18] "History and Progress of the Medalta Stoneware Ltd., Medicine Hat, Alberta," Appendix C in Jack Forbes, "Manufacturing Process History of the Medalta Potteries National and Provincial Historic Site 1912-1954," unpublished manuscript, Parks Canada, 2000.

[19] Unemployment Insurance Commission Report on Industrial Dispute, J.W. McLane, August 22, 1947, National Archives of Canada (NAC), Department of Labour Record Group 27 (RG27), Vol. 456, Strike 154.

[20] Marc Stern observed that the percentage of women workers nearly doubled in Trenton, New Jersey with the growth of decoration in the pottery industry. The number of women rose from less than 10 per cent to 18 per cent of the workforce. In the nineteenth century women workers at Trenton earned only 40 per cent of the male wage. Marc Jeffrey Stern, The Pottery Industry of Trenton: A Skilled Trade in Transition 1850-1929 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 41-43.

[21] Among those works consulted are: William C. Gates Jr. The City of Hills and Kilns: Life and Work in East Liverpool, Ohio (East Liverpool, Ohio: The East Liverpool Historical Society, 1984); Don Anthony Shotliff "The History of the Labor Movement in the American Pottery Industry: The National Brotherhood of Operative Potters-International Brotherhood of Operative Potters, 1890-1970," Ph.D. Dissertation, Kent State University, 1977; P. W. Gay and R. L. Smyth, The British Pottery Industry (London: Butterworths, 1974); David A. McCabe, National Collective Bargaining in the Pottery Industry (Baltimore and London: Oxford University Press, 1932).

[22] Jacqueline Sarsby, "Sexual Segregation in the Pottery Industry," Feminist Review, 21 (November 1985): 67-93.

[23] Among the earliest examples of the "new" social history are E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class which was first published in 1963 (London: Penguin Books, 1991), and Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," American Historical Review, Vol. 78, No. 3 (June 1974): 531-588.

[24] Joan Wallach Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 88.
[25] Ibid., 42.

[26] Two examples of the insights to be gained by integrating class, gender and race into an analysis include Mrinalini Sinha's book Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), and Todd McCallum's article "'Not a Sex Question'? The One Big Union and the Politics of Radical Manhood," Labour/Le Travail, 42 (Fall 1998): 15-54.

[27] Joy Parr, The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Joan Sangster, Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1995).

[28] Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell and Carol Wolkowitz, A Concise Glossary of Feminist Theory (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1997), 170.

[29] Parr, Gender of Breadwinners, 8.

[30] Nancy F. Cott argues forcefully for the inclusion of both genders in historical studies for these reasons. "On Men's History and Women's History," in Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in

Victorian America, eds. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). 206.

[31] Sangster, Earning Respect, 4.

[32] Ibid., 5.

[33] Ibid., 250.

[34] Parr, Gender of Breadwinners, 231. By Gramscian I refer to Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who used the concept of hegemony to explain how a small elite in a capitalist society imposes its ideology on the majority through the arts and the media rather than using force. Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, (Longon: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

[35] Sangster, 163.

[36] Ibid., 251.

[37] Ibid., 5-6.

[38] Ibid., 135.

[39] Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy M. Forestell, "Introduction," Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

[40] Ibid., 1.

[41] Ibid., 224, footnote 4.

[42] Joy Parr, and Mark Rosenfeld, eds., Gender and History in Canada (Toronto: Copp Clark Ltd., 1996), 2.

[43] Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), 107-8.

[44] Sangster, Earning Respect, 8.

[45] Canadian examples include: Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," Labour/Le Travail, 19 (Spring 1987) and Working Families: Age, Gender and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1993). American examples include Mary H. Blewett, Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry 1780-1910 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), and Elizabeth Jameson, All That Glitters: Class, Confict, and Community in Cripple Creek (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

[46] Howard and Tamara Palmer's various books are a helpful resource for exploring issues around ethnicity and race in Alberta. See Land of the Second Chance: A History of Ethnic Groups in Southern Alberta (Lethbridge: The Lethbridge Herald, 1972); Patterns of Prejudice: A History of Nativism in Alberta (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982); Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985).

[47] Ruth Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters, The Social Construction of Whiteness (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.

[48] Sangster, Earning Respect, 7.
[49] Ibid., 114.

[50] David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (New York: Verso, 1991), 14.

[51] Ibid., 14.

[52] See Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips and Jesse Vorst, eds., Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003 (Winnipeg/Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995); Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System during World War Two," Labour/Le Travail (1978), 175-196; Finkel, "The Cold War, Alberta Labour, and the Social Credit Regime," Labour/Le Travail, 21 (Spring 1988), 123-152; Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993); Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948 (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2001); Palmer, Working Class Experience.

[53] David Bercuson's view that Western workers were more radical than those in the East because of frontier conditions, which created class and social polarization, has been rejected by a number of labour historians who argue that this dichotomous analytic model obscures historical understanding. Jeremy Mouat argues convincingly that the notion of Western exceptionalism ignores significant moderate elements within organized labour and the role of sympathetic politicians. David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919, Canadian Historical Review, 58 2 (June 1977): 154-175; Jeremy Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: B.C.'s Hardrock Miners 1895-1903," Canadian Historical Review, 71 3 (1990), 317-345. See also Glenn Makahonuk, "Class Conflict in a Prairie City: The Saskatoon Working-Class Response to Prairie Capitalism," Labour/Le Travail, 19 (Spring 1987): 89-124; Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," Labour/Le Travail, 13 (Spring 1984): 11-44; Bryan D. Palmer and Craig Heron, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-1914," Canadian Historical Review, 58 (1977): 423-58.

[54] Jonathan F. Vance, "Aftermath: Home from War – 1945 vs. 1918," The Beaver, 80:5 (October/November 2000), 22-28.

[55] Bryan Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 280.

[56] John Richards and Larry Pratt, Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), 149-153; C.B. Macpherson, Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953).

[57] Roger Gibbins, "Regionalism in Decline: 1940 to the Present," in Riel to Reform: A History of Protest in Western Canada ed. George Melnyk, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1992), 215-223.
[58] David Bright, The Limits of Labour: Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Calgary, 1883-1929 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998).

[59] Ibid., 157-8.

[60] For a recent example of such an analysis see Todd McCallum, "'Not a Sex Question'? The One Big Union and the Politics of Radical Manhood," Labour/Le Travail, 42 (Fall 1998).

[61] Bradbury, "Women's History and Working Class History," Labour/Le Travail, 19 (Spring 1987), 36.

[62] Patricia Roome, "Remembering Together: Reclaiming Alberta Women's Past," in Standing on New Ground: Women in Alberta, eds. Catherine Cavanaugh and Randi Warne (Edmonton: The University of

Alberta Press, 1993), 188. Roome points out that the experiences of women workers in Alberta has rarely been studied, which has left a serious imbalance in the historiography of labour in the province.

[63] Howard Palmer with Tamara Palmer, Alberta: A New History, (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990).

[64] Caragata, Alberta Labour.

[65] Ibid., 141.

[66] Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon. See Chapter 5: "A Hot Economy and a Cold War," 99-140.

[67] Manning's comments to a public gathering were published in the Edmonton Bulletin, October 15, 1947, six days before Rae attacked the union leaders representing Medalta workers. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 109.

[68] Fallow's remarks were published in the People's Weekly, October 18, 1947. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 110.

[69] Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour, the CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

[70] Palmer, Working Class Experience, 291-92.

[71] Ibid., 290-1.

[72] Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

[73] Al King, with Kate Braid, Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local (Vancouver: Kingbird Publishing, 1998).

[74] Ibid., 291.

[75] Julie Guard, "Womanly Innocence and Manly Self-Respect: Gendered Challenges to Labour's Postwar Compromise," in Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003, eds., Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, Jesse Vorst (Winnipeg/Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 119-138 and "The 'Woman Question' in Canadian Unionism: Women in the UE, 1930s to 1960s," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto (OISE), 1994.

[76] Ruth Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All:" The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986) and "Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada, 1934-1940," Labour/Le Travail 25 (Spring 1990), 77-103; Ann Porter, "Women and Income Security in the Postwar Period: The Case of Unemployment Insurance, 1945-1962" in Wendy Mitchinson, Paula Bourne, Alison Prentice, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light and Naomi Black, eds., Canadian Women: A Reader (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 322-352; Anne Forrest "Securing the Male Breadwinner: A Feminist Interpretation of PC 1003", in Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003 eds. Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, Jesse Vorst, (Winnipeg/Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 139-162; Ruth Milkman, Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

[77] Jeff Keshen, "Revisiting Canada's Civilian Women During World War II," Histoire sociale/Social History 30 (1997): 239-266; Veronica Strong-Boag, The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English

Canada, 1919-1939 (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1988): Joanne Meyerowitz, Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1988).

[78] Ed Gould, All Hell for a Basement, (Medicine Hat, Alberta: City of Medicine Hat, 1983); David C. Jones, L. J. Roy Wilson, and Donny White, The Weather Factory: A Pictorial History of Medicine Hat, (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairies Books, 1988). These two books provide an overview of major events, people and businesses in Medicine Hat. They also give reveal aspects of the culture and community. But neither book gives a sense of workers' lives or the city's labour activism.

[79] David C. Jones, Empire of Dust, (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1987).

[80] Ibid., 3.

CHAPTER TWO

"The tide turned and people realized that they are human, they aren't cattle:"[1] The Emergence and Transformation of an Industrial Workforce

Crossing the bald prairie, travellers to Medicine Hat are often surprised by the sudden change in topography as they descend the city's roughly hewn coulees to a treed and grassy river valley. The steeply-sloping hillsides protect against strong winds that sweep the area, allowing mature trees and shrubs to thrive at the confluence of the city's three rivers. This veritable "oasis" in the starkly beautiful prairie desert has long been a refuge to those who have peopled the Medicine Hat region.[2] Such geography is a fitting metaphor for the city's role in the transition from agriculture to industrial work during the first half of the twentieth century.

Medicine Hat became an important industrial centre in the West when the discovery of cheap natural gas and a flood of homesteaders into the area combined with the CPR line to make it a vital distribution centre for crops and industrial goods.[3] For thousands of homesteading families whipped by the fierce winds of drought and economic crisis in the '20s and '30s, Medicine Hat was their financial salvation. In many families more than one family member was able to secure a cash-paying job in the city's industries and services to eke out a living during the desperately lean years. The experience of former Medalta Potteries worker Christine Pocsik's family captures the symbiotic relationship between farm families and Medicine Hat during the early decades of the century: "[Dad] worked for the CPR , and my mother maintained things, she'd mainly stay on the farm until it was time to take the crop off and then he'd come back and then go again. I mean this is how we got by in those really bad days."[4] Coming off the farm with a girlfriend as teenagers in the 1940s to find work, Christine Pocsik's reaction to the city was typical: "Of course we came to Medicine Hat and this was like – this wasn't a desert, this was like a green valley, lush and beautiful and – we never did go back, we stayed."[5]

Despite her decision not to return to the farm, Pocsik's life, like the lives of many others who worked in Medicine Hat, was shaped in profound ways by the desert-like terrain

extending roughly 200 kilometres outside the city. During the interwar years a drought that was more intense and extensive there than anywhere else in the West combined with low wheat prices to depress the entire agriculture-dependent region economically.[6] Farmers' reliance on cash infusions from paid work in the city was not evenly matched by local industry's need for workers. As a result, well before the 1930s the agricultural crisis created a labour surplus that gave employers a commanding advantage over workers in the area. The instability of the factory's labour needs due to market-driven and seasonal fluctuations, forced workers to rely on supplementary forms of income. In this respect the pottery's operation was typical of an early stage of industrialization.[7] These economic circumstances help explain why in 1947 Medicine Hat workers remained among the lowest paid workers in the province.[8]

This chapter demonstrates the intimate relationship between agricultural crisis in the region around Medicine Hat and the situation of workers in the city, to establish the context within which grassroots support for labour activism emerged in 1947. It also examines how gender, culture, community and material circumstances influenced worker support for labour activism. Finally, the larger social, political, and economic context of the immediate postwar era is sketched to establish the perspective of important stakeholders in the strike, including the union, Medalta Potteries, and the state in its various manifestations. This context helps explain why the immediate postwar years were such a crucial transition period for organized labour in Alberta.

The first incarnation of Medalta Potteries was established in 1912 during a remarkable burst of economic growth that dominated Medicine Hat in the decade leading up to WWI. Agriculture emerged as the major industry after 1902 when five successive years of significant rainfall and good crops convinced many people of the area's farming potential. Deceived by this "freak" of nature and by the promotional efforts of the Canadian government, which was eager to settle the region, a flood of homesteaders arrived hoping to cash in on what was billed as "The Last Best" land bonanza in the West.[9] Despite many warnings about the drybelt area around Medicine Hat, land sales fuelled a remarkable explosion of population and industrial growth. The city expanded from 1,500 residents in 1901 to 12,000 in 1911.[10] Businesses as varied as flour mills, a foundry, and a

linseed oil company burst onto the scene producing a wide range of products ranging from lime, crayons and building blocks, to brick and tile, pottery and cylinders.[11] At the peak of the city's boom in 1913 it had 190 businesses, eight chartered banks, eight public schools, fourteen churches, twenty natural gas wells, twenty-five miles of graded streets and a population of 15,000.[12]

In 1912-13, at the peak of the economic boom, John McIntyre, an American from Spokane, Washington, built the first pottery factory in Medicine Hat, which became Medalta Potteries. McIntyre was attracted by the city's offer of tax, land price, and utility rate concessions that seemed to make it economical to manufacture pottery from clay imported from Spokane.[13] Although McIntyre's enterprise failed about a year after startup, the abandoned building and equipment were purchased in 1916 by three local businessmen who established Medalta Stoneware Ltd.[14] The new owners included Charles Pratt, who moved to Medicine Hat from Ontario during the city's boom years, William A. Creer, who managed the kilns, and Ulysses Grant, a financial partner originally from North Dakota who did not play an active role in the venture. As Anne Hayward has pointed out, the new pottery company benefited from the lucrative business terms McIntyre secured, but avoided his mistake by purchasing a finer grade of clay nearby in Eastend, Saskatchewan.[15] Medalta Stoneware Ltd. also emerged as the local economy went into decline, which gave its labour-intensive operation the advantage of a large pool of unskilled workers.

The economic bubble began to burst throughout the province in 1914. A drop in wheat prices, completion of two major railways, and declining property values combined to create growing unemployment.[16] In Medicine Hat wartime enlistments, war contracts at the local foundry, and bumper crops in 1915 and 1916 provided only a temporary reprieve.[17] The effect of economic decline was intensified in southeastern Alberta by the realities of an extreme climate. Collapse of the area's agricultural economy as drought returned in 1917 triggered the wholesale abandonment of farms by many homesteaders. Entire communities disappeared. Those that endured were burdened with the debt of overbuilt utilities, roads, schools, and churches that the remaining populace could not sustain. In Medicine Hat the market for locally manufactured products shrank and many companies closed their doors.[18]

Throughout the inter-war period the position of labour in Medicine Hat was weakened by devastation of the agriculture industry, which dominated the region. Unlike the rest of the country, in the drybelt region the Depression began right after WWI. Between 1921 and 1926 more than half of the people in nearly a quarter of southeastern Alberta's townships abandoned their farms or rural homes.[19] Increasing mechanization on the farms that remained reduced the demand for farm labour by the late 1920s.[20]

The labour surplus created by this intensifying economic crisis was essential to Medalta's financial success. It kept labour costs, which were a major portion of operating expenses, at a minimum. Although lack of experienced potters in the Medicine Hat area forced the owners to import a handful of craftsmen from the United States, England, and Germany, the majority of its workers were unskilled local men and women trained on the job. From a workforce of twelve men in 1916, the factory workforce had expanded to approximately 100 in the mid 1920s, roughly 10 per cent of whom were women.[21] The factory they occupied was a long, low brick building with only a clerestory to bring natural light into the otherwise dark interior environment.[22] It consisted of six separate but adjoining rooms dedicated to different stages of the manufacturing process. Raw clay entered the factory at the east end of the building and moved through the various work stations to exit the building as finished ware at the west end near the railway spurs.[23]

The main stages of the manufacturing process were clay preparation, jiggering or slip casting to produce the pottery pieces, decorating, glazing, firing, and finally, checking and packing the finished ware for shipping. Many of these stages involved heavy lifting and constant exposure to temperature extremes and choking dust. During preparation of the clay, despite the use of machinery, "workers had to lift and manipulate heavy materials and deal with clay dust and dampness."[24] Jiggering and slip casting were two methods of creating pottery pieces that required very different skill levels. Slip casting, which involved filling plaster moulds with clay to create asymmetrical handled pieces or variegated ware like vases and lamp bases, could be performed by semi-skilled workers. In comparison a jiggerman required "skill, speed and, dexterity."[25] Jiggering involved the deft use of a steel template tool to shape clay placed in a mould on a revolving wheel. Judicious use of water ensured that the ware didn't crack or have a rough finish.[26] Jiggering was considered an

exclusively male position, although women performed the work during WWII and operated semi-automatic jiggering machines after they were introduced in the 1940s.

Women predominated in the role of trimming and sponging the shaped pieces to remove imperfections. They also usually performed the job of attaching handles and spouts to the cups and teapots because their "small and quick hands" were said to make them more adept than men.[27] The decorating department was staffed exclusively by women, apart from the supervisor, Tom Hulme, and the foreman. Decoration involved applying decals, stencils and stamps to the pottery pieces or hand-painting "banding" around the edge. This department was quiet and relatively free of heat and dust compared to most areas of the factory, and the supervisor was particularly well liked.[28] Once it was decorated, the pottery was glazed by male and female workers who dipped the ware in a vat or sprayed it. Gloves were not used and the glaze contained lead, although the lead content was reduced to "almost harmless" by 1947, according to a government official.[29]

After the glazed ware was dry it was fired in the kilns, a process that took several days. Women tended to perform the job of pinning smaller ware into saggers, which were supports used to protect the pottery from damage in the kiln, because their hands were smaller. The job involved heavy lifting because the saggers were made of concrete. Some of the manual labour involved in loading and unloading the original beehive-shaped kilns was reduced in the 1940s when a tunnel kiln was built with tracks through it so that carts of ware could be transported slowly through the kiln for firing. Men held all positions related to technical operation of the kilns. A final stage of the process involved checking and packing the finished pottery. Men tended to perform the work of constructing crates and women tended to be checkers and both men and women packed the goods in straw for shipping.[30]

Gender segregation had long been a prominent feature of factory work in Canada as a means of ensuring that women did not threaten male jobs.[31] At Medalta the jobs to which men were given exclusive access involved technical skill, the supervision of men, or were especially heavy or dirty. Particular notions about masculinity were tied up in aspects of these jobs. Many positions required heavy manual labour that was deemed most appropriate for men. Heavy lifting, particularly around the kilns, where it was very hot, was

considered inappropriate for women by some. Engelina Kessler said during the war "there were some girls that worked in the kiln. That should have been left for the men, and yet they put women on that job . . . those saggers, they were heavy. I don't think girls should have been lifting those. Yeah, I thought that was asking a lot of staff." But Kessler said the women performed the work capably.[32]

The jiggerman's job at the wheel required as many as three assistants, which conveyed a degree of status. The jiggerman was assisted by a "batter" who hurled the portion of clay down onto the mould to expel air from it, the "mould runner," who carried moulds to and from the drying area, and a trimmer, who smoothed the completed pieces. These positions were filled by women and boys.[33] The sense of male pride derived from this hierarchical relationship that subordinated women is captured by former jiggerman Basil Leismeister's comment: "I was the only boy, or man, working with these ladies. When I got a hangover in the morning all they did is give me coffee in the morning. They looked after me and I enjoyed that."[34] There was also a competitiveness among jiggermen that has been ascribed to their masculinity. As Forbes and Antonelli have explained, "The jiggers were a hot-headed bunch and it was common to see two jigger wheels standing empty while their occupants stepped out back to indulge in a fist fight. Their steam uncorked, the men would return to their wheels and resume the pace."[35]

In addition to employers assuming women were more capable of deft hand work, many women expressed a preference for jobs that conformed to expectations about femininity. Bertha Riegel, who worked as a trimmer for a jiggering team, said she never aspired to the more skilled position of machine operator because "it was bad enough working with dry clay and clay water without working in the wet clay." Instead, she said most women tried to get into the packing, glazing, or other work that "wasn't as dirty as working with clay," which was hard on your hands.[36] The gender segregation that resulted from the influence of cultural expectations affirmed a gender hierarchy in the workplace and protected male jobs.

By 1926 Medalta had captured a commanding share of the national market for stoneware, primarily stoneware bottles and the company's mainstay, functional crockery. An abundance of casual labour was an essential ingredient of their success in Medicine Hat.

After struggling financially for the first few years the company was able to pay a 5 per cent dividend in 1925 on a capital investment of $150,000. The company's profits that year were $8,175.97.[37] Despite their apparently precarious financial start the company's three owner-operators assigned themselves a significant increase in their monthly salary two years after they started the business.[38]

During this period when the company was turning a profit, most of the country was enjoying a temporary burst of prosperity that fuelled a surge of labour militancy.[39] But in Medicine Hat Medalta Potteries found that workers were easily replaced and government wage and work condition regulations could be circumvented. When notified by the government in 1926 that more than the allowed 25 per cent of female workers were being paid the "apprenticeship" or beginner rate, Medalta's key owner-manager, Charles Pratt went on the offensive.[40]

> It is not our intention to pay experienced wages to inexperienced girls ... if the Department insist [*sic*] these girls are not allowed to work at their production value the only thing that we can do is to give them their cheques and dismiss them. Their [*sic*] are dozens of girls anxious to work in our plant as the working conditions are good and they are always treated with consideration.[41]

Pratt stated that his "only other alternative" was to implement a piecework system and pay the "girls ... according to their production."[42]

In 1938 under different ownership and management Medalta again violated the 25 per cent rule for female workers. The company's attitude remained much the same. Head office in Calgary directed local plant superintendent Ed Phillipson to lay off one of two females being paid the apprenticeship rate and to rehire a more experienced employee who had recently been laid off at the full rate. E.A. Stone reasoned that the layoff "would be more beneficial" to the company: "We see no reason for paying either one of these girls $10 a week if they are not as efficient as one of the girls you have laid off at $12.50 a week."[43] There was no consideration of the disruption to employees' lives when workers were discharged and rehired at the company's whim. This strictly bottom-line perspective

did not take into account the needs of employees, evidence of their loyalty to the company, or seniority. In both of these cases the provincial government exempted Medalta from adhering strictly to the minimum wage regulation. The company was allowed to pay the workers affected the lower rate until the end of the year in the case of the 1926 incident, and "until we heard different from him" in 1938.[44] Every effort was made to minimize wages for male workers as well. When a jiggerman's helper who had worked at the pottery for a number of years switched to regular day work, the company took advantage of the fact he had been employed by the jiggerman, not Medalta, and paid him the apprenticeship rate.[45]

Medalta developed inventive ways to oppose and circumvent wage increases as government regulation during the interwar years increased to ensure workers were paid an adequate wage. In 1926 Pratt convinced his employees to sign a petition against a government initiative to reduce the legislated work week from fifty-four hours to forty-eight by arguing that it would force their wages down.[46] Twelve years later E.A. Stone tried to convince female employees to accept a 5 per cent wage reduction when a new minimum wage regulation was implemented mandating a rate of thirty cents an hour for women who worked less than a six-day work week. The maximum number of hours women could legally work in 1938 was forty-eight hours a week. Since Medalta's female employees were working forty-four hours in a five-and-a-half-day work week the new legislation meant women workers should have been paid thirty cents an hour or $13.20 per week. Instead, Stone argued that the company was justified in paying them the cheaper weekly rate of $12.50 because "according to the Governments [*sic*] instructions we can work them for six full days and still only have to pay $12.50."[47] The government's tendency to accommodate Medalta when regulations were violated meant workers did not receive the protection intended by provincial minimum wage legislation.[48]

In general, minimum wage regulations, which were passed to protect women workers, had the opposite effect. Alberta was the first province to pass a minimum wage law in 1917 as part of a middle-class social reform movement intended to ensure working women could support themselves in "decency," if not comfort. Similar laws for men were not passed until the mid-1930s. Significantly, women working in agriculture, domestic

service, teaching, nursing and clerical work were exempted from the minimum wage regulations, which ensured that they applied only to a minority of women. For women who were subject to the minimum wage regulation it often became the most they could earn.[49] A 1946 wage survey conducted by the Alberta government to assess the impact on employers of an increase in the minimum wage revealed that a far larger proportion of women workers than men earned an amount at or around the minimum wage. Consequently the report's author warned government officials that:

> Careful study [of the report's results] should be made before the Board increases the basic rate for females to any great extent. The large percentages of employees who would be immediately affected is in sharp contrast to the Male picture. It would appear that the basic minimum wage established for female employees tends to become the going or fair wage and that female employees are more dependent on Government Regulations for their income level than are males. Under normal conditions the supply of female labour exceeds the demand and this has an adverse affect [*sic*] on the payment of above minimum rates."[50]

The advantage a surplus of male and female labour afforded Medicine Hat employers also resulted in harsh work conditions within the pottery. No workers had job security and the frequency of layoffs meant few workers were employed most of the year.[51] Split shifts operated without a shift differential.[52] When sales orders were strong a regular work week was the maximum set by law – fifty-four hours in the early years and forty-eight hours until the 1950s. Government inspectors found that work conditions at the factory did not meet legislated standards; however, the company passed inspection.[53] There was no lunchroom (although one was required by law) so at mid-day workers simply downed their tools and ate at their work station or outside behind the factory during the summer months. The factory was hot in the summer, cold in the winter and was dirty with choking clay dust all year in many areas. Matilda Schlenker, who was one of the first women to work at Medalta in the mid-1920s, remembered being choked by the dust and fumes in the factory. Grateful for the job, she continued to work there for years even

though the environment made her sick and at one point she was unable to work for five years.[54] Both male and female workers developed back problems that they later attributed in part to the extraordinary lifting required at the factory.[55]

Management tended to be suspicious and intolerant when workers sought compensation for workplace injuries. In 1926 a Workmen's Compensation Board officer sided with a worker who had broken both wrists when Charles Pratt pressed the man to return to work early because he had been seen gardening in his yard.[56] In correspondence exchanges with the Workmen's Compensation Board (WCB) Pratt blamed workers for carelessness or openly accused his employees of exaggerating their injuries, but did not acknowledge any negligence or inadequacy on the part of the company.[57]

The high proportion of cheap "inexperienced" female workers employed suggests that, Pratt's complaints notwithstanding, the unskilled factory work was learned quickly and a high turnover of workers did little to disrupt production.[58] The higher incidence of minimum wage violations in the case of female workers, judging by the available records, also suggests that women were exploited more often than men.[59] This gender difference may be attributed to the greater job opportunities, wages, and promotions available to men at this time. In interviews women who worked at Medalta emphasized that work at the pottery was considered a good job for women compared to waitressing and domestic work, which were the main forms of employment available to women who lacked high school education. As Hannah Osborne explained, "At that time it was a job as good as you could get."[60]

Traditional property inheritance patterns that favoured the sons of farmers, together with the assumption that women's work on the farm was limited to domestic work and farm chores such as milking and feeding the chickens, meant that the daughters of farm families represented a large proportion of those seeking paid work in the city. As Christine Pocsik explained, it was her brother who began running the farm when her father left periodically to take paid work, "because I was a girl I wasn't mechanical wise or anything. I couldn't go out and fix things if they broke down."[61] Former Medalta worker Lloyd Brosnikoff recalled working on a threshing crew in the Medicine Hat area during the 1940s for a Ukrainian farmer who had six children, four of whom were daughters:

> The boys were out helping, the daughters stayed and helped Mom cook, milked the cows, did the chores while the men were out working. They weren't allowed to – well I off and asked my boss that, I said, 'How come you don't have any women on this crew?' and he said, 'Well they couldn't stand it,' and I said, 'Well there's some pretty big girls out there.' They were hefty farm girls, you know.[62]

Another former pottery worker explained that she could have worked on her father's farm but the family needed the cash she could earn more than her labour. Engelina Kessler came from a family of thirteen children and the family farm was not very big: "There was always work [on the farm] but we had to earn some money because it was difficult."[63]

These gendered cultural expectations have been traced to the industrial revolution when production moved from the home to the factory, making it more difficult and less acceptable for married, middle-class women to work for wages outside the home. This led to the middle-class ideal of a male family wage and a definition of "workers" as exclusively male and "work" as labour performed for a wage in the public sphere.[64] Single working class girls often became the earliest factory workers because of the need to supplement their family's farm income. These economic and cultural imperatives help explain why many single young women and fathers, but few married women, worked at the Medalta factory.[65]

Throughout the twentieth century the number of women in the workforce rose steadily in Canada but the percentage of married women working for wages rose dramatically, particularly after 1941. In the 1920s, when approximately 17 per cent of women worked for wages, most of the women working were young and single.[66] Working women were perceived to be earning only "pin money," because they were assumed to be dependent on their family or a husband. It was assumed that men were family breadwinners. Instead, increasing numbers of married working-class women were being drawn into the workforce, particularly after WWII, to provide income that was essential to their family.[67] The demographic shift has been attributed to a younger average age at marriage, a growing acceptance of young married women working, (provided they did not

have children), and more prolonged schooling for adolescents.[68] This reality, which threatened the definition of men as breadwinners, created tensions about women's paid labour within the working class. Nevertheless the belief that women should not threaten men's jobs and that they were not entitled to the same wage persisted, together with cultural stereotypes about inherent differences between male and female workers that reinforced extensive job segregation.[69]

An important element of this construction was the fact Medalta pottery workers were almost exclusively white. An essential aspect of white masculinity and femininity in the Canadian West was their construction in opposition to Aboriginal masculinity and femininity. As Sarah Carter has demonstrated, beginning in the late nineteenth century White women were viewed as frail and vulnerable while Aboriginal women were perceived to be dangerous and violent.[70] In an interview the tall and strong build of one of the few Metis women who worked at the pottery during the strike was denigrated with the comment she "was built like a big squaw." A remark by another worker that this Metis woman "would punch you right in the nose for [saying] that" reinforces the notion of Metis women as aggressive. In comparison, an essential contrast between white and Aboriginal males centred on the work ethic. As one male worker explained when asked why no Aboriginal or Metis males worked at the pottery, "They were too damn lazy, that's why." This remark seems to substantiate David Roediger's argument that white working-class males constructed an image of the "other" – whether it was African Americans or Aboriginals – "as embodying a preindustrial, erotic, careless style of life the white worker hated and longed for."[71] Polarized gender constructions emerged as white settlers strove to legitimize and consolidate their growing domination of the West by controlling Aboriginals using repressive measures such as the reserve and pass system.

During the process of industrialization in western Canada these racial and gender constructs were used to legitimize white access to industrial jobs. The ability of former workers to recall one of the few Metis people who worked at Medalta suggests that race was a salient feature in the formation of hierarchies of power within the pottery workforce. Significantly a Metis woman's earliest job at the pottery was one of the heaviest and dirtiest. As a kiln worker she lifted heavy saggers that were often very hot – a job usually

performed by men – although after the war she attained a position in the decorating department, which was a more congenial area in which to work.[72]

Central to the legitimization of female workers' access to industrial jobs was the need to ensure that their work conformed to a cultural stereotype of women as subordinate, weaker, and less capable than men. As we have seen, within the workplace this resulted in a gendered division of labour that assigned women workers lighter work that was defined as less skilled, at lower rates of pay. In addition to generating gender-specific jobs, wage rates and opportunities these polarized constructions of masculinity and femininity justified a gender hierarchy in the workplace. It also rendered invisible and unremunerated the domestic work of women in the home.[73] Government labour regulations consistently set the female minimum wage well below the male wage because of the middle-class assumption that women workers did not have to support themselves or families. Women were also restricted to a shorter work week and were not allowed to work at night. They were to be provided with seating to rest when not working and were prohibited from heavy lifting.[74] These ostensibly "protective" measures effectively reduced women's ability to compete for jobs and justified the notion of women workers as inferior to men.[75] The formal restrictions, together with the notion of women as inherently domestic, limited women's job alternatives to nursing, teaching, and secretarial work for those with education and primarily domestic work and waitressing for those without much schooling. Also, the assumption that women workers were young, single, and soon to marry and stay home to raise children limited their opportunities for skill development and promotion compared to men who were assumed to be supporting a family or a potential breadwinner.

The reality of working-class life in Medicine Hat contrasted starkly with the middle-class ideals upon which government and company assumptions were built. Employee lists reveal that it was common for more than one member of a family to work at the pottery because even a senior male worker's wage was insufficient to support a family. On the eve of the strike, thirty-eight families had more than one person working at the pottery.[76] As Christine Pocsik explained:

> Families worked there. Let's [look at] the Stickels – Chris Stickel the Dad, he was the foreman, and the son and the daughter worked there so there was three of them bringing home money, bringing home their cheques, and I'm sure that was probably a good living then ... There were a lot of young kids working there whose Dad worked there. That's how a family survived.[77]

Census figures for 1946 reveal that 63 per cent of families in Medicine Hat headed by a male wage-earner earned less than $37.50 a week, which was a healthy sum for an individual, but was well below the amount needed to sustain a family in any degree of comfort.[78] When the income of other family members is added to the wage of the male income earner the percentage of families earning less than $37.50 a week drops to 53 per cent. As a result, in most working-class families children left school after grade eight to earn income and contribute to the family's subsistence.[79] Schooling rates in Medicine Hat also reflect this trend. Only 58 per cent of the population over four years of age had completed at least Grade Eight in 1946.[80] Wives usually worked for wages on and off even during their years of childrearing.[81]

The rigidly gendered system of wages, jobs, and promotion opportunities that was justified by a middle-class ideal did not take into consideration the situation of individual workers. Bertha Riegel remembered working with a widow who had a school-age son to support but who did not receive a "breadwinner" wage because of that fact.[82] Similarly, male workers at Medalta earned a higher wage regardless of whether or not they had any dependents.[83] Employers profited from women's underpayment, and justified it by a set of gendered assumptions about why women worked. The principle of paying according to need was never suggested or accepted.[84] Instead, a double standard toward wages for men and for women was adopted.

When Medalta's initial success as a major producer of gingerbeer and liquor bottles collapsed in the late 1920s with the introduction of cheaper glass bottles, gendered wage rates worked to the advantage of the company. Hayward has argued that Medalta achieved success during the 1930s by expanding the artware portion of its product lines. Constrained by the high cost of introducing new moulds the company expanded its art department,

which developed a large variety of artistic surface treatments to vary the look on pottery pieces coming from the same mould.[85] Since decorative work was labour intensive, an important aspect of the venture's financial success was the restriction of art department positions to female employees, who earned roughly 64 per cent of the male wage.[86]

This practice was common in the American and British pottery industries where employment of a greater percentage of women workers gave the English an advantage over the Americans. In Trenton, New Jersey, as the amount of decorative work increased in the late nineteenth century, the percentage of female workers nearly doubled.[87]

Although Medalta's art department never exceeded twenty staff, its status as an exclusively female preserve guaranteed women a strong presence in the pottery.[88] Prior to WWII, women worked primarily in the art department, in the office, as spongers cleaning the ware for painting, and sticking handles and spouts on cups and teapots. When a shortage of labour developed during WWII, women expanded into every area of the pottery, including the most skilled job of jiggering and the heaviest jobs. At the outset of the strike in August, 1947, women comprised 42 per cent of the workforce.[89]

Although there was a fairly active labour movement in Medicine Hat during the first two decades of the century, in the interwar years there is no evidence of collective labour activism. Local workers organized a labour council in 1905 that soon failed but was reorganized in 1910.[90] There was some labour activism in the years surrounding the Winnipeg General Strike; however, there is no indication that local workers held sympathy strikes during that strike, or that they were involved in any major labour disputes in the two decades that followed.[91] Twelve hundred striking relief camp workers stopped overnight in the city in June, 1935 on their way to a protest in Ottawa. Although they were well received by city residents, only one local man is known to have joined the protesters.[92] Provincially the city was represented by a coalition of farm and labour representation; however, agriculture remained the dominant industry until after WWII.[93] Labour achieved electoral success in 1944 with the election of E.W. Horne to municipal council, who supported Medalta workers during the strike, which was near the end of his final term.[94]

Individually workers resisted the harsh wages and conditions at Medalta most often by leaving. In 1926 Pratt complained to the provincial government that he was forced to

pay more than 25 per cent of female workers the apprenticeship rate because worker turnover was so high. Out of thirteen women hired in June, 1925 only five remained on staff a year later.[95] A male worker's decision to approach his provincial MLA rather than his employer when he was still being paid an apprenticeship rate after two years of employment indicates the intimidating attitude of management at the factory. There is no evidence of women workers bringing low wages to the attention of government. Violations of female minimum wage regulations were discovered by wage inspectors.[96] The exodus of numerous workers to Medicine Hat Potteries in 1938 when the new pottery opened, suggests there was widespread dissatisfaction with wages and conditions at the older factory. Among them were some of Medalta's most senior employees.[97] Despite low wages and adverse conditions, the company was able to claim in 1940 that "Medalta Potteries employs competent employes and craftsmen, most of whom have been with the firm since it started."[98] This degree of continuity likely reflects the difficult material position of workers in Medicine Hat during the interwar period and lack of job alternatives, particularly for women.

Labour relations at Medalta Potteries during the interwar period were marked by a degree of paternalism that was typical in a new industry.[99] At Medalta, paternalism was marked by an autocratic and controlling attitude toward employees and the expectation of loyalty and obedience typical of a filial relationship. Pratt's ability to convince workers to sign a petition against a shorter work week and Stone's confident expectation that women workers could be persuaded that a new minimum wage regulation would legitimately reduce their weekly wage by 5 per cent are acts that reveal a relationship in which management exerted remarkable control over its workers. Similarly, in a directive from Calgary in 1937, one of the owners advised his manager to "do a little missionary work in the plant" to influence employees to vote for a particular mayor in the upcoming municipal election.[100] Medalta's gross insensitivity and harshness regarding wages, work conditions and workplace injuries also betrays an attitude that was fundamentally paternalistic and exploitative, rather than respectful of workers' needs and dignity. This relationship seems to have combined with material constraints to help blunt the potential for collective class consciousness among Medalta workers during the interwar period.

The German, Russian and Austrian ethnic roots of Medalta's workforce may also have inhibited collective worker activism.[101] Proportionately, Medicine Hat had one of the largest German-speaking communities in Canada in the early part of the twentieth century.[102] During the two world wars in which Canada fought against Germany, German-speaking peoples in Alberta were the target of harassment.[103] This harassment resulted in a tendency for German-speaking peoples to become self-employed and to be less politically active than other ethnic groups. Immigrant workers in general were harder to organize in Alberta during the interwar period because of the language barrier and generally lower levels of education.[104] The expectation that they would eventually own their own farm could also have weakened their class identification as workers. Finally, the strong patriarchal values of many European groups who immigrated to southern Alberta in the first decades of the twentieth century – many of whom were German-speaking – contributed to the region's political conservatism. But unlike racial and ethnic differences between management and workers in the Alberta coal industry, at Medalta Potteries there was more racial and ethnic similarity than difference between workers and management, which obscured class differences.[105]

The outbreak of WWII in 1939 dramatically changed the position of labour across the country. Approximately 20 per cent of the Canadian work force was unemployed when the war started.[106] By 1941 the demands of a wartime economy had made labour shortages epidemic, placing workers in a position of strength for the first time since the end of WWI. Industrial unionism, which organized legions of unskilled workers in new mass production industries, achieved remarkable gains during the war, further strengthening the position of labour.[107] Union membership, particularly in the new industrial unions, doubled in Canada between 1940 and 1945 to 700,000.[108] The American Wagner Act, which was passed in 1935, set a precedent for government legislation that explicitly endorsed the right of workers to join unions and bargain collectively.[109]

The Canadian government's initial response to burgeoning union membership and growing worker demands during the war was to pass Privy Council Orders that urged employers voluntarily to provide workers with fair wages and conditions and to recognize workers' right to association. Many Canadian employers simply ignored the orders and the

government often refused to act or sided with employers.[110] The result was a major wave of strikes across the country in 1943 that threatened Canada's war production (see figure 1 page 13).[111] At the same time organized labour swung its electoral support behind the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) to help that party win a federal byelection. Forced to act by the rising strength of labour and the CCF, Prime Minister McKenzie King passed PC 1003 in February, 1944.

This milestone in Canadian labour history for the first time guaranteed workers the right to organize and to bargain collectively. It established procedures to certify unions, forced employers to recognize trade unions, defined unfair labour practices and created an administrative apparatus to enforce the legislation. One peculiarly Canadian aspect of the legislation is that neither the union nor the employer was allowed to hold a strike or lockout during the term of an agreement or before submitting to compulsory conciliation. This feature tended to benefit employers by creating delays. The American Wagner Act, which was passed nearly a decade earlier and heavily influenced PC1003, did not contain this provision.[112] Compulsory conciliation was an important factor in the construction of Medalta workers as lawless because they struck without seeking government conciliation. Management did not seek conciliation either, but its public image did not suffer because of that. When control of labour returned to the provinces at the end of the war provincial governments, including Alberta, modelled new labour legislation on PC 1003.

In Medicine Hat a labour shortage developed early in the war because of government contracts and military enlistments.[113] At Medalta Potteries, a government contract to supply the armed services and prisoner of war camps with dishes helped create a severe labour shortage that forced the company into twenty-four-hour production.[114] Despite the relative shift in power between workers and their employer, extraordinary wartime circumstances seemed to inhibit labour activism. To meet its labour needs Medalta hired a larger proportion of women workers. These women were disinclined to complain because factory work was most often a welcome alternative to traditional female jobs, particularly after the Depression. The company also took on fifty prisoners of war from the local POW camp who were in no position to negotiate.[115] Although women workers filled all types of jobs previously designated male, including jiggering, which

commanded the highest wage rates, they continued to be paid less than the male rate.[116] POWs were paid fifty cents a day.[117] The large percentage of women employed during the war, which increased from about 10 per cent during the interwar period to at least 42 per cent, must have been a significant savings to the company as it achieved its peak production years.[118] Medalta's total earnings rose 23 per cent between 1941 and 1942, although profits were capped at 5 per cent because of wartime regulations to prevent profiteering. Restrictions also applied to workers, who were not allowed to quit a war industry job and whose wages were frozen for the duration of the war.[119]

As Hayward has noted, the shortage of workers placed a premium on labour that triggered new concern about health and safety as a way for the pottery industry to "conserve the labour force they had." For example, the dangers of silicosis from inhaling clay dust, which had first been raised in 1932, made headlines in The Clay Products News and Ceramics Record in 1940. That is when a new study revealed the grim rate of diagnosis for those who worked in a clay products industry environment for more than thirty years. Both government and ceramics industrialists became more concerned about health and safety issues. Government inspections were more frequent during the war and included air sample tests for silica and lead dust particles.[120]

The labour shortage itself, however, did not appear to change Medalta's fundamentally paternalistic and penurious attitude toward its workers. An extensive file of Workmen's Compensation Board (WCB) claims generated during the war reveals that the factory was notified of safety infractions ranging from a depleted first aid kit to lack of respirators for workers handling lead to inadequate goggles.[121] Despite a WCB directive in January, 1941 to place guards on moving machinery, five months later a female worker was half scalped when her hair caught in a rotating shaft.[122] Alma McMain never fully recovered from the injury.[123] The accident focused government attention on the factory and safety measures were improved in the following months, which resulted in a significant decline in injury reports.[124] In its correspondence with the WCB Medalta's refusal to acknowledge any responsibility for workplace accidents, even in the most blatant instances of negligence, reveals management's persistent disregard for its workers. In the case of Alma McMain, Medalta denied that the accident resulted from a lack of safety guards

around moving equipment. Instead, management insisted that the rotating shaft was not easily reached and said the woman's hair stuck to the shaft because it was wet, blaming the injured woman for the accident.[125]

Medalta's major response to the labour crisis was to invest in technology that would reduce the number of workers needed and increase the company's control over the pace of work. Much of the initiative for new technology came from plant superintendent Ed Phillipson, who was reputed by several workers to be an egotistical and insensitive manager. When asked to describe their memories about the relationship between workers and management most workers felt it was distant. But there was a range of attitudes, particularly toward Phillipson. Bertha Riegel said "He put management before his employees. He was trying to make it, to impress the [owners] ... and he did it at the expense of the employees." Engelina Kessler described Phillipson as "a real snob. You know, 'I'm management here and you guys are the lower class people.'" Christine Pocsik, however, felt positively toward him: "You couldn't have found a nicer man than Mr. Phillipson."[126]

As Hayward has pointed out, "Phillipson focused on mechanizing any element of human labour he could."[127] Phillipson designed a semi-automatic jiggering machine during WWII that dramatically reduced labour costs by eliminating the positions of the jiggermen's helpers. The new equipment also reduced the cost of the machine operator who no longer needed the skill of a jiggerman.[128] Conveyor belting was introduced in the late 1930s to speed the process of moving ware through the factory.[129] This innovation allowed the company more effectively to set the pace of work, but its plans sometimes backfired. Former worker Rosetta Brosnikoff remembers a number of occasions in the early 1950s when she and her co-workers could not keep up with the pace of the conveyor belts and watched helplessly as pottery crashed over the end of the belt.[130]

In the American pottery industry increasing mechanization heightened labour relations tensions by reducing wages through deskilling and by aggravating job security concerns.[131] There is no direct evidence of a link between increasing mechanization and labour unrest at Medalta. Certification of a union, in March, 1943, that operated essentially as a company union, raises the possibility of such a connection. Lack of employee

awareness of this union or involvement in it, together with the company's complete failure to fulfill its contractual obligations, suggests that the union may have been part of a strategy to preempt an independent union during an era of chronic labour shortage and growing industrial unionism. A local of the Clay Products Workers Union was formed at the pottery in March, 1943 with so little fanfare among workers that none of the former workers interviewed for this study, some of whom worked there in 1943, remember anything about it.[132] During the strike in 1947, workers questioned in a strike-related civil action about the existence of this union also stated they knew nothing about it. Union lawyer Joseph Cohen pointed out that the terms of the 1943 contract, which entailed a fifty-four-hour work week, were "harsh" and "outdated." Workers said they never voted to renew the contract on its renewal date in March, 1947. Company representatives could provide no evidence that signators to the original contract in 1943 were duly elected or that a secret-ballot vote had been held on any of the contract renewal dates since 1943, as stipulated in the contract. There was also no elected Grievance Committee as the contract stated. The only firm evidence of the union's existence within Medalta were lists of union members and the fact that dues were deducted. The number of members had declined substantially in 1946 and 1947 from seventy-seven in 1945 to twenty-five in 1947.[133] Frustration among those workers who were aware of the Clay Products Workers Union was expressed in a letter to a Calgary labour publication just before Mine Mill was certified at Medalta. Readers were told that Medalta workers "do not want anything to do with this union as they have not profited much by it to date."[134]

At the end of the war Medalta Potteries faced a number of challenges, one of which was the need to update much of its machinery because of intensive use during the war years. More important in the long term and less tractable, however, was a looming labour problem centred on wage rates, which had been held artificially low by the region's depressed economy and by wartime labour regulations. A 1946 business projection by management demonstrated the company's hope that mechanization would be an effective solution to the labour problem by reducing Medalta's reliance on human labour.

> [T]here is so much agitation amongst labour for higher wages and shorter hours, and we doubt very much if we will ever be able to produce merchandise with the same number of hands as we did in 1938 and 1939. We do know that wages are going to be at least 50% higher, which, of course, must reflect on the selling price of merchandise.[135]

The statement concluded: "As a whole, the picture for 1946 is bright on one side and rather gloomy on the other," conveying the company's pessimistic view of labour relations well before the August, 1947 strike occurred.[136] This statement also reveals that there was considerable grassroots pressure for wage improvements at the pottery before a new union arrived on the scene.

The war was an important transition era for Medalta workers despite persistently low wages and poor working conditions. As Engelina Kessler explained, "Because there was such a shortage of jobs [in the 1930s] people were like cattle, you know, you lead them to the job and they get the job. But I think in the 40s and 50s the tide turned and people realized that they are human, they aren't cattle."[137] Rhetoric about the fight for democracy and freedom, as well as wartime sacrifices, combined with growing evidence of prosperity to infuse Canadian workers with a sense of entitlement to a share in the wealth.[138] In addition, organized labour's legislative gains, symbolized by PC 1003, gave unionized workers a new respectability and legitimacy as partners with capital and the state – at least theoretically.[139] The result was a new wave of labour unrest in 1946-47, triggered this time by pent-up wage demands amidst growing profits and rising inflation.

As Anne Forrest has demonstrated, the respectability and legitimacy PC 1003 afforded workers was profoundly gendered because the legislation was framed by notions of rights and freedoms that applied only to men who were assumed to be breadwinners, such as the right to bargain collectively and to strike. This implicitly excluded women workers who were viewed as economically dependent temporary workers and were largely unorganized.[140] The substantial presence of women workers who had been drawn into the paid labour force by the country's wartime economy did not dismantle the rigid gender division of labour and gender hierarchy that existed in both the workplace and the home. In

fact, the postwar era was a reactionary period during which gender roles were reinscribed more firmly.[141] The effect of Depression, when many men could not support their families, and war, which drew unprecedented numbers of women into the paid labour force, was to create "postwar jitters" about masculinity and femininity, to borrow a phrase from Ruth Roach Pierson.[142] The result was a conservative postwar social climate that intensified heterosexism.[143] The traditional nuclear family with a stay-at-home wife and mother was the template for social mores and social policy.

This emphasis on reasserting traditional patriarchal gender roles is evident in the policies, attitudes and rhetoric of governments, business, and labour during the immediate postwar era. The federal government closed daycare nurseries and revised federal income tax policy that had been changed during the war to accommodate married women who worked.[144] Governments also renewed a Depression-era regulation barring married women from civil service jobs and developed an unemployment insurance system that imposed extra requirements on married women.[145] Gendered minimum wage rates persisted: In June, 1947, the minimum wage for women workers in Alberta's was 72 percent of the male minimum wage, reflecting the assumption that working women did not support a family while working men did.[146]

Employers operated on the same assumptions. A postwar construction boom combined with strong industrial and farm productivity in and around Medicine Hat to prevent employers from laying off married women as servicemen returned from the war.[147] Nevertheless, Medalta reestablished gendered job segregation and maintained gender-specific wage rates and promotional opportunities after the war.[148] In 1947, for example, there were only two wage categories for women workers at the factory: "inexperienced" and "experienced." A female worker was hired at the "inexperienced" rate and after a certain period of time, usually three to six months, was awarded the "experienced" rate. No further wage increases were structured into the wage rates for female employees. For males there were three wage categories differentiated by skill and age but not experience. "Juniors and apprentices" earned the lowest rate. Once a male was over twenty-one years of age he was awarded the "unskilled" rate. Only men could be awarded the "skilled" rate for particular jobs.[149] This gender-specific criteria for wage increases reflected

management's assumption that male workers were committed to a career because they supported a family while women workers were single and temporary, working only until they began to raise a family. There was also an expectation that a woman was dependent on her family until she married.

Organized labour's adherence to this gendered view of male and female workers was more conflicted, particularly within progressive left-wing unions. The predominant concern of all industrial unions in the 1940s, was to secure unskilled male workers steady work at a wage adequate to support a family.[150] This was something that previously only skilled craftsmen had been able to attain. The presence of women in a bargaining unit, however, created ambivalence and contradictions as unions tried to improve the situations of women workers within this patriarchal paradigm. Internal struggles to uphold contractual seniority rights regardless of sex and pressure on married women to give up their jobs to men revealed the conflict created by privileging male workers.[151]

Guard has pointed out that the male breadwinner ideal placed working-class women in a peculiarly classless position because "femininity was being redefined in such a way that class was erased altogether."[152] Increasingly all women, regardless of their financial circumstances, were assumed to conform to a middle-class lifestyle centred on domesticity and consumption. This solidifying redefinition of femininity afforded working-class women a less legitimate claim to higher wages than men even though most working class husbands could not support a family. It also meant militancy jeopardized their claim to respectability, which hinged on their ability to conform to a middle-class norm of passive, dependent, and vulnerable femininity. These prevailing gender norms made some women workers unwilling to act militantly. Perhaps more importantly, it reduced the effectiveness of female militancy that did occur, because militant women were ignored or downplayed by newspapers, employers, the state and unions. The more limited public perception of worker solidarity weakened the union movement.[153]

At the same time, competing forms of working-class masculinity emerged as a manifestation of the internal struggle between moderate and militant factions of organized labour. This split, which was a response to labour's new legitimacy, weakened the postwar labour movement. As Guard has demonstrated, mainstream unionists constructed

themselves as more "mature" and rational than "immature" and hot-headed militant unionists. Clinging to the respectability newly accorded labour, they advocated a conciliatory approach to negotiations with capital.[154] In an effort to vindicate labour's theoretical status as a "partner" in industrial development, they branded militant unionists "irresponsible." In comparison, militant left wing unionists continued to view labour's relationship with capital as fundamentally oppositional. They built on the traditional androcentric image of the worker as "the responsible breadwinner, the upright family man whose dedication and hard work earned him the affection of his family and the respect of his community."[155] Manly respectability was defined in terms of aggressiveness at the bargaining table and the courage to strike, as well as solidarity with other workers, and the achievement of an adequate wage.

The culture and goals of the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (hereafter Mine Mill), which represented Medalta workers from 1947 to 1954, epitomized masculinist left-wing unions at the time. Mine Mill had a proud history of militancy and progressiveness that dated back to the turn of the century when miners on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel fought to improve workers' lives.[156] The union and rank-and-file members embraced industrial unionism, particularly in the West, long before this concept became popular within the mainstream labour movement in the late 1930s. It also had a history of organizing more diverse and disadvantaged workforces.[157] Mine Mill's leaders remained skeptical of labour's new partnership status with business and resisted the trend toward more bureaucratic leadership by emphasizing democratic processes and independent thought despite an intensifying Cold War.[158]

Communists had long been effective, energetic organizers of Mine Mill because of their genuine commitment to improving the lives of workers. As a result, non-Communist rank-and-file workers consistently elected Communist Party members to leadership positions. Passage of the American Taft-Hartley law in 1947 required that all union officials sign a non-Communist affidavit. This forced the expulsion of Communist union officials from American unions and intensified anti-communist hysteria in both the United States and Canada.[159] Some Mine Mill officials refused to comply with the law and others resigned from the Communist Party in order to sign the affidavit. The union's defiance and

persistent critique of the escalating Cold War and anti-communism made it the target of attacks within the labour movement as well as outside it. Mainstream unionists strove to purge organized labour of militant elements that compromised its respectability and its ability to control rank and file members. As a result, Mine Mill was eventually expelled from the labour movement in both Canada and the United States. Several historians have argued convincingly that the anti-communist hysteria that was rising throughout the immediate postwar era stemmed largely from the efforts of big business and the state to roll back the gains labour had achieved during the war. Historical evidence of actual subversive activities is clearly inadequate to justify the level of repression that occurred in the postwar years.[160]

Mine Mill's progressiveness was also evident in its opposition to racial and gender discrimination, which is best captured in the 1954 movie Salt of the Earth chronicling the efforts of a Mine Mill local in New Mexico to overcome racial and gender divisions in a lengthy 1950 strike.[161] Mine Mill's establishment of "ladies" auxilliaries as integral to union locals, its advocacy of equal pay for equal work in the 1940s, and its attempts to involve women workers on key union committees also demonstrate its progressiveness. Nevertheless, the union's masculinist rhetoric and culture and its uncritical acceptance of the male breadwinner ideal demonstrate that, despite the international's official advocacy of gender equality, stubborn gender attitudes undermined more inclusive labour goals. As Laurie Mercier has pointed out, "Union identity, and its success and power, was tied to the male breadwinner ideal and concepts of masculinity," such as an emphasis on physical, even "brute" strength.[162]

Mine Mill began organizing in Alberta in 1944. Most of the workplaces it organized were overwhelmingly male, except for Medalta Potteries and Dominion Glass, which formed a joint local in 1947.[163] Mine Mill was not put off by either the large contingent of women workers (who mainstream unions were less inclined to organize) or the anti-union stance of both companies. The union was motivated by a determination to increase wages in the province. It also took seriously the need to ensure that workers were represented by the union of their choice. These priorities were emphasized in a 1949

address at Alberta's first Mine Mill conference by the province's international representative, William Longridge.[164]

Medicine Hat was targeted by Mine Mill and other industrial unions because it was a low-wage area in the province.[165] As mentioned above, census figures for 1946 reveal that both average wages and the level of educational achievement in Medicine Hat were lower than in any of the province's other major cities.[166] Within Medicine Hat, Medalta Potteries was notorious for its low wage levels. The average wage in the Canadian clay products industry in 1947 was $34.91 and in Canadian manufacturing industries it was $35.66.[167] Information available is insufficient to determine an average wage rate at the factory in 1947; however, management figures released during the strike set the top wage rate at $33.60 per week for males and $21 per week for females paid on an hourly basis.[168] During the strike management and the union disagreed about the proportion of workers whose earnings approached the top end of the rate schedule, but it is clear Medalta wages were substantially lower than the industry average.[169]

The low level of wages in Medicine Hat may help explain the hazardous and grossly inadequate housing conditions found in the city during a two-month inspection by civic officials that was held at the time of the strike. In a scathing report a town official described families living in overcrowded quarters that ranged from ramshackle buildings and dank cellars with earth floors and walls to unsanitary chicken coops transported to the city and rented as housing. Lou Pozzi warned that roughly 3,000 residents (out of a populace of 15,000) lived in unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions: "If what we want is a Little Chicago, or the 1871 vintage, stockyards and fire traps and rampant disease and all, we are getting it."[170] Medicine Hat underwent a burst of growth after the war, which would account in part for the abysmal living conditions in the community. But the city's low wages would also seem to be a factor.

Mine Mill's organization of Medalta workers was one facet of a major effort by industrial unions to expand into Medicine Hat where low wages were holding down wages across the province. Prior to 1947 crafts-based unions had dominated the city's labour movement. That year Mine Mill, The United Packing House Workers of America, the Amalgamated Building and Construction Workers of Canada, and other CCL unions began

organizing in Medicine Hat.[171] Mine Mill successfully organized Dominion Glass workers a month after the Medalta local was formed.

Labour organization led to labour action and a number of local businesses were hit with work stoppages. The clay products industry, which employed 20 per cent of Medicine Hat workers, was hit hardest during the summer of the Medalta strike.[172] Roughly 100 Medicine Hat Potteries workers went out on a three-day wildcat strike in July demanding higher wages, a forty-hour work week and a union shop.[173] Eighty-five workers at Alberta Clay Products walked out for one day in sympathy. Workers at both factories were members of the Clay Products Union that Medalta workers belonged to before Mine Mill. Both factories were owned by local industrialist Joseph Harlan (Hop) Yuill. A week after the Medalta strike started sixty-five workers at Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Co. struck for two weeks demanding higher wages, shorter hours and union security. All of these walkouts occurred spontaneously during negotiations or conciliation, as did the Medalta Potteries dispute. Each of these contracts had to be settled through government-mediated conciliation or arbitration.[174]

Other groups of local workers also walked out that year. One hundred and eighty-four labourers struck April 1-6 for increased wages. The dispute was resolved through negotiations that ended in a compromise. At the Dominion Glass factory in Redcliff, just outside Medicine Hat, approximately 100 women workers staged a one-day walk-out in May to protest a five-cent increase awarded male workers but not themselves. The women returned to work after meeting with company officials who agreed that an arbitration board would discuss a similar increase for female employees.[175] The spontaneity of this walk-out suggests that the impetus for equal pay came directly from the women themselves, and was not imposed by Mine Mill, which was certified by a majority of the 450 glass workers about two months later. The glass workers formed a unit that, together with the Medalta unit, formed a Mine Mill local in Medicine Hat.[176] In July, fifteen chemical factory workers walked out for a week to protest the dismissal of a union officer. Conciliation resulted and the workers won their case.[177] Only in the case of the Medalta Potteries strike did both sides dig in for an extended battle. The high level of incidents suggests that discontent among Medicine Hat workers was widespread and a chasm yawned between worker and

employer expectations. As a result the Medalta dispute assumed major significance for workers and industrialists, as well as the larger community.

The determination of industrial unions and workers to ensure that they cornered a share of Alberta's burgeoning wealth was matched by the determination of the province's right-wing government to suppress labour unrest after the war. Premier Ernest Manning's belief in the values of individualism, self-sufficiency and free enterprise, which stemmed from his faith as an evangelical Christian, made him suspicious of any form of collectivism.[178] His antipathy for organized labour intensified after the Leduc oil strike in February, 1947. This milestone in Alberta's economic development aggravated the existing labour shortage and threatened to strengthen the hand of organized labour in the province.[179] Eager to reassure American oil investors of its ability to maintain labour peace and keep wages low in the province, Manning's government became even less sympathetic to the concerns of workers. It was within this political and economic context that the unrest at Medalta Potteries erupted.

Local employers were equally determined and well positioned to crush labour unrest in the community. J.H. (Hop) Yuill was a major Medicine Hat industrialist who owned the second largest pottery in Medicine Hat. In addition to Medicine Hat Potteries and Alberta Clay Products, he owned Medicine Hat Milling Co. and was a part owner of Alberta Linseed Oil. The Yuill family also owned large tracts of land in the city's core. Most importantly, Yuill, who clearly had a major stake in the Medalta strike, owned the local daily newspaper and radio station in Medicine Hat.[180]

Ownership of Medalta Potteries changed hands in the months prior to the strike. Arthur Cumming, a major shareholder who had managed the factory from Calgary since 1937, sold out because he anticipated difficult times for the pottery industry.[181] The company was bought by a group of Montreal businessmen and a Calgary lawyer, all but one of whom did not live in the community. They included Alfred E. March, a shipping magnate who was president of Medalta Potteries; E.C. Janes, Managing Director, L.H. Melville; and Robert De Wolfe Mackay. The Calgary lawyer, Neil German, who was Arthur Cumming's son-in-law, handled court actions for the company during the strike.[182] Only Janes was eventually stationed in Medicine Hat as head of operations. During the

strike in a statement to the local newspaper Medalta workers expressed concern about the new owners' intentions:

> There is no doubt that Medalta Potteries can be an asset to the community if the new ownership is genuine in its intentions to make it into an industry which will raise the living standards of workers in the city. The union would welcome such intentions. But if it is to be carried on as a low wage plant it will hurt every citizen in the 'Hat.[183]

Medicine Hat's local business community did not share the reservations and concerns about Medalta's new ownership expressed by workers. Medalta's new plant manager, Jack Cunliffe, was appointed a director of the Medicine Hat Chamber of Commerce in October, 1947, and Neil German was invited by the chamber to deliver a talk that fall on "The Threat to Industrial Peace in Canada." German's address, which emphasized the need to battle the "Marxian element" within organized labour, was given front page coverage in the local newspaper.[184]

While it is evident there was substantial support for Mine Mill among rank and file Medalta workers, support was uneven and reflected the influence of several key factors, including military service, marital status, gender, and whether a worker had been raised on a farm. Like demobilized servicemen all over the country, ex-servicemen returned to Medalta Potteries but were no longer willing to accept poor wages, long hours and difficult working conditions.[185] Rueben Kessler, Alex Pocsik and Clarence Sailer were three of the new union's key activists, and all of them had charges laid against them during the strike. Kessler and Sailer were two of the seven men jailed during the strike. All had served during the war and were dissatisfied with the pottery's low wages. As Engelina Kessler explained: "My husband made thirty-three-and-a-third cents an hour at Medalta when he came out of the army in 1946 or '47 – that is a mighty low wage."[186] Although he was unmarried at the time, Englina Kessler said her husband wanted to earn enough at the pottery to be able to support a family some day.[187] It is quite possible that the ex-

servicemen were also attracted to militant unionism because its emphasis on combativeness reinforced masculinist ideologies of war.

Alex Pocsik was twenty-two when he was discharged from the army. He was Secretary-Treasurer of the union when it first organized and throughout the strike. In an interview, his wife Christine Pocsik described her husband's attitude: "As soon as we got married, he says, 'You're not working no more, that's it.'" Christine Pocsik said she was glad to stay home. Years later, when their youngest child had left home, she accepted a retail job before telling her husband because her husband still did not want his wife to work. Alex Pocsik's insistance that his wife not work reveals how crucial it was to some male workers that they be able to support a family single-handedly. He left the pottery shortly after the strike for a better paying job at the CPR.[188]

Clarence Sailer, who was president of the Medalta local during the strike, was a middle-aged male worker who had two teenage children working full-time at the factory in 1947. His family circumstances demonstrate the inadequacy of even a senior male worker's wage for supporting a family. All of the former workers interviewed agreed that any family living on a single Medalta wage lived a meagre existence. Many of the family members who worked at the pottery were fathers and their teenage children who quit school to work to support their family, which signalled the return to pre-war workforce norms.[189] Bertha Riegel said she remembered married men being among those who pressured her to join the union: "The ones that come to mind right now were married men that seemed to be sort of a bit of a instigator."[190] Both of the men interviewed, as well as Rueben Kessler, soon left the pottery for more promising work.[191]

Interviews with six women workers revealed that their employment opportunities were more limited than men's, which made the factory job attractive. Women's attachment to the workforce was also more tenuous because they expected to marry and stay home to take care of a household and children.[192] Consequently their support for the union and the strike tended to be more restrained and was motivated primarily by a sense of injustice that all workers were being paid "desperately low" wage rates, rather than a concern about women's situation in particular.[193] All of the six women interviewed either picketed or performed union work during the strike, although they expressed widely varying degrees of

support for the union and the strike. Asked why she supported the strike, Riegel said: "I suppose some of us just went along because, well, I guess it was getting to the point where you felt you were worth a little more than what you were being paid, and so we just went along with it."[194] Dorothy Beierbach said she supported the union because, "they were there to help you and to try and get you a better wage and that was your bargaining power, other than that you took what you got."[195] Most of the women interviewed accepted the gendered notion that men were entitled to higher pay because of their need to support a family, regardless of a man's personal situation. In describing her own attitude toward the union Engelina Kessler said: "I paid union dues but I was never a dedicated union member." She said some women workers felt "intense" hostility toward management and were more "aggressive" than herself. Kessler felt she could relate better to the men's hostility toward management "because they were trying to establish homes. Women in those days did not make up homes for themselves as they do today. Women ... relied more on their husbands to be the wage earner."[196]

Rosetta Brosnikoff, who began working at the pottery two years after the strike, remembered some women feeling a sense of injustice about the lower pay women received for the same work: "That was one of the sore points, because you worked side-by-side with a man and he got more money than you did. " But Brosnikoff, who became heavily involved in the union executive, did not remember the union taking up the issue of equal pay while she was there.[197]

There is little direct evidence to suggest how marital status in itself affected women workers' commitment to the union. There were some married women at the factory at the time of the strike; however, they were a minority and it was not possible to interview any.[198] Several of the women interviewed continued to work at the pottery after they married, but this did not seem to affect their attitude toward work or the union. They continued to view their work as temporary. There was no stigma about married women working; however, two of the women who worked at the pottery after they married left within a few months once they became pregnant. Rosetta Brosnikoff said she did not tell her foreman about the pregnancy. She left when she was three months pregnant partly because she sensed that it was considered inappropriate for pregnant women to work at the factory. What is most

consistent about the attitudes of the women surveyed is their acceptance of the patriarchal gender paradigm that dictated lower wages and more limited job opportunities for women.

The type of work performed in the factory also shaped workers' attitudes toward their job and the union. Those who performed more difficult, dangerous and uncomfortable work at the factory tended to be less content than those who worked in, for example, the art department, which was cleaner, quieter and involved less physically taxing work than other departments. It was also headed by a particularly likeable manager, Tom Hulme.[199]

Growing up on a farm rather than in the city had a profound effect on the way men and women viewed their job and the strike. Out of the nine former Medalta workers whose lives were profiled through oral interviews, six were raised on nearby farms. Hannah Osborne, who was one of those farm children, was the only woman interviewed who said she did not support the union or the strike, although she joined the union and struck because she felt she had no choice: "I just went along with it because you belonged to the union you have to go with it." Osborne also had the most difficult upbringing of those interviewed. Several of her younger siblings were removed to foster homes shortly after her mother died in childbirth while delivering her twelfth child. Osborne's father could not afford to support them all. She never saw two of her brothers again, although she was reunited with two other siblings as an adult. At the age of eleven, as the fourth oldest child in a motherless farm family during the Depression, Osborne was suddenly doing much of the work her mother had done. After years of doing domestic work and child care on the farm or for neighbouring families on a barter basis, when she finally got a steady paying job in the pottery at the age of twenty-three Osborne said "*that* was a good job uhuh, [Was it hard?] and 25¢ an hour – I didn't find it hard."[200] The harsh circumstances of her early life made Osborne grateful for the 25¢ an hour she earned even though she never got a raise in the six years she worked there. Asked about working conditions, the tedium of factory work, or the difficulty of living on such a low wage Osborne responded: "I was never dissatisfied. I made the best of it." She said, "You gotta make up your mind you like your work or you're not gonna be happy with it. No, I enjoyed the work ... I guess I was raised on hard work."[201]

The harsh rural life of the "Dirty Thirties" and the war years, which meant farm children endured social isolation, an endless round of chores, and living with hard financial choices, tended to limit union support among those who grew up on area farms. William Longridge, a Mine Mill representative from Calgary noted this aspect of the Medalta workforce in a comment to the labour board six months after the strike ended. Longridge was objecting to Medalta management's attempt to force an employee vote on the union. He was worried they would not get enough support from workers because "there are a lot of farmers there who are not even interested in the vote."[202] The status of prairie farmers as essentially self-employed entrepreneurs may help explain their more conservative outlook compared to urban or resource town workers in the West.[203]

Out of this complex web of political, economic and cultural realities emerges a pattern of forces that transformed an industrial workforce. By the 1940s the agricultural devastation of the interwar years had begun to alienate many farm sons and daughters. City jobs in industry or service increasingly were seen as the way of the future. War experiences, prosperity, and the strengthened position of labour helped spur the maturation of an industrial workforce in Medicine Hat. Lack of immigration during the interwar years removed the twin obstacles to labour organization of ethnic heterogeneity and language differences. Family relationships, intermarriage and strong friendships within the pottery combined with a renewed societal emphasis on traditional gender roles to generate class cohesion. Although there were strong conflicting forces at work, a generation of Canadian-born workers emerged with more confidence, higher expectations and little to lose. As we will see, once they mobilized, these workers were remarkably committed to improving the situation of workers at Medalta Potteries. Their shift in outlook caused class divisions to harden, transforming the symbiotic relationship between farm families and Medicine Hat. A critical mass of workers began to reject farming and increasingly embraced industrial work. As Hannah Osborne explained, all of her brothers and sisters chose to abandon farming because "We didn't see no future in it ourselves."[204]

NOTES

[1] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[2] The valley was a crucial source of food and shelter for Aboriginals for thousands of years. Gerald Freisen, The Canadian Prairies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 6.

[3]Howard Palmer with Tamara Palmer, Alberta: A New History (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), 60.
[4] Christine and Alex Pocsik interview September 23, 2000.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jones, Empire of Dust.

[7] Nearly 100 workers were employed throughout the year in the mid-1920s. The number dropped significantly by the mid-1930s to the point where the pottery was operating only four or five months a year and employed fewer than twenty employees. It was not until WWII that a labour force of more than 200 workers was employed throughout the year. Alberta government labour force record for Medalta Potteries, 1927, PAA 69.235/276. Antonelli and Forbes, Pottery in Alberta, 88.

[8] My assessment that many of those dried out on the farm came to Medicine Hat looking for work is based on the fact that most of my informants were from farms near Medicine Hat They reported that many other workers at the pottery also came from nearby farms.

[9] Jones, et al, The Weather Factory, 19.

[10] Henry C. Klassen, A Business History of Alberta, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1999), 47.

[11] Jones, et al, The Weather Factory, 10.

[12] Ibid., 13.

[13] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 18-20.

[14] The company did not acquire its most enduring name, Medalta Potteries, until 1924 when it reorganized and chose a name that reflected its shift away from stoneware products. Ibid., 25.

[15] Ibid., 20.

[16] Palmer and Palmer, Alberta: A New History, 166.

[17] Gould, All Hell for a Basement, 170. Gould cites a Medicine Hat Times report that at the outbreak of war as authorities began recruiting in the city "there were 'quite a number of men around who are practically destitute ...'"

[18] Jones, et al, The Weather Factory, 15; Jones, Empire of Dust, 52-55.

[19] Jones, et al, The Weather Factory, 95, 116, 220. Drought persisted through the 1920s and 30s with only a few sporadic years of relief in the drybelt region. Farm abandonment peaked in 1926 and the Great Depression was essentially an anticlimax for the Medicine Hat region.

[20] Cecilia Danysk. Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1995). See charts pp. 178 and 189 which demonstrate the close relationship between the increase in mechanization and the decline in the number of paid workers hired by farmers in Alberta in the 1920s. Significantly, this chart lists only "Paid Workers," "Farmers' Sons," and "Farmers." Although Danysk does not comment on the gender specificity of "Farmers" or the explicitly gendered category of "Farmers' Sons," her evidence confirms the information provided in oral interviews that suggests women were not considered suitable for work as agricultural labourers. It is this largely cultural prejudice that explains why so many farmers' daughters were drawn into factory work in Medicine Hat.

[21] Alberta government labourforce record for Medalta Potteries, 1927, PAA 69.235/276.

[22] Upon examining photographs of the factory in 1947 a government official commented that "The light in many parts of the plant seems to be rather bad." One of the attractions of the Medicine Hat Potteries factory, which attracted Medalta workers when it opened in 1937, was that it had large windows that made it brighter. Letter from Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry, W.D. King to Clayton Adams, Chairman, Board of Industrial Relations, March 1, 1947, PAA 63.5/482.50.31.

[23] Jack Forbes, "Manufacturing Process History of the Medalta Potteries National and Provincial Historic Site 1912-1954", unpublished manuscript, Parks Canada, 2000, 8.

[24] Although Gates is describing the process in East Liverpool, he said this process was typical of most potteries until the 1920s. Gates Jr., The City of Hills and Kilns, 418.

[25] Hayward, Pottery in Alberta, 74.

[26] Informal interview with Basil Leismeister during a pottery demonstration at the Clay Products Interpretive Centre, Medicine Hat, June 19, 2000.

[27] In a 1940 letter from Medalta's chief rival, Medicine Hat Potteries, to the government justifying its need to exceed minimum wage regulations by employing more females at the low "apprenticeship" rate, G.B. Armstrong explained that, "Our work for these girls is not hard but requires the small and quick hands that are not found in male employees." This claim was common throughout the industry. Letter February 8, 1940, PAA 69.131.

[28] Engelina Kessler found clay "ugly to work with" because it made her hands dry and cracked. Management did not allow workers to use lotion because it could mark the pottery, or gloves, because of the higher risk of breakage. Kessler was happier once she was moved to the art department where it was quiet and there was much less dust. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[29] In a letter to W.D. King, the Deputy Minister of Trade and Industry, from Clayton Adams, Chairman of the Board of Industrial Relations March 21, 1947, Adams described the 10 per cent lead content of manufacturing glaze as "almost harmless," particularly as respirators were available where the glaze was mixed. PAA 63.5/482.50.31.

[30] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 19, 2001.

[31] Alison Prentice, Paula Bourne, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Wendy Mitchinson and Naomi Black, eds., Canadian Women: A History Second Edition (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996), 254.

[32] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[33] Unlike the women, the boys were training in the hope that they would become jiggermen eventually.

[34] Videotaped interview with Basil Leismeister and Charles (Chuck) Butgereit, March 26, 1994, The Clay Products Interpretive Centre, Hycroft Video #1.

[35] Antonelli and Forbes, Pottery in Alberta, 140.

[36] Riegel said working with clay meant "you were living in dirt day after day, eight hours a day, your hands were chapped, your fingernails were peeling, they were sore." Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.
[37] Unsigned letter from Medalta Potteries Ltd. to the Chairman & Members of the Forty-Eight-Hour-Week, Commission of Enquiry, Alberta. December 6, 1926, PAA 235/69.

[38] Charles Pratt's monthly salary increased from $75 in 1916 to $250 in 1918. The other two owners, Ulysses Grant and William A. Creer, were each paid $160 a month in 1918. Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 22.

[39] Fudge and Tucker, Labour Before the Law, Chapter 6 "Industrial Voluntarism in a Prosperous Interregnum: 1925-1929" details the militancy of workers across the country, including coal miners in Alberta during this period. The apparent lack of militancy among Medicine Hat workers seems to be related to the more severe economic climate in that region.

[40] Under Alberta labour legislation, employers could pay no more than 25 per cent of their workers the "inexperienced" or "apprenticeship" rate, which started at less than 75 per cent of the minimum wage. June 15, 1926 Inspector's Report. In the pottery industry nine months was considered the learning period after which all workers were expected to be earning at least the minimum wage. Letter from the Commissioner of Labor to Charles Pratt, July 21, 1926, PAA 69.235/69.

[41] A letter from Charles Pratt to W. Smeaton, Commissioner of Labor, Alberta, July 6, 1926. PAA 69.239/69. Ten women applied within one day for a stenography job advertised in the local newspaper in 1927. Most of them had business college training. Medalta turned down many job applicants and explicitly refused to pay the way of anyone coming from out of town or out of the country. Job Applications and Letters of Recommendation 1927, PAA 69.235/216.

[42] Letter from Charles Pratt to W. Smeaton, Alberta Commissioner of Labor, July 6, 1926, PAA 69.239/69.

[43] Letter from E.A. Stone to Ed Phillipson, November 7, 1938, PAA 69.235/382.

[44] Letter from Commissioner of Labor W. Smith to Charles Pratt, July 21, 1926, PAA 69.235/69. Letter from E.G. Phillipson to Medalta's head office in Calgary, November 16, 1938, PAA 69.235/382.

[45] As Stone explained: "... this would appear to let us out, otherwise it would appear that his length of service might entitle him to be paid at the rate of 33 1/3 cents an hour." Interoffice memo from E.A. Stone to the plant superintendent, February 16, 1938, PAA 69.235/373.

[46] Letter from Charles Pratt to W.C. Smith, March 8, 1926, PAA 69.235/69.

[47] Interoffice memo February 2, 1938, PAA 69.235/373.

[48] During the interwar years Alberta passed some of the most progressive labour legislation in the country. It regulated conditions of employment and institutionalized trade unions. Fudge and Tucker, Labour Before the Law, 219.

[49] Prentice, et al, Canadian Women: A History, 258-260.

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[50] "Survey of Wage Rates Current in Alberta During the Last Half Year 1946" by H.P. Rocke, Chief Inspector, Board of Industrial Relations, December 26, 1946, PAA 67.71/470.N.

[51] Management was explicit in a memo regarding potential employment of a jiggerman from Ontario: "we do not guarentee [*sic*] steady employment, to anyone ..." Interoffice memo January 19, 1938, PAA 69.235/408.

[52] Interoffice memos January 5 and 18, 1938 state that a mechanic, G. Nagel , was laid off January 10 "as most of the machines are now checked and nearly completely repaired," then rehired a week later. PAA69.235/372. Interoffice memo February 14, 1938 states three men worked a split shift two days that week "in order to work the machine extra hours." PAA 69.235/373.

[53] The factory did not have a lunchroom or the proper number of toilets and its sanitary conditions were described as "fair". H.M.Bishop's Inspector's Report on Medalta Potteries factory, June 15, 1926, PAA 69.235/69.

[54] Antonelli and Forbes, Pottery in Alberta, 59, 61, 105.

[55] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000; Frank Anhelher audiotape interview, May 30, 1988, MHM. C65.

[56] Letter from Workmen's Compensation Board (WCB) Claims Officer to Medalta Potteries, September 15, 1926, (PAA 69.235/65).

[57]PAA 69.235/65.

[58] Former worker Engelina Kessler said that other than running the jiggerwheel there was not much skill involved in the various pottery jobs and everyone learned quickly on the job. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[59] This higher incidence is particularly striking given that women represented only about 10 per cent of the workforce in the 1920s and appear to have maintained a similar proportion during the 1930s, although few figures are available for those years. Workmen's Compensation Act (Accident Fund) Alberta, 1925, PAA 69.235/65. Government wage summary form, 1927, PAA 69.235/272.

[60] Hannah Osborne interview September 23, 2000. Engelina Kessler and Bertha Riegel took waitressing and domestic work respectively during the strike. Both women felt relieved when the strike ended and they could return to more congenial work at the pottery. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000 and Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[61] Christine and Alex Pocsik interview September 23, 2000.

[62] Lloyd Brosnikoff interview September 23, 2000.

[63] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000. "As late as 1936 75 per cent of the agricultural labour force in Alberta (100,000 people) relied on wage labour to supplement their farm incomes, but only 7 per cent (9,000 people) were year-round farm hands." Freisen, The Canadian Prairies, 319. See also, Cecilia Danysk, Hired Hands.

[64]Mary P. Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the Middle Class, 1780-1850 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987). These

authors demonstrate that the ideology of separate spheres, which emerged with industrialization, profoundly altered fundamental concepts of femininity and masculinity throughout society in ways that were class-specific.

[65] All of the former workers questioned about the number of married women at Medalta agreed that few worked at the factory.

[66] In 1921 17 per cent of women in Canada over the age of fifteen were part of the paid labour force. In Alberta the figure was only 13 per cent. The vast majority – 80 per cent according to one Vancouver survey – were single women under the age of twenty-five who were forced to work out of economic necessity. By 1944 the number of women in the paid labour force had risen to 33 per cent then dropped to 24 per cent in 1946. It did not reach 33 per cent again until 1967. Prentice, et al, Canadian Women, 251, 350-52.

[67] The percentage of married women working rose from just over 10 per cent in 1941 to between 25 and 35 per cent during the peak years of the war. By 1961 nearly 50 per cent of all female workers in Canada were married, which represented a dramatic shift in the composition of the Canadian labour force. Ibid., 350-52.

[68] Prentice, et al Canadian Women, 351. Prolonged schooling was possible for more Alberta children as rising government revenues after the Leduce oil strike were used to expand education funding. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 124-25, 142.

[69] Milkman, Gender at Work, especially "Introduction," 1-11.

[70] Sarah Carter, Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997). See "Introduction: Defining and Redefining Women," 3-47.

[71] David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class. (London & New York: Verso, 1996), 14.

[72] Prentice, et al, Canadian Women, 346. Visible minority women, who previously had been limited to domestic work, were drawn into industrial work during the acute wartime labour shortage. As Prentice, et al point out; however, they tended to be assigned the least desireable jobs. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000. Union Minutes book, UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[73] Hugh Armstrong and Pat Armstrong, The Double Ghetto: Canadian Women and Their Segregated Work Third Edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994).

[74] Alberta Labour and Social Legislation History, unpublished document, author unknown, Alberta Department of Labour, 1970.

[75] Prentice et al, Canadian Women, 258-260.

[76] In total those thirty-eight family names represented ninety-six workers, which was nearly 40 per cent of the workforce at Medalta. The family with the largest number of workers at the pottery -- the Entzminger family -- had six people on the union list. August 2, 1947 Mine Mill membership list for Medalta Potteries. Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed, August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S.C. 1318, #44436.

[77] Neither Pocsik or any of the other former workers interviewed could recall many married women working at the factory, although Pocsik's own mother worked there briefly one winter. Christine and Alex Pocsik interview September 23, 2000.

[78] Although figures are not available for 1946, in 1947 a Toronto Welfare Council budget estimated that the minimum income requirement for a family of four was $40.11. Mine Mill brief to the Arbitration Board regarding Dominion Glass June 6, 1949, UBC Mine Mill 128/23.

[79] None of the women or men interviewed completed high school, although three women completed Grade Nine. The majority left school after Grade Eight, often because they lived on a farm and the family could not afford to board them in Medicine Hat where the only high school was located.

[80] Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Census of the Prairies Provinces, 1946, Vol. I Population, Department of Trade and Commerce (Ottawa, ON, 1946), 553.

[81] All of the women interviewed went back to work at some point in their lives and most of them worked sporadically throughout the years they raised children.

[82] Bertha Riegel interview, December 14, 2000.

[83] The strength and pervasiveness of the expectation that a married man should be paid more is evident in Medalta management's hiring deliberations about the relative merits of two men for the job as office manager in 1938. One man was married and the other was single. Management was less inclined to hire the married man because he would "no doubt, want more." Internal memo December 8, 1937, PAA 69.235/370.

[84] In a brief to the Alberta government the Calgary Board of Trade specifically refuted the idea of paying wages according to need: "it is neither consistent nor true to argue that all employees are heads of families and that wages should be based upon domestic responsibilities. Rather ... wages are ... related to the kind of work, the degree of experience and skill, and the amount and value of the end production ... but the basis on which these rates are set must be upon the total available production and the ability to pay." Calgary Board of Trade submission to the Alberta Board of Industrial Relations, April, 1949, PAA67.71/470.R.

[85] Anne Hayward, "Medalta's Art Department", Material History Review, Vol. 39, (Spring 1994), 14-18.

[86] The wage differential is based on a year-end wage summary for 1927. PAA 69.235/272.

[87] In 1870 only 10 per cent of Trenton, N.J. pottery workers were female. The percentage rose to eighteen by 1880 as the amount of decorative work increased, reaching twenty-three per cent by 1919, which was still well below the English figure of one-third in 1861. Stern, The Pottery Industry of Trenton, 35-36, 41-43.

[88] Hayward, "Medalta's Art Department," 23, f.n.39. Although the art department was managed by men, only women workers could work on the shop floor.

[89] Eighty-nine females and 124 males went out on strike. Unemployment Insurance Commission Report on Industrial Dispute by J.W. McLane, Manager, Medicine Hat Employment Office, August 22, 1948, National Archives of Canada (NAC) Department of Labour RG27 Vol. 456, Strike154.

[90] Caragata, Alberta Labour, 27-28. A Medicine Hat local of the Federated Association of Letter Carriers formed in 1913 and in 1917 municipal employees organized, 48, 82.

[91] In 1917 the local labour council, together with the Edmonton and Calgary councils, jointly sent a telegram to Ottawa opposing the conscription of workers until there was a conscription of wealth. That year members of a union at Redcliffe, which borders on Medicine Hat, were fined for having 'subversive' newspapers. In 1919 Medicine Hat hosted the most radical convention of the AFL. The main topics for discussion were freedom of speech and the tactic of general strikes in light of labour's recent electoral failures. Caragata, Alberta Labour, 58, 60, 70.

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[92] Gould, All Hell for a Basement, 181.

[93] United Farmers of Alberta candidate Perren Baker won the1921 provincial election with the help of Labor running mate, Billy Johnson. Jones, Empire of Dust, 119.

[94] Horne held office until 1947 when an entire slate of municipal labour candidates was defeated shortly after the Medalta strike collapsed. Gould, All Hell for a Basement, 279-80; The Medicine Hat News, December 10, 1947.

[95]Two of the women married, two others moved out of the province, two returned to their family farm and one returned to a former job in a laundry. One worker was discharged because she was "not suitable". Memorandum from Charles Pratt to W. Smeaton, Alberta Commissioner of Labor, July 12, 1926, Provincial Archives of Alberta (PAA) 69.235/69.

[96]Letter from J. Robinson to C. Adams, Board of Industrial Relations, December 14, 1938, PAA 69.131/2013.
[97] The plant manager, W. Armstrong and the ceramics engineer, Karl Baumler both left Medalta for Medicine Hat Potteries, as well as several senior jiggermen, PAA 69.235/370.

[98] Letter by E.G. Phillipson, April 11, 1940. PAA 69.235/408.

[99] Although Medicine Hat was post-industrial because of its early Anglo settlement and the availability of new farm machinery, railways, and cars, the degree of paternalism evident in the relationship between Medalta Potteries management and workers during the interwar years bears a strong resemblance to labour relations found in industries during an earlier stage of industrialization. Palmer has explained this form of paternalism as necessary "to justify exploitation and mediate inherently irreconcilable interests that had not yet hardened into class antagonism." Bryan D. Palmer, Working Class Experience, 42.

[100] Letter from A.D. Cumming, President and Managing Director, to E.A. Stone, interim plant manager, December 3, 1937, PAA 69.235/383.

[101] Although figures are not available, former workers confirmed what the union lists indicate, i.e. that most of the workers at Medalta were of German-speaking ancestry. Engelina Kessler said about 70 per cent of the workforce was of German ancestry. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000. Those who came from Russsia tended to be German-speaking Russians.

[102] Palmer, Peoples of Alberta, 5. German was the first language of thirteen per cent of the heads of households in Medicine Hat, according to the 1946 census, which made it the dominant language next to English in the community. Census of the Prairie Provinces, Vol. III "Housing and Families", 459.

[103] During WWI a German-owned greenhouse operation in Medicine Hat was smashed. By 1939 hostility toward German-speaking peoples was more muted, but it was still strong enough to make a new German-speaking church congregation in Medicine Hat debate whether or not to conduct services in German. Gould, All Hell for a Basement, 118, 145. Workers at Medalta were not allowed to speak German to the German POW inmates who worked at the factory during the war. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.
[104] The flow of immigrants to the Canadian West slowed substantially during the interwar period, so that by the 1940s first-generation Canadians who were the children of immigrants, were becoming predominant in the pottery. Nearly all of the former pottery workers interviewed were born in the Medicine Hat area. The one exception was Alex Pocsik, who came to the area from Europe as a child.

[105] Palmer, Land of the Second Chance, 193, 235, 246.

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[106] Francis et al, Destinies, 300.

[107] Palmer, Working Class Experience, 250-254. Industrial unionism is the organization of all workers in an industry, including the unskilled into a single union. It began to achieve success in the late 1930s, first in the United States and then in Canada, in response to technological changes that created mass production, eroding the power of skilled workers who had previously dominated organized labour's craft unions.

[108] Francis et al, Destinies, 303.

[109] James R. Green, The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

[110] Bryan Palmer argues that, ironically, these orders-in-council triggered labour conflict rather than preventing it. A bitter strike in 1943 by the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers at Kirkland Lake, Ontario in which the government refused to act, outraged workers across the country, marking a turning point in labour's attitude toward government. Palmer, Working Class Experience, 278-9 and 286-87.

[111] Gregory S. Kealey with Douglas Cruikshank, "Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950," Figure 11.c: Number of Person Days Lost, 1891-1950, in Workers and Canadian History, 407.

[112] Bryan Palmer, Working Class Experience, 279-80.

[113] Alberta Foundry and Machine Shop, which manufactured anti-aircraft and shrapnel shells, a British Commonwealth Air Training School, and a prisoner of war camp that housed up to 12,000 inmates also generated considerable employment in the city. Jones et al, The Weather Factory, 97, 99; Gould, All Hell for a Basement, 193-194.

[114] Eighty Medalta workers enlisted in the armed services. Letter from A.D. Cumming to Col. Ross, National Defence, February 15, 1945, PAA 69.216/10.

[115] Plant superintendent Ed Phillipson expressed delight at the tractability of the POWs. Antonelli and Forbes, Pottery in Alberta, 113.

[116] This observation is based on the assumption of workers interviewed that women workers were not paid the male rate even if they performed a job traditionally held by men. Secrecy about employee wages prevented workers from knowing each other's wage rates. Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[117] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 113-114. Antonelli and Forbes, Pottery in Alberta, 113.

[118] Data on the male/female ratio of workers is not available for the war years; however, on the eve of the strike 42 per cent of workers were women and the wartime figure was likely even higher. Unemployment Insurance Commission Report on Industrial Dispute by J.W. McLane, Manager, Medicine Hat Employment Office, August 22, 1948, NAC Department of Labour RG27 Vol. 456, Strike154.

[119] Antonelli and Forbes, Pottery in Alberta, 111-112.

[120] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 108-109. Air sample tests at Medicine Hat Potteries during the war revealed levels ten times higher than the allowable limit. Although no similar records are available for Medalta Potteries, the fact that Medalta was an older, less-well-maintained factory would suggest that silica and lead particle readings would have been at least the same or higher.

[121] Letter from E.E. Owen, WCB to Medalta Potteries dated January 11, 28 1941, PAA 69.235/438.

[122] An exchange of letters between Medalta and the Workmen's Compensation Board concerning this accident in May, 1941 reveals that Medalta had not provided the government with a monthly safety report for six months and lacked adequate safety guards on its moving equipment. PAA 69.235/438.

[123] Hannah Osborne interview September 23, 2000.

[124] Safety report injuries: September, 1940, 7.2 per cent; July, 1941, 9 per cent; August, 1941, 13.3 per cent; October 1941, 2.8 per cent; November 1941, 1.0 per cent. PAA 69.235/438.

[125] PAA 69.235/438.

[126] Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000. Engelina Kessler interview, September 16, 2000. Christine and Alex Pocsik interview, September 23, 2000.

[127] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 82.

[128] Ibid., 84-85; Forbes, "Manufacturing Process," 48.

[129] Forbes, "Manufacturing Process," 42.

[130] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview September 23, 2000.

[131] Stern's study demonstrates that mechanization contributed to the collapse in 1922 of an extended period of labour relations peace in the Trenton pottery industry. Stern, The Pottery Industry of Trenton.

[132] Hannah Osborne's name was on the union list one year but in an interview she said she did not remember belonging to a union called the Clay Products Workers. She did, however, remember the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Hannah Osborne interview September 23, 2000.

[133] The Clay Products Union's members list cited fifty-three employees in 1943, sixty-three in 1944, seventy-seven in 1945, thirty-five in 1946, and twenty-five in February, 1947. Examinations for Discovery, October 3, 1947. Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[134] W.S. Ratcliffe to G.C. Cushing, Secretary, Trades and Labour Congress; printed in The Call, Calgary Trades and Labour Council, May 15, 1947.

[135] "Preview of Pottery Business for 1946," PAA 69.216/10.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[138] Alfred Edwards, Introduction by Craig Heron, "The Mill: A Worker's Memoir from 1945 to 1948," Labour/Le Travail, 43 (Spring 1999), 171.

[139] Despite considerable debate about PC 1003, historians agree that it opened a new era in which organized Canadian workers, including the unskilled, gained a degree of legitimacy never previously attained. Debate centers on whether the legislation strengthened the position of workers by making it easier to form a union and forcing union recognition or whether it weakened it by severely limiting use of the strike. See Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations Systems During World War Two," Labour/Le Travailleur, 3, 1978; Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon; Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz,

"Towards Permanent Exceptionalism: Coercion and Consent in Canadian Industrial Relations," Labour/Le Travail, 13, (Spring, 1984); Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips and Jesse Vorst, Eds., Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003 (Winnipeg/Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1995); Fudge and Tucker, Labour Before the Law.

[140] Anne Forrest, "Securing the Male Breadwinner: A Feminist Interpretation of PC1003," in Gonick, et al. Labour Pains, Labour Gains, 139.

[141] Scholars generally agree that there was a concerted effort to reinscribe traditional gender roles, but there is debate about the extent to which that goal was successful. See Ruth Roach Pierson, "They're Still Women After All:" The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), and Jeff Keshen, "Revisiting Canada's Civilian Women During World War II, Histoire sociale/Social History, 30 (1997): 239-266, for insight into the debate in Canada. For the United States see Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1988), and Joanne Meyerowitz, Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

[142]Pierson, "They're Still Women After All".

[143] This social climate was particularly oppressive for lesbian and gay Canadians as groups and institutions tried "to reproduce heterosexual family patterns and the sexual subordination of women." Line Chamberland, "Remembering Lesbian Bars: Montreal, 1955-1975," in Canadian Women: A Reader, Wendy Mitchinson, Paula Bourne, Alison Prentice, Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Beth Light, Naomi Black, eds. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, Canada, 1996)," 352-379. "[H]omosexuals were seen as threats to the traditional Canadian nuclear family," triggering "witchhunts" to root out homosexuals in the civil service because of "defects in their characters." Alvin Finkel, Our Lives: Canada After 1945 (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers, 1997), 33-34.

[144]During the war a wife could earn any amount and still be treated as a full dependent.

[145] Ann Porter, "Women and Income Security in the Postwar Period: The Case of Unemployment Insurance, 1945-1962", in Canadian Women: A Reader, Mitchinson, et al., 324-5.

[146] In June, 1947 the minimum wage for women was raised from $15 per week (31¢ per hour) to $18 per week (37.5¢ per hour). The minimum wage for men was raised from $20 per week (42¢ per hour) to $25 per week (52¢ per hour). These minimum wages were based on a forty-eight hour week. Alberta Employment Standards Policy Manual, undated, Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Employment Standards Department.

[147] Although many Canadian workplaces pressured married women to give up their job, a persistent labour shortage in Medicine Hat at the end of the war helps explain why workers interviewed said they were not aware of such pressure at Medalta Potteries. In 1945 Phillipson responded to the local legion's concern that POW's were taking jobs from returning servicemen by explaining that an acute labour shortage still existed and returning servicemen were welcome. Letters exchanged between Ed Phillipson and C.H. Park, October 24 and November 2, 1945, PAA 69.216/10. A news report indicated that Medicine Hat had very little unemployment in 1947, The Medicine Hat News, December 3, 1947.

[148] During the war Bertha Riegel worked with Winnie Stores, a woman who operated a jiggering machine. Riegel was a mold runner. Asked whether Stores was a jiggerman Riegel said: "Well, we didn't call them jiggerer ... they just ran the machines – the operator." The title "jiggerman" may have been reserved for male workers to justify the wage difference between men and women who operated this machine. Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[149] "Medalta Facts" by Medalta Potteries management, The Medicine Hat News, October 9. 1947.

[150] Julie Guard, "Womanly Innocence and Manly Self-Respect: Gendered Challenges to Labour's Postwar Compromise", and Forrest, "Securing the Male Breadwiner," 119-138.

[151] Pamela Sugiman, Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937-1979, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 51-57.

[152] Julie Guard, "Womanly Innocence," 124.
[153] Parr. Gender of Breadwinners, see Chapter Five, "Womanly Militance, Neighbourly Wrath," 96-119. Parr's analysis of a bitter strike at the Penman's factory in Paris, Ontario in 1949 reveals an effort by the union to minimize the militance of women workers. Another similarity to the Medalta strike is the attempt by Penman's and the state to discredit the workers' union with allegations of communist influence.
[154] This approach also reflected the new bureaucracy and accountability of union leaders for controlling their members. Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 282.

[155] Julie Guard, "Womanly Innocence", 124.

[156] See Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism"; Jameson, All That Glitters; Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall Be All, (New York: Quadrangle, 1969); Vernon H. Jenson, Heritage of Conflict: Labour Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry Up to 1930, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950).

[157] James J. Lorence, The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America, (Albuquerque, New Mexico: The University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 20.

[158] The Cold War was instigated in September, 1945 in Canada by Igor Gouzenko's revelation of a Communist spy ring. See Frances et al, Destinies, 331.

[159] Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 292.

[160] See Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.); Lorence, The Suppression of Salt of the Earth; Whitaker and Marcuse, Cold War Canada, 358.

[161] The movie is also remarkable because of the difficulty its producers, who included Mine Mill, faced because of the repressive Cold War political climate in the United States. Salt of the Earth was banned in the United States during the first years after it came out. James J. Lorence, The Suppression of Salt of the Earth.
[162] Laurie Mercier, "'Instead of Fighting the Common Enemy': Mine Mill Versus the Steelworkers in Montana, 1950-1967," Labor History, 40/4 459-480.

[163] The companies organized by Mine Mill in Alberta between 1944 and 1949 included an amonia plant in Calgary, Consolidated Mining & Smelting, Dominion Bridge Company, Canada Cement Company, Westeel, as well as Dominion Glass and Medalta. I am assuming that these operations employed primarily men. Report to Mine, Mill Alberta Conference, Calgary, April 24, 1949 by International Representative W. (Bill) Longridge, UBC Mine Mill Box 127/2.

[164] Ibid.

[165] An undated bulletin by union promoters in Medicine Hat sometime in the spring of 1947 states: "Present working conditions and wages in this area, stand as a threat to organized workers in other parts of this

province and elsewhere. Thus making an intensive organizing campaign a necessity." Undated bulletin, "Medicine Hat Becomes Unionized", UBC Mine Mill, 128/25.

[166] See page 21.

[167] The Clay Products News and Ceramic Record, August, 1948, 1; Historical Statistics of Canada, (Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1983), E41-48.

[168] These figures do not include piecework rates which allowed women to earn a top rate of thirty-five dollars and men to earn up to forty-three dollars. Unemployment Insurance Commission: Report on Industrial Dispute, September 13, 1947. Completed by company manager Jack Cunliffe. NAC Department of Labour, RG 27, Vol. 456, Strike 154.

[169] A statement by each party in the dispute concerning wage rates was published in the Medicine Hat News during the strike. See "Medalta Facts", October 9, 1947 and "Further Facts Re: Medalta", October 11, 1947.

[170] The Medicine Hat News, November 24, 1947.

[171] "A.F. of L. Union Plays Company Union Role in Medicine Hat" notice, UBC Mine Mill 127 1& 2.

[172] Anne Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 119.

[173] The Medicine Hat News, July 9, 1947.

[174] "Strikes and Lockouts in Canada During 1947, "Department of Labour, Canada, Supplement to the Labour Gazette, April, 1948.

[175] The Medicine Hat News, May 12, 1947.

[176] Letter from K.A. Pugh, Secretary of the Alberta Department of Trade and Industry to Frank Rogess, Business Agent, Mine Mill, December, 1, 1947. UBC Mine Mill, 127/1&2.

[177] "Strikes and Lockouts in Canada," Labour Gazette, April, 1948.

[178] Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 86, 136-137.

[179] Richards and Pratt, Prairie Capitalism, 160.

[180] The Medicine Hat News and CHAT Radio. Hop Yuill started the radio station in 1946. It was the only radio station in the community for several decades. Autobiography of Joseph Harlan Yuill, researched and compiled by Kathleen Dirk, "Living in Medicine Hat: The Yuill History 1883-1985." Unpublished manuscript, 1985, MHM..

[181] Hayward, Pottery in Alberta, 136-37.

[182] German's vested interest in the dispute is transparent during some of the court actions when he constantly answers questions for the plant manager under questioning by defense lawyer Joseph Cohen. Examination for Discover, Jack Cunliffe, Oct. 3, 1947. Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85..289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[183] The statement was signed by William Longridge, International Representative of Mine Mill in Alberta and Clarence Sailer, Chairman of the Pottery Unit of Local 881, The Medicine Hat News, October 11, 1947.

[184] Ibid., October 30, 1947.

[185] Alfred Edwards, "The Mill: A Worker's Memoir from 1945 to 1948," Introduction by Craig Heron, Labour/Le Travail, 43 (Spring 1999). Alfred Edwards' memoir articulates the disappointment that motivated many ex-servicemen to become active in their workplace union.

[186] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000. Rueben Kessler passed away in 1999.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Christine and Alex Pocsik interview September 23, 2000.
[189] Engelina Kessler said her husband quit school in Grade Six or Seven because he was one of the oldest of twelve children in a family that was financially strapped. Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[190] Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[191] Lloyd Brosnikoff was the second man interviewed. He had just finished school at the age of 16 the summer of the strike and worked at the pottery only a few weeks before the walkout. Lloyd and Rosetta Brosnikoff interview September 23, 2000.

[192] It seems no coincidence that Hannah Osborne, who was engaged to be married in six weeks when the strike broke, and who never went back to paid work, was least supportive of the union. Hannah Osborne interview September 23, 2000. All of the women eventually married and had children; however, most performed work for wages throughout much of their lives.

[193] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[194] Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[195] Dorothy Beierbach interview December 14, 2000.

[196] Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[197] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 19, 2001.

[198] "There were very few married women working at the pottery at the time I was there. There were mostly single girls – uneducated, single girls." Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[199] Engelina Kessler and Christine Pocsik worked in the art department and described being able to bring a cup of tea to their work station or to take a little more time at lunch (when they were on a piecework rate) because of Tom Hulme. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000; Christine Pocsik interview September 23, 2000.

[200] Hannah Osborne interview September 23, 2000.

[201] Ibid.

[202] The company's attempt to force a vote was successful. Mine Mill won, but with a very slim majority. Minutes of a meeting between William Longridge, Mine Mill lawyer Joseph Cohen, and the provincial Board of Industrial Relations, spring 1948. PAA 79.46/214.

[203] Gerald Freisen has noted the essential conservatism of the Alberta Progressive movement, which manifested in the United Farmers of Alberta, compared to radical labour movements such as the Syndicalists, who formed the Industrial Workers of the World. The Progressive movement was fundamentally "evolutionary" rather than "revolutionary" in outlook because it strove to work within the capitalist system, not to overthrow it. Gerald Freisen, The Canadian Prairies, 372.

[204] Hannah Osborne's brothers and sisters all rejected farming: "We didn't see no future in it ourselves." Hannah Osborne interview September 23, 2000.

CHAPTER THREE

"To this day I don't know what they were trying to prove:"[1] Reconstructing Militancy

It has been more than half a century since 213 Medalta Potteries workers walked off the job, leaving behind only eight co-workers who refused to strike.[2] The personal fallout from that historic event persists even today. The Medalta strike remains a taboo subject for a number of former workers, now in their 70s, who stood on opposite sides of the bitter and lengthy dispute. Requests for an interview with those who crossed the picketline were refused because of keenly felt feelings that could threaten the fragile local truce carefully constructed over time. As one former worker explained, ten years passed before some of those involved in the strike spoke to each other again. Today they speak, but the strike itself has never been discussed. Although only a few former workers described such intense feelings, the enduring bitterness for some suggests a complex range of worker experiences and motivations that belies accounts of the strike as primarily the work of 'sinister' union leaders from outside the community.

Previously unexamined union records, photographs, and new oral histories with former workers, demonstrate that, although some workers opposed the strike, there was substantial grassroots support for it within the pottery workforce. There was also significant support for labour activism within the larger community of Medicine Hat, where there was a sense that low industry wages were hurting local businesses. The Medalta Potteries strike became an important conflict in the struggle between capital and labour at a critical juncture in the province's development. Management welcomed the strike as an opportunity to crush a union known for its militancy. Its efforts were supported by local industrialists, who feared that organized labour would force wages higher. The strike was manipulated by the company, state institutions and the press to discredit the union movement and undermine legitimate working-class demands at a time when labour held a position of relative strength. Labour's strength derived from a post-war economic boom triggered by the Leduc oil strike as well as pent-up consumer demand. Labour unrest was

fuelled by a sense of entitlement because of wartime sacrifices and the expectation that workers would share in the province's growing prosperity.

The company's strategy to undermine worker demands relied heavily on the legal system, which required the support of the state and the media. This strategy was grounded in a profoundly gendered construction of male and female workers. Responding to pervasive contemporary class and gender assumptions about male workers as family breadwinners and female workers as economic dependents the attention of management, the courts, and the press focused on and exaggerated male actions during the strike, while the presence of women workers was ignored or underplayed. The union's masculinist culture and militant stance contributed to this effect, as did the values, beliefs, and attitudes of rank-and-file workers.

The result was a construction of male workers as violent and dangerous yet at the same time naïve and ignorant. There was an eerie silence about women workers who made up 42 per cent of the workforce. This silence suggests societal discomfort with the spectacle of women workers' militancy because it did not fit contemporary cultural norms for femininity. More fundamentally, women workers' labour activism and militancy was ignored because of an uneasiness about the reality of working-class women's essential role in the "male" domain of paid work. Thus, when not ignored, women workers' labour activism was obscured by their construction as innocent victims of either industrialists or the union, depending on the context. This construction reasserted their conformity to 'normal' femininity. The assumption that respectable women workers would not be militant, together with their less legitimate claim to adequately paid work, limited their public impact during the strike and invited an emphasis on the actions of male workers.

Gendered constructions of male and female workers, which drew on contemporary cultural stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, played a crucial role in the strike's outcome. Reasonable demands for union recognition, bargaining in good faith, higher wages and better work conditions were easily dismissed by a public offended by the apparently brutish behaviour of male workers and insufficiently concerned about the needs of women workers. The effectiveness of these constructions reflected pervasive cultural assumptions that linked violence and ignorance with working-class masculinity. In

addition, the emphasis on worker ignorance or innocence made Medalta workers an easy target for allegations of insidious Communist influence. Amidst the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War that gripped Alberta and much of the Western world in 1947, allegations that gullible workers were being deceived by unscrupulous Communist union leaders were credible and helped destroy the broad-based public support Medalta workers enjoyed at the outset of the strike. Faced with this loss of support the sense of entitlement and injustice that had fired many workers' commitment to labour activism evaporated. Union membership among Medalta workers dropped from a pre-strike level of 98 per cent to roughly 50 per cent six months after the strike ended.[3]

This chapter details worker and community support for labour activism at Medalta Potteries and how it shifted throughout the course of the strike. It elaborates the key ways in which class and gender operated to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the union in the eyes of the public. An important theme throughout my analysis concerns the pernicious alliance between Medalta Potteries and the state in its many forms. This alliance was grounded in a profoundly gendered, middle-class view of labour that was paternalistic and anti-union despite the existence of new provincial labour legislation modelled on PC 1003.

The events of the Medalta strike make explicit the extent to which Premier Ernest Manning's Social Credit government, the judiciary, and local municipal government abrogated their responsibility to equalize the balance of power between capital and labour on behalf of Alberta workers. The evidence suggests that the state chose to handle the Medalta strike severely, particularly in light of its more conciliatory approach to other local labour disputes at the time. This choice reflects the potent combination of three factors. The government was dealing with a vehemently anti-union company with which it clearly sympathized and with a notoriously militant union whose potential power it feared. The confrontation occurred at a time when the provincial government was making every effort to attract American oil investors following the recent Leduc oil strike. To compound the situation, two weeks after the Medalta strike began a national meat packers strike by the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) broke out across the country, including in Edmonton.[4] This successful strike, which roughly parallelled the timing of the pottery

strike, demonstrated the potential for union power. The provincial government was unable to intervene decisively because of the UPWA strike's national scope; however, the premier and members of cabinet capitalized on rising anti-communist sentiment with allusions to an international conspiracy and urged workers to cross the picketline.[5] It was during this labour crisis that provincial courts dealt severely with strike-related charges against Medalta workers, some of which were completely unfounded.

In the months leading up to the strike the speed with which Medalta workers signed Mine Mill membership cards, and their remarkable support vote for certification, indicates there was strong worker interest in a union whose militant approach held the greatest promise of improved wages and working conditions. Within a few weeks Mine Mill had signed up 166 of the factory's 222 potential union members and on May 22 became the official bargaining agent for Medalta workers following a government-supervised vote that was 100 per cent in favour of certification.[6] Approximately 200 votes were cast in favour of the union and no votes were cast against it.[7] It was the first 100 per cent certification vote to be achieved in the province at that time.[8] Two-and-a-half months later an unsupervised union vote on whether or not to strike resulted in a 98 per cent strike vote – only three union members voted against striking.[9] In interviews, former workers report that workers "came out in droves" for union meetings during these early months leading up to the strike.[10] Although there is evidence that many workers followed the lead of their co-workers, a substantial core group of men and women were committed unionists.

There was also evidence of strong support for Medalta workers within the larger community of Medicine Hat when the strike started. After walking off the job, fifty striking workers sang and waved placards in a spontaneous parade from the pottery up through the town core without harassment by local police (see photograph 1). Unlike the local newspaper, the police did not make an issue of the parade's illegality.[11] Medicine Hat Mayor William Rae tried to facilitate a settlement by arranging a conference between himself, management and the union less than two weeks after the strike began. Rae abandoned this attempt the same day it was initiated, despite union leader William Longridge's strong support. Veiled comments in a letter from Longridge to the mayor suggest that the union blamed management for the mayor's sudden reversal: "Any obstacle

Photograph 1: Approximately fifty striking Medalta workers sang and waved placards in a spontaneous parade led by a car from the pottery up through city streets on the first day of the strike.

Photograph courtesy of Hannah Osborne.

to a settlement of this dispute will be regarded by the citizens of the city with disfavour, and I urge your worship if such obstacles have been placed in your path, you should make a public statement to that effect." [12] But the mayor's initiative at this early stage indicates the high-profile nature of the strike and the legitimacy of workers' demands within the community.[13] That impression is reinforced by city council's approval of a community tag day that raised $475.23 for strikers and a well-attended strike rally only a few days later.[14] Two city aldermen spoke at the rally that drew 900 supporters and raised an additional $214 only a few days after the tag day.[15] Throughout the strike only a handful of people responded to Medalta's advertisements for new employees.[16] Finally, only weeks after the strike began union representatives from across the city organized a local labour committee to promote a slate of labour candidates in the upcoming municipal election.[17]

There was a perceptible shift in attitudes toward the union workers as strike events unfolded. The provincial government's initial inaction and exclusive focus on the union's behaviour, together with a complex web of legal devices used by the company with the complicity of the courts, projected an image of workers as unlawful, unreasonable, and

intransigent. In comparison, the company's actions escaped media or official criticism. In the first days after negotiations broke down – before the strike began – both parties chose not to seek government conciliation.[18] The union's international representative in Calgary, William Longridge, came to the city the day workers walked out and approached management to arrange a meeting. His request was rejected when Longridge said he had not changed his position.[19] Thereafter the company refused to meet with the union for nearly a month, even at the invitation of the mayor. Union leaders continued to seek alternative methods of resolving the dispute, such as informal meetings and government mediation.

The initial refusal of government mediator David Mathieson to intervene in the dispute, and his exclusive focus on the union's behaviour, contributed to a portrayal of the union as unlawful. Mathieson, who was in Medicine Hat to deal with another labour dispute when the strike broke, refused to meet with representatives of the striking workers until they returned to work. He blamed only the union for not requesting conciliation as mandated by provincial labour legislation. In a front page article in the local newspaper Mathieson said: "It's an illegal walkout and the department is not taking any action until employes return to work and the union applies to the minister for conciliation."[20] Yet in the same situation one month earlier, involving the walkout of workers at Medicine Hat Potteries Ltd., Mathieson flew in from Edmonton and met with them.[21] He was able to open conciliation proceedings, which eventually went to arbitration. Mathieson corrected the impression of government inconsistency and harshness four days later by saying that he was referring to the illegality of such action by any union, not the Medalta union in particular. His correction appeared at the end of an article placed in the back pages of the local newspaper.[22]

The government did not intervene in the strike until nearly a month after employees walked out, and its intervention was a response to a request from the union, not the company. Union president Clarence Sailer travelled to Edmonton with city Alderman E.W. Horne to ask for government mediation.[23] Press coverage of the mediation talks focused on the union's refusal to allow the conciliator to address the general union membership. A news report was subtitled "Both Hold Line" despite a significant wage concession by the

union -- no concessions were offered by the company. The union reduced its wage proposal from a 33 per cent increase for females and a 21 per cent increase for males, to a 12 per cent increase across the board, which was a major sacrifice on the part of women workers, in particular.[24]

The most powerful expression of Medalta's intransigence and its attempt to destroy the union chosen by its employees was management's decision to fire all 213 striking workers less than a week after the strike began. Medalta placed a front-page advertisement in the local newspaper on the Saturday after the strike started, notifying its striking employees that "these persons are now considered no longer employes of Medalta Potteries Ltd." Employees were instructed to call at the office Monday to receive their wages. The company's actions, which were unprecedented in Medicine Hat labour disputes that year, were justified in terms of the strike's illegal status: "The strike is officially illegal, and the union has had ample opportunity this week to return to work, and open conciliation proceedings. This has not been done so we are forced to this drastic step."[25] The company's indication that it would "consider applications for employment from its former employes" makes explicit management's intention of getting rid of the union.[26]

One of the earliest indications of initial local support that evaporated was an about-face by Medicine Hat's police court Magistrate in his handling of the first strike-related charges. A week after the strike began, Magistrate T. O'B. Gore-Hickman, sitting in Medicine Hat police court, and Justice Clinton B. Ford, sitting in the Supreme Court of Alberta in Calgary, were each faced with separate injunctions requested by Medalta Potteries to restrain union members from picketing the plant. In Medicine Hat the Magistrate told four men and six women picketers who appeared before him that both parties had certain rights which had to be respected. "Employes had the right to picket and to attempt to persuade other employes to join them, but under no circumstances could force or intimidation be used."[27] In Calgary, Justice Ford interpreted the law more severely in his handling of a separate injunction that named fifteen men and five women, many of whom were union officials. Ford said that an injunction restrained workers "from picketing or causing any act injurious to the company's business."[28] Upon learning about the injunction granted by his judicial superior, the Medicine Hat Magistrate reversed his decision in a

news article published the following day and said any picketing would be illegal. The difference between the two judgments suggests that at the time there was the potential for a more generous interpretation of labour law that adhered more closely to the spirit of PC 1003. The local Magistrate's initial assumption that picketing was allowed may also reflect his sensitivity to community support for the striking workers. Either way, this evidence indicates a harsh judicial interpretation of the law in the case of the Medalta Potteries strike.

The injunction granted by Justice Ford was part of a larger civil action that had an enormous impact on the course of the strike. The spurious allegations it contained and the painfully slow pace at which it proceeded combined to damage the union's credibility. The larger civil action claimed that the union's certification was invalid and that the strike itself was illegal. In addition, the company sought $10,000 in damages from the union as well as legal costs. Evidence to support Justice Ford's severe interpretation of the injunction and the company's damaging allegations could not be tested until a regular sitting of the Supreme Court of Alberta was held in Medicine Hat. That sitting, which was initially set for October 15, was put over until October 23 – the day the strike ended. But public uncertainty about the union's legitimacy began when the claim was filed seven days after the strike began. Significantly, the press failed to mention in initial reports that only an interim injunction had been granted August 19, and therefore it was not based on a judicial examination of evidence. Instead the emphasis was on "defiant" picketers who were violating a court injunction.[29] Similarly the press consistently reiterated the company's claim that the union was not authorized to represent Medalta workers – an absurd allegation given the government-supervised certification vote that demonstrated 100 per cent support among workers who voted.

When the judgment for Medalta Potteries' civil claim was finally handed down in November – after the strike ended – its finding was that the government had used the wrong certification form because of new legislation passed in the spring.[30] A government letter to Mine Mill summing up the problem stated:

> [I]t was found that the Certification was faulty due to us using the old form and that the fault could be easily remedied by issuing a new

> Certificate . . . the majority of the employees had elected the Union as their Bargaining Agent, and . . . the fault was only a minor one and in most cases would not even be questioned.[31]

In effect the union's credibility as a legitimate bargaining agent for Medalta workers during the strike was compromised by a technicality resulting from government error. Press coverage of the judgment, when it was handed down after the strike ended, focused on the technical fact that the union was "not certified." But by then the union had lost the public relations battle. Even so, the article obscured the reason the union was not certified, which was government error, and ignored the implications for the strike.[32]

The civil action launched by the company in Supreme Court a week after the strike began was a legal manoeuvre that put the union on the defensive throughout the remainder of the strike. In particular, Justice Ford's severe interpretation of an injunction, which made any picketing illegal, together with the allegation that the union was not legally certified, cast workers and their union leaders in the role of senseless outlaws. Gender played an essential role in this construction. The notion of males as inherently aggressive and of females as passive, vulnerable and economically dependent, shaped the attitudes and actions of all parties involved in the dispute. As a result the actions of male workers on the picketline were exaggerated and vilified while women's actions were ignored or, when that was not possible, women were depicted as innocent victims.

The difference between the behaviour of men and women workers was less significant than press reports and court charges, convictions, and sentences would suggest. Indeed, previously unpublished court evidence, oral interviews, and photographs all muddy the stark contrast between the behaviour of men and women workers in contemporary accounts that portray men as violent and render women's role as negligible. Men and women workers were charged in numbers that were roughly proportionate to their representation among the strikers; however, there were significant differences in the type of charges laid and in the way they were handled by the press and the courts.[33] Moreover there is a remarkable disparity about the degree of strike-related violence that occurred. The impression of lawlessness and violence that is conveyed by contemporary news

reports and judicial remarks is at odds with what former rank-and-file workers related in oral history interviews. It is difficult to assess how a filter of more than fifty years affected the memories of workers. The context of other evidence, however, and the consistency of their respective reponses, gives credence to worker testimony that allegations of violence were exaggerated.

In the first two picketline incidents only men were charged with the more serious offences of assault, intimidation, and obstruction. Four men were named in a total of nine such charges laid during the first two weeks of the strike. Three charges of intimidation were eventually dropped. A fourth charge of intimidation was dropped because the man charged agreed not to go back on the picketline. This decision by the Crown points to the political rather than the inherently violent nature of these charges.[34] Similarly, a charge of obstruction warranted only a suspended sentence when the defendant pleaded guilty. The two charges of common assault, which resulted in convictions, involved a standard picketline incident in which the union's Calgary representative and a rank-and-file worker "jostled" and "pushed" as several management officials escorted one strike breaker through the picketline August 21. The fact that several of the company's top officials were escorting the strike breaker suggests the possibility that this incident was staged to frame picketers as violent. Headlines that blared the word "assault" and news reports quoting severe judicial warnings about "no rough stuff" and the "seriousness" of "acts of assault" or "stopping of traffic" conveyed a sense of worker extremism that was not borne out by published details of this picketline disturbance.[35]

In connection with the same incident August 21, six women and four men were charged with illegal strike action because of the injunction granted Medalta Potteries only the day before. These charges reinforce the impression that Medalta officials provoked the picketline disturbance to generate charges that would damage the image of picketers, and to intimidate them. The strong representation of women among those charged suggests that women had a strong presence on the picketline, and the company felt the need to intimidate them as much as the men.

Three incidents of anonymous violence occurred during the strike to further tarnish the union's image. A brick was thrown through the window of a strike-breaker's home and

a rock was thrown through the window of a union member who was leaving town each week to work.[36] A hand-written threatening note was sent to company lawyer, Neil German, stating: "Give you time to settle or get out city by 12 p.m. Saturday, October 18. If you fail will have a Liberty over your dead body or a ransom for return (signed) B.B. Press Gang."[37] These incidents implicated the union because no one claimed responsibility for them and police investigation turned up no suspects.

The two most serious picketline incidents involved very different levels of violence, but their handling by the courts and the press conflated them, causing all of the fifteen individuals involved to be implicated to a similar degree. The first incident involved obstruction of a truck that had crossed the picketline and was stopped by strikers when it returned from the factory hauling pottery. Part of the load was dumped on the ground and broken.[38] Albert Pawlowski, Matthew Wolfer, Josie Longridge (William Longridge's wife), and Les Bogie were charged with leading a group of workers who stopped the truck. They were charged with "watching and besetting" in connection with this incident.[39]

The second incident was described by the newspaper as a "mauling": One male strike breaker was "kicked about the body after he was thrown to the ground" and four other male strike breakers were "pummelled by fists and sticks." One man went to hospital and was released the next day.[40] It was also reported that strikers tried unsuccessfully to "drag" several "girls" from the back of a manager's car and called them "abusive and foul names."[41] Josie Longridge and Matthew Wolfer, who were charged in the first incident, were also charged in the second incident.[42] Eleven other unionists, six of whom were women, were charged in the "mauling" incident. One man was charged with assault.[43]

The two picketline disturbances occurred about a week apart toward the end of September, but newspaper accounts of them were published at the same time, immediately after the second incident. Altogether fifteen men and women pleaded guilty to charges of "watching and besetting" and one man pleaded guilty to an additional charge of assault.[44] All seven of the men were sentenced to thirty days of hard labour, even though only one man was charged with assault. The seven women charged with "watching and besetting" also pleaded guilty but received only a suspended sentence. Significantly, an eighth man charged who submitted a letter "asking the court for mercy and explaining that he had been

forced against his will to take part in the disturbances," was also given a suspended sentence.[45]

The dramatically different sentences were determined by an individual's gender rather than his or her actions. Although explicit detail about the alleged violence was published, this time particular actions were not attributed to individuals, so it is impossible to tell from the news reports who did what. This type of blanket charge and anonymous press coverage implied that everyone charged was equally involved in the most serious acts of violence, even though only one man was charged with assault. The Magistrate's severe words confirm this impression. Gore-Hickman said, "Acts of assault committed by groups of persons threw guilt on all taking part, whether they were the actual ones who committed the act or not. Should murder result every member was guilty."[46]

The Magistrate's leniency toward the women unionists directly contradicted his stated intent. This contradiction revealed a fundamental tension between gendered cultural ideals about work that assumed workers were male and the reality of committed and effective women picketers. Gore-Hickman's comments that he "hesitated to send young women to jail" where they would be fingerprinted and their criminal file started, reflected his view that women workers were incapable of militant behaviour. As Carolyn Strange has pointed out, courtroom leniency toward women has been construed in chivalric terms in other situations to serve the needs of a male judiciary.[47] In the Medalta case, a male judiciary chose a chivalric response to the women's guilty pleas to avoid emasculating themselves and the company's male management. Chivalry is grounded in the notion that women must be protected by men because they are weak and defenceless and therefore less responsible than men. Drawing on this gendered construction also reasserted the patriarchal gender hierarchy and rendered the judiciary and the employer less vulnerable to community outrage.

Significantly, defence lawyer A.Y. Spivack also asked for the leniency of the court "in the case of the female workers, the majority being 17 or 18 years of age," although he did not request leniency for any of the men, one of whom was eighteen.[48] The lawyer's request on behalf of the women unionists also reveals a fundamental ambivalence. Mine Mill encouraged women's involvement in the union and on the picketline, and strove to

address their particular needs. Yet in this instance the union lawyer chose not to promote an image of militant women workers who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their male co-workers in labour activism to secure fair wages and conditions. Instead, he affirmed working women's respectability according to conventional, primarily middle-class norms of passive and vulnerable femininity.

A variety of sources suggest that women were well represented on the picketline and effectively helped to prevent access to the factory. Courtroom questioning related to Medalta's civil action against the union reveals that "girls with sticks" were involved in the mauling incident, although there is no suggestion of exactly what they did. In addition, court questioning by company lawyer Neil German indicates that "a bunch of girls" surrounded the plant manager's car and lined up to form a barricade across the road during the mauling incident.[49] The same court records reveal that several women pickets harrassed train engineers in August. The women mocked the train operators by waving picket signs that caricatured the men as the train was manoeuvred past them.[50] Court affidavits that meticulously documented the identity and movements of picketers demonstrate that women were well represented on the picketline.[51] Photographs taken by former Medalta worker Hannah Osborne during the first days of the strike also demonstrate the strong presence of women among the picketers (see photograph 2).

Former Medalta worker Engelina Kessler said women workers participated fully but not equally in picketline activities. Picketers were divided into groups with a leader "and it was always the men that were the leader of the group. Maybe it was for protection. I don't know." Kessler said women picketers were encouraged to explain their cause to the public to garner support, but they were instructed not to speak to anyone who was trying to enter the plant. "They thought there was supposed to be a certain amount of males on each group to, so, in case of anybody coming. Like there was a scuffle at one time but I was never aware of that but apparently my husband was involved."[52] Dorothy Beierbach said: "The only thing I remember is trying to aggravate the people that were inside – blow whistles or something and so they'd look out the window to see what was going on out there. . . When they went in in the morning we might yell at them or, you know, make jabs at them or something like that."[53] None of the women interviewed participated in or even

knew about the incidents involving women workers that were revealed by Neil German's line of questioning during the Examinations for Discovery.

Photograph 2: Women workers were well represented in a spontaneous parade on the first day of the Medalta Potteries strike, August 12, 1947.

Photograph courtesy of Hannah Osborne.

There is a remarkable discrepancy between contemporary accounts of strike violence and what workers remembered. When asked about the incidents of violence all of the former workers interviewed denied witnessing anything personally and insisted that the actual actions of those on the picketline were much less serious than was suggested by press accounts and court rulings. All but two of the workers interviewed were charged during the strike. Bertha Riegel was one of the seven women who pleaded guilty to "watching and besetting" in connection with the two most serious picketline incidents. Although she appeared in court because she was told "you have to be in court," she did not

know why she was charged and she did not remember anybody being hurt badly. Asked why the sentence for the same charge was so different for women, Riegel said she remembers only rumours. "You did hear that there was some aggression on the men's part."[54] Riegel said she felt the behaviour of union members on the picketline was unremarkable: "You know we didn't do anything, ah, drastic, ... this is why I couldn't understand why these fellas were sent to jail, and why we were given a summons, because we didn't destroy anything."[55] Kessler, who was also in court for the sentencing, said workers were stunned by the jail sentence:

> It was very very shocking. Yes, it was, it was very shocking. Because there was such an old man, Mr. Wolfer, he was a decrepit old man and here they sent this man off to jail. Now what could a little old man like that have done? It was like they picked six or seven or eight fellows out of this group of 200 out there and said these are the guys that we're going ... and there was a young lad, I think he was 16 or 17 years old and I mean, what did this boy have to do with anything? They picked this old man and this young kid like they were going to set an example. It just blew me right out of the water and still to this day I don't know what they were trying to prove.[56]

One male worker who was jailed but refused to be interviewed stated that he was not even on the picketline at the time of the incident for which he was charged, although, according to the court record, he pleaded guilty to "besetting the premises of Medalta Potteries."[57]

Fifty-three years after the fact it is impossible to know what happened on the dusty perimeter of the factory that fall. What is clear from interviews is that former workers felt at the time that the degree of violence alleged was exaggerated and that the jail sentence handed down to male workers was excessive. The evidence also suggests that news coverage of these incidents had a major effect on public opinion and worker morale. A news report about the "mauling" incident was the only one picked up by the national press. Most aspects of the strike received only local or at most regional coverage.[58] In a memo to Ottawa local manager of the federal employment office J.W. McLane predicted that the mauling incident would adversely affect the public's attitude toward strikers: "while public

sentiment may not be entirely favourable to the company, the worker is losing local sympathy."[59]

Public sympathy may also have been eroded by press reports and judicial remarks that portrayed male workers as ignorant and naïve. In his ruling on an obstruction charge, Magistrate Gore-Hickman said that the man "admittedly uneducated, had been 'pushed into this position by men who knew better.'" For that reason the Magistrate did not impose a jail sentence.[60] In another court case a few days later, questioning by company lawyer Neil German and the court justice undermined the credibility of rank-and-file worker Albert Pawlawski who "declared that he did not understand '99 per cent' of the injunction with which he had been served." He said he could not read very well but he appeared in court because his wife made him. Responding directly to a question from Justice Ford, Pawlawski "said he knew it wasn't just a piece of funny paper."[61] These comments were elicited by specific questions from the company lawyer and the judge, which suggests an assumption that the worker was ignorant and uneducated.

The company's paternalistic notion that workers were incapable of understanding their own best interest also compromised the public image of workers as knowledgeable men and women committed to their workplace. Medalta's dismissal of all striking workers, which was effectively a lockout, together with comments by management in court documents, demonstrate management's cavalier attitude toward workers.[62] Management refused to accept that the majority of workers saw their own interests as separate from the company's and that they felt their interests were best served by a new independent union and strike action. In court under oath manager Jack Cunliffe stated: "That a few employees have told me that they were satisfied with the pay they were getting, and I am informed by various foremen and do verily believe that similar remarks have been made to them. That I verily believe there are a large number of employees who would come to work if they could cross the picket lines."[63] Cunliffe's comments ignored the overwhelming certification and strike votes as well as worker solidarity and cooperation on the picketline that kept production minimal throughout the strike.

Company lawyer Neil German's comments in court regarding the pre-existence of a company union reveals a paternalistic arrogance. In an exchange between German and

union lawyer Joseph Cohen, German vowed that he could prove the existence of the previous union even if none of the workers who testified knew anything about it, including those who belonged to it and were still paying dues according to company records:

> Mr. German: Oh, sure. All I have to prove is there was a union, and there was an agreement, and that deductions were made after the 6th of March, 1947.
> Mr. Cohen: Regardless of whether one man was in the union or not?
> Mr. German: That is right.
> Mr. Cohen: As long as there was one man in it and you took off dues you claim there was still a union?
> Mr. German: You have to recognize that it was the bargaining agent of the employees of the plant whether they happened to be union members or not.[64]

Management's disparaging attitude toward workers likely undermined public confidence in workers' judgment.

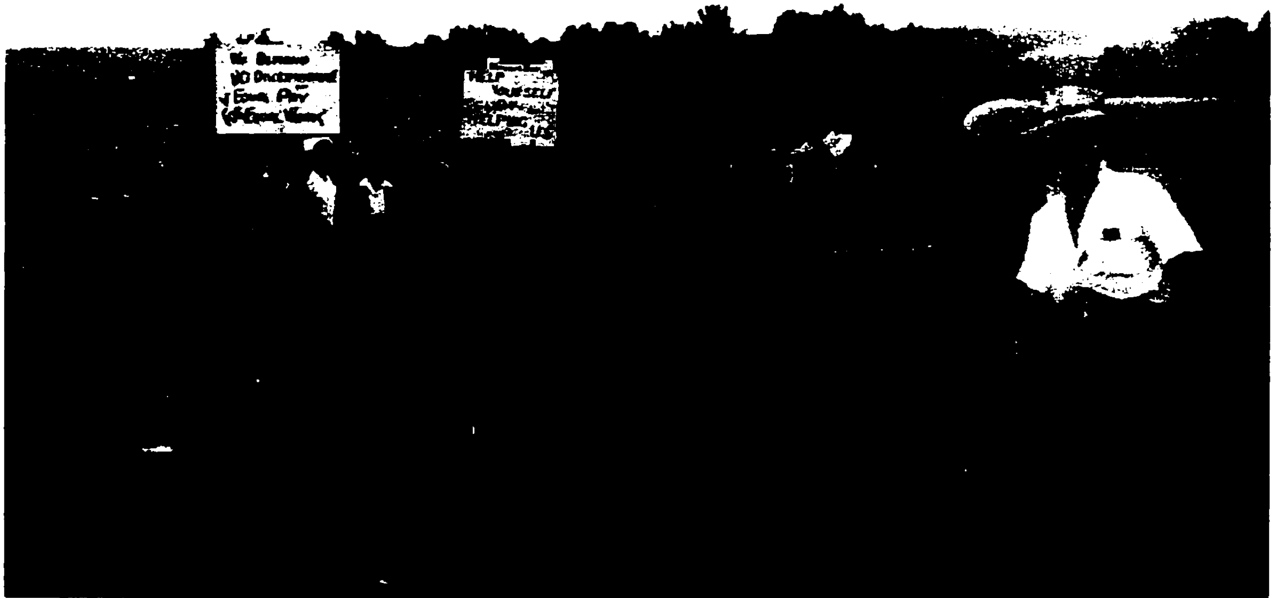
Rather than unintelligent and ignorant, women workers tended to be cast in the role of innocent victims when their actions forced them into visibility. This gender bias was most evident in Magistrate Gore-Hickman's decision to send seven male workers to jail and give seven female workers a suspended sentence for the same plea.[65] In a less overt way cultural stereotypes about vulnerable femininity seem to have played a role in union appeals to the public for funds and support. A teenage female worker gave one of the speaches at a labour rally August 30. Mabel Degg spoke to the crowd about earning the minimum wage at Medalta, eliciting considerable sympathy from listeners, judging by company lawyer Neil German's insistent questions in court asking William Longridge who told her what to say.[66] Longridge said Degg chose her own words at the rally. In a separate incident midway through the strike, the union local sent Degg and co-worker Dorothy Beierbach on a tour through the Crowsnest Pass to solicit strike donations at miners' meetings in a number of communities (see photograph 3). Beierbach said the two workers were not told why they were chosen for this duty, but it was a welcome diversion

Photograph 3: Mabel Degg (left) and Dorothy Beierbach pose during their speaking tour of mining communities in the Crowsnest Pass, September 29, 1947.

Photograph courtesy of Dorothy Beierbach.

from picketline work. The assignment of two young, attractive, and well-dressed women workers to the fundraising tour seems to have capitalized on the appeal of vulnerable femininity and at the same time affirmed women's activist role in the union.

This incident neatly captures the fundamental ambivalence toward women workers that is apparent in the union's self-image and rhetoric as well as its policies and recommendations. Mine Mill demonstrated its progressiveness by drawing women into an activist role. Women were represented in numbers equal to men on the first union negotiating committee and an effort was made to narrow the gap between male and female



Photograph 4: A woman picketer holds a sign saying "We Demand No Discrimination, Equal Pay for Equal Work" on the first day of the Medalta Potteries strike, August 12, 1947.

Photograph courtesy of Hannah Osborne.

wages. As noted the union's first contract proposal called for a 33 per cent increase in women's wages and a lesser increase of 21 per cent for men. The union also promoted the concept of equal pay for equal work before it became commonplace. Picketline

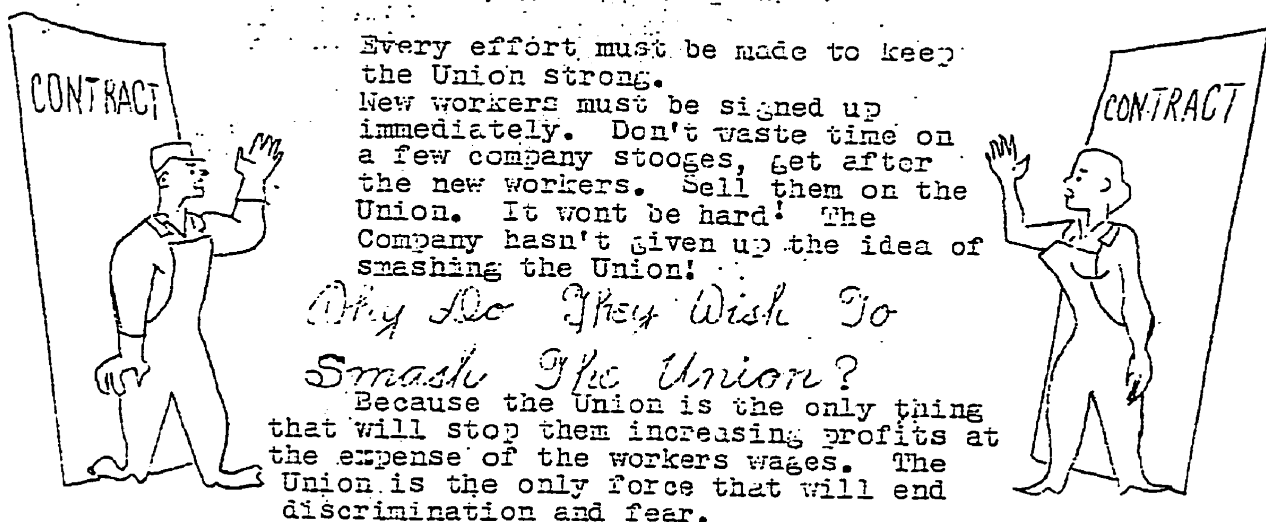
photographs suggest that the union promoted the idea of equal pay for equal work during the strike (see photograph 4). One of the earliest union bulletins was illustrated with graphics that projected an image of women workers standing as equals with men (see figure 2 on page 94).

Yet gender segregation and a gender hierarchy of power seem evident in the operation of the union. The union's leadership was predominantly male and a photograph reveals the pronounced physical separation of men and women at union meetings that belies the graphic images promoting unity and equality between male and female workers (see photograph 5). The priority of male workers' needs was confirmed by the first wage concession made during the strike. The union's wage demand was reduced from 33 per cent and 21 per cent respectively for women and men to an across-the-board wage increase of 12 per cent that would have increased the gendered wage gap had it been accepted. In

Photograph 5: A Mine Mill union meeting of Medalta Potteries workers at the Moose Hall in Medicine Hat. Undated.

Photograph courtesy of Dorothy Beierbach

Medalta Union Members Must Continue To Recruit



Every effort must be made to keep the Union strong.
New workers must be signed up immediately. Don't waste time on a few company stooges, get after the new workers. Sell them on the Union. It wont be hard! The Company hasn't given up the idea of smashing the Union!

Why Do They Wish To Smash The Union?

Because the Union is the only thing that will stop them increasing profits at the expense of the workers wages. The Union is the only force that will end discrimination and fear.

Negotiations Are Continuing

The Company has offered 7% increase, but negotiations are proceeding on other points. A complete report will be made to the members at the earliest possible date.

The Union Must Keep Strong

Only by a strong United Union can the workers hope to benefit if not only today but in the future. We urge the new workers who have not signed up to ask their shop steward for a card today.

BE WITH THE GANG
WHOSE AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF!!

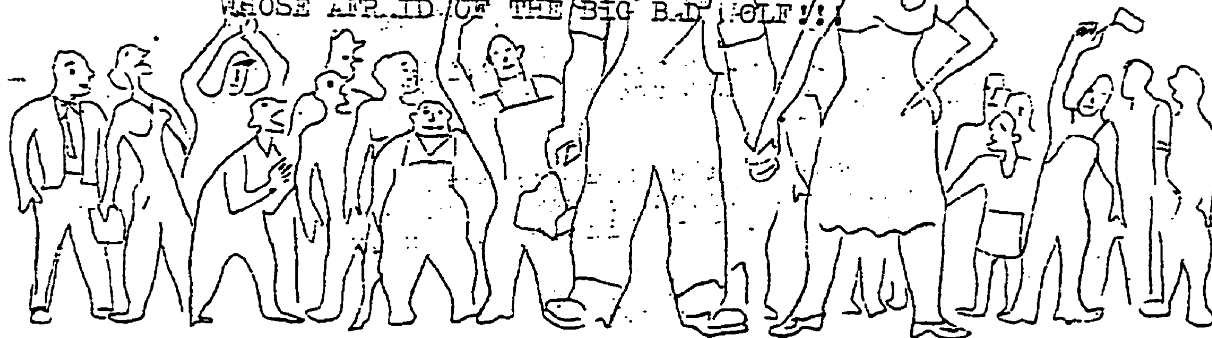


Figure 2: This union bulletin was published during the first weeks after Mine Mill was certified at Medalta Potteries. The inclusion of women workers in these graphics is linked to a recruitment drive that appears to target women workers.

Source: "Strike Bulletin," September 3, 1947, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

effect, women workers were expected to sacrifice the most. None of the former workers interviewed who participated in the strike remembered anything about the issue of equal pay for equal work. They were also not aware that the union's first wage proposal called for a larger increase for women than for men or that the union ultimately abandoned that stance later in the strike. Given that the workers interviewed were very young at the time of the strike it is possible that the issue of equal pay for equal work was supported by older, long-term women workers. To some extent it may have been a strategic issue raised by the union to attract the support of women workers, or to ensure that cheaper women workers did not threaten male jobs.[67]

In general, union literature and rhetoric ignored women workers. Graphics portrayed workers almost exclusively as men and the few female images were depicted in a domestic role (see figure 3 page 96). Combative union rhetoric about "fighting" implicitly excluded women, whose respectability hinged on their ability to conform to conventional norms of femininity that excluded confident, assertive behaviour. Similarly, talk of "rights" excluded women workers who were not accorded the same entitlement to work and a self-supporting wage that men enjoyed in the immediate postwar years when returning war veterans and male breadwinners had priority in the job market.

In addition, the union's construction of militant working-class masculinity as bold, loyal, self respecting, and virtuous in opposition to "bosses," judges, strikebreakers and "stooges" defined the class conflict primarily in terms of competing masculinities. Strike bulletins described bosses resorting to "legal skulldugery." (see figure 4 page 97). Union leader Les Bogie implicitly impugned the manliness of a strike breaker who tried to cross the picket line by saying, "Do you realize what the working men of Medicine Hat will think of you when we win? No working man in Medicine Hat will want to work with you."[68] Comments that "any honest worker can be persuaded to join a Union," and that "a strong United Union" is fundamental emphasized the virtuous qualities male workers assumed to legitimize their cause.

The union's ambivalent attitude toward women workers, and its emphasis on male working-class militancy undermined its efforts to hold public support. Militant union

STRIKE BULLETIN Au. 14/47.
POTTERY UNIT LOCAL 881
INT'L UNION OF MINE, MILL AND SMELTER WORKERS

M I N E M I L L

Strike Bulletin

Sept.3/47 HOT DOG FEED TO-NITE ON PICKET LINE
AT 9 P.M.

TO-NITE TO-NITE TO-NITE

ALL PICKETERS WELCOME

Figure 3: – Graphics in two union bulletins issued during the first weeks of the strike reinforced the notion that workers were male and women's role was primarily domestic.

Source: "Strike Bulletin," August 14 and September 3, 1947, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

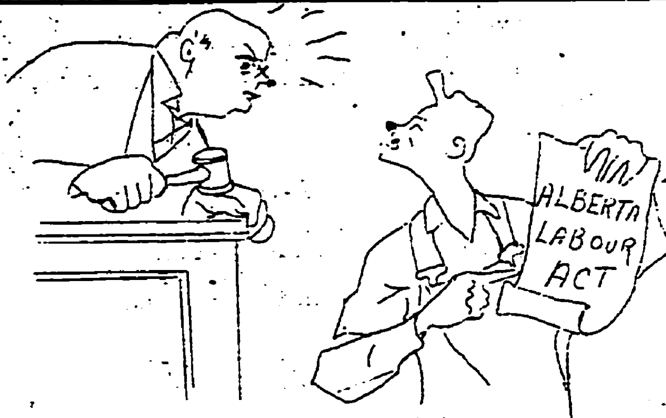
Force Not Necessary To Recruit.

Threats of force or actual force itself is not necessary, as any honest worker can be persuaded to join a Union, if not the first time he is asked at least after several explanations.
The only reason an honest worker refuses is generally because he is afraid and usually he has been intimidated by the bosses.

The dishonest worker who either seeks to gain by toading to the boss, or wishes to have someone else pay for his gains, is usually not much credit as a Union member and is usually avoided by the other workers. ..ithout friends or companionship he generally leaves to seek more congenial work.

At Medalta where 95% of the workers are in the Union, they naturally resent those who do not play their part and are suspicious of those who do not join.

They are willing to fight for any of their members who are discriminated against, but they certainly do not want anything to do with people who take the Company's side against them. There is no middle road you either are for the Company or for the Union.



All Newly Employed Workers:
TAKE NOTE:
Any attempt by the Company or any of it's staff to suggest that you should not join the Union is illegal, and such cases should be reported to the Union. The dismissal of any employee for legal Union activity is also illegal and subject to prosecution.

Figure 4: Self-respecting, confident, and virtuous workers were contrasted with sycophantic "company stooges" and arrogant, indifferent bosses.
Source: "Strike Bulletin," Mine Mill Strike, June 24, 1947, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

rhetoric about fighting for justice and rights excluded women workers and made male unionists vulnerable to interpretations of their actions that exaggerated the actual degree of violence that occurred. The relative silence about women workers weakened the impact of worker solidarity.

The values, beliefs and attitudes of workers themselves contributed to the polarized image of male and female workers that grew during the strike. In interviews women workers displayed an ambivalence about women's role in the strike that revealed a personal struggle with the contradiction between their experiences and the cultural norms of femininity. They were quick to assert that women workers played an important role on the picketline but none could, or perhaps would, relate any specific incident in which women were assertive, although several said they had heard rumours about women's aggressiveness.[69] Their comments revealed a view of themselves as inherently less capable of militancy than men. They seemed uncomfortable with the suggestion that some women workers may have behaved aggressively on the picketline.

Assumptions about male militancy and female passivity fuelled the image of male workers as potentially violent. Engelina Kessler later married one of the men jailed for thirty days, and in forty-nine years of marriage they never discussed exactly what he did on the picketline to warrant that jail term. His unspoken resistance to discussing it left her wondering whether more happened than she had thought. Although Kessler said she was "shocked to think that they had to go to jail for something as trivial as what happened," the severity of the court sentence shook her confidence in the union and labour activism. The assertions of court and government authorities had created a new margin of doubt in her mind: "I didn't realize what they had done had been that bad ... I always did wonder what had transpired."[70] Given the element of doubt the court's harsh sentence created in Kessler's mind it is not surprising that the public became convinced of the worst. The silence of jailed workers like Rueben Kessler and the former worker who chose not to be interviewed raises the question of whether the public denouncement as much as the actions themselves triggered an enduring sense of shame.

The strike ended October 23 when the union surrendered unconditionally, forcing workers to return to their jobs on the company's terms, without any formal protection

against discrimination for union activism. The circumstances surrounding that date suggest that the union conceded defeat because it recognized that it had lost the public relations battle, and the court's blatant sympathy for the company left it no hope of success through the legal system. October 23 was the date that the civil action – launched more than two months earlier to determine whether or not the union was legitimately certified – was finally heard in the Supreme Court of Alberta. A news report on the legal wrangling that day indicated that, although the judge did not hand down his judgment for three weeks, he supported the company's contention that a contract with a previous union continued to exist, which would invalidate the new union's legal certification.[71] This realization at the court hearing followed hard on the heels of Mayor Rae's virulent attack on union leader William Longridge, which was given front page coverage in the local newspaper. Longridge was alleged to be an "agent of Moscow" who engineered the strike as a "calculated plan" to "set Canadian against Canadian."[72]

The union's accurate reading of the public's mood was demonstrated in the results of a municipal election held six weeks after the strike ended. A slate of labour candidates who were all ex-servicemen and unionists ran on a platform of union-strengthening policies to raise low wage rates in the city.[73] One of the candidates, who spoke at a rally for the jailed Medalta workers in October, had equated labour's battle with "the same fight for freedom from want as was waged by our armed services during the two world conflicts of this century."[74] All of the labour candidates were soundly defeated. Collectively they received only 30 per cent of the votes cast and finished in last place. One of the candidates was Clarence Sailer, a Medalta jiggerman jailed during the strike and president of the Mine Mill local. He placed second to last out of eight candidates. Labour's mayoralty candidate, Alderman E.W. Horne, had a better showing, winning 40 per cent of the votes cast, but was defeated by incumbent mayor William Rae.[75]

In the run-up to the election a Welcome Home Reception and Supper was put on by the union for the "Seven Labour Heroes" when they returned from jail. The celebration was an attempt to salvage the manhood of male workers and counter their image as lawless and dangerous by portraying them as honest, respectable breadwinners. The reception also provided a public forum to criticize industry and the state for the injustice and betrayal

workers felt. In a speech union spokesman Les Bogie, who was one of the jailed men, said defiantly, "We are not ashamed of our crime and punishment." Alderman Horne, an alderman who supported labour, commented on the irony of saying Canadians are "glorious and free ... when men can be confined to jail for defending their rights and their bread and butter livlihood."[76]

This construction of principled, respectable working-class masculinity stands in stark contrast to the image of dangerous and ignorant male workers constructed through the courts, government rhetoric and the press. Once again, women workers, who had been charged in equal numbers and who participated fully on the picketline, were ignored by the very concept of a reception for "labour heroes" that focused exclusively on the male workers who were jailed. Oral interviews reveal that women workers, together with the wives of male unionists, organized and prepared the banquet of home-cooked fare for the reception supper.[77] The local paper's elaborate detail about the banquet menu that described everything from the baked ham and mashed potatoes to the olives, relishes, and hot rolls, was the closest thing to public acknowledgement that women workers were accorded (see photograph 6).

The ritualistic labour heroes dinner reinforced traditional gender roles to reassert male and female worker respectability within the confines of conventional middle-class expectations. Male workers were lauded for heroically fighting for a breadwinning wage while women's heroism could only be seen in terms of their traditional gender role in the kitchen. The parallel between women's low profile in the public sphere and within the union itself demonstrates the degree to which they were constructed in middle class terms by organized labour. This rendered invisible the double duty they performed as both paid workers and the primary domestic workers in the household.

The starkly gendered court sentences and the labour heroes dinner demonstrate most effectively the ambivalence of the company, court officials and the union toward women workers. The attitudes of rank-and-file workers reveal the internalization of conventional gender roles that were at odds with lived experiences. These incidents also show how this persistent construction of male and female workers made male workers more vulnerable to charges of violence and obscured the heroism, strength and commitment of women workers

Photograph 6: Back in the kitchen – Women unionists, as well as the wives of male unionists, prepared the banquet for the seven labour heroes at the Welcome Home Reception and Dinner held at the Moose Hall in Medicine Hat, November 6, 1947. From left to right, Selma Stickel, Josie Longridge (wife of union leader William Longridge), Dorothy Beierbach, and Ruth Sandau. The other two women have not been identified.

Photograph courtesy of Dorothy Beierbach.

to labour's struggle. In this way the polarization of gender roles promoted by the postwar political, social and economic climate helped weaken the labour movement. The power to shape images of workers, rather than the actions of workers themselves, proved most decisive in determining the outcome of this struggle.

The Medalta strike shows that legislation designed to empower workers to join the union of their choice, and to be able to sit down with their employer to bargain collectively in good faith, was easily circumvented by employers who had the support of the state and the business-owned press. It also shows how the contemporary cultural, political and

economic context in which working-class masculinity and femininity operated helped shape constructions of male and female workers that undermined their public credibility.

Viewed through the prism of class and gender the Medalta strike provides insight into a shift in the balance of power between workers, employers and the state at a critical juncture in Alberta's history. The strong presence of women workers shows more clearly how prevailing gender constructions made it easier for Medalta's legal actions to discredit labour activism. Moreover, court challenges and strike coverage that projected an image of workers as lawless and potentially violent caused workers themselves to doubt the legitimacy of their cause. Although the union continued to represent Medalta workers after the strike and became an effective vehicle for improving wages and work conditions, the strike marked a critical turning point in support for organized labour in Medicine Hat.

NOTES

[1] Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2000.

[2] Only a handful of workers tried to cross the picketline during the course of the strike. The number of workers who remained behind was provided by a strikebreaker who refused to be interviewed. Federal government records state that 124 men and eighty-nine women walked off the job August 12, 1947. Unemployment Insurance Commission Report on Industrial Dispute, August 22, 1947 by J.W. McLane, NAC Department of Labour RG 27, Vol. 456, Strike 154.

[3] Minutes of a Board of Industrial Relations meeting April-May, 1948. Out of between 250 and 275 potential union members 156 workers had signed membership cards. A government-supervised vote on whether or not to retain Mine Mill as the bargaining agent for Medalta workers' held immediately before the first contract was signed, endorsed the union with only a 50 per cent majority. The first contract was signed May 22, 1947. PAA 79.46/214.

[4] Nearly 1,000 workers at Canada Packers Ltd., Swifts Canadian Co., Ltd. and Burns meat packers in Edmonton struck from late August or early September until mid-October. Meat packers in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Brandon, Manitoba as well as Toronto, Hull, Quebec, Peterborough, Ontario, Arthabaska, Quebec and Montreal also went on strike. NAC Department of Labour RG 27, Vol. 457, Strike 161.

[5] The "conspiracy" remarks by Ernest Manning and his public works minister were made October 15 and 18, 1947, in response to the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) strike. They were echoed by Mayor Rae in his vicious attack on Mine Mill's leadership at Medalta Potteries October 21, 1947. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989); The Medicine Hat News, October 22, 1947.

[6] Letter from Mine Mill Financial Secretary to Medalta Potteries April 28, 1947. Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[7] There is conflicting evidence about the actual vote numbers, but it is clear that the certification vote was 100 per cent in favour and none opposed. In Jack Cunliffe's court testimony at an Examination for Discovery the figures cited were 200 in favour and none opposed. Court testimony reported by the The Medicine Hat News October 23 stated "out of 194 eligibles 178 voted in favor, none opposed, three spoiled ballots." Jack Cunliffe Examination for Discovery October 3, 1947. Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318. The Medicine Hat News, October 23, 1947.

[8] Mine Mill Organizer, May, 1947, Mine Mill Local 881, UBC, Mine Mill 127/1.

[9] Jack Cunliffe Examination for Discovery October 3, 1947. Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85..289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[10] Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[11] A brief article in The Medicine Hat News detailing the proper process and authorization required for a parade permit was implicitly critical of Medalta workers. But local police stated no action against the workers was planned. The newspaper was owned by city industrialist, J.H. (Hop) Yuill, whose ownership of several local businesses, including Medicine Hat Potteries, gave him a vested interest in the strike, The Medicine Hat News, August 12, 1947. During the municipal election in December, 1947 the newspaper was accused of bias against a slate of labour candidates. In a published response the newspaper stated: "We resent the imputation ... that J.H. Yuill, president of the Medicine Hat News Co. Ltd., has ever attempted to

influence the choice of news or the from [sic] in which it is presented in The News [*sic*]." The Medicine Hat News, December 8, 1947.

[12] Letter from William Longridge to William Rae, August 28, 1947, UBC Mine Mill 1-1.

[13] The mayor tried to downplay the importance of his initiative in a published news report by calling it "premature." The Medicine Hat News, August 29, 1947.

[14] Ibid., September 10, 1947.

[15] Ibid., August 30, 1947.

[16] In a letter to his superiors in Ottawa J.W. McLane, manager of the local National Employment office, said: "Less than 1% of the workers of this plant have applied at this office for employment and only a few have made inquiries regarding drawing Unemployment Benefits and on the opposite side of the picture we have made very few referrals on the order placed by the company [for replacement workers]." Letter from J.W. McLane to Director of Industrial Relations, Department of Labour RG 27, Vol. 456, Strike 154. There was a labour shortage in the community at the time of the strike and the union itself found temporary work for some workers, which also accounts for the low number of Unemployment Benefits applications. Lloyd and Rosetta Brosnikoff interview September 23, 2000.

[17] Minutes of the first meeting of the "United Labour Committee" September 28, 1947, UBC Mine Mill 128/25; "Union Labour Men Plan Joint Effort Municipal Election," The Medicine Hat News, September 29, 1947.

[18] In court questioning by the union lawyer company manager Jack Cunliffe admitted that the company did not apply to the Minister of Trade and Industry for the appointment of a Conciliation Commissioner. This admission contradicted a press report that the company was "prepared to open conciliation." Jack A. Cunliffe and William Longridge Examinations for Discovery, October 3, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318; The Medicine Hat News, August 14, 1947.

[19] Ibid. According to a strike bulletin the union rejected formal conciliation under the Alberta Labour Act because it believed that "Conciliation and Arbitration would only bring the same results. In the end they would be forced to take the action they are now taking." Strike bulletin, undated, "I am a Medalta worker." UBC Mine Mill 127/1-1a.

[20] The Medicine Hat News, August 14, 18, 1947.

[21] Mathieson also met with both parties during a two-week walk-out by sixty-five workers at Medicine Hat Brick and Tile Co. that occurred one week after the Medalta strike started. Both companies were represented by the Clay Product Workers Union, which preceded Mine Mill at Medalta. The Lethbridge Herald, August 30, 1947.

[22] The Medicine Hat News, August 18, 1947.

[23] Ibid., September 10, 1947.

[24] Ibid., September 12, 13, 1947.

[25] Ibid., August 16, 1947.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., August 21, 1947.

[28] Ibid., August 22, 1947.

[29] "Picketers Defy Court Injunction," Ibid., August 23, 1947. The union maintained picketing throughout the seventy-two day strike despite the injunctions. Ibid., October 18, 1947.

[30] Judgment by Justice Hugh John Macdonald, November 19, 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[31] Letter from the Department of Trade and Industry to Mine Mill December 1, 1947, UBC Mine Mill 127/1.

[32] The newspaper headline was: "Judgment is Medalta Union Not Certified Under New Act," The Medicine Hat News, November 20, 1947.

[33] Fifty union members were charged in connection with the strike and eighteen of them were women. Thus women represented 36 per cent of those charged; they comprised 42 per cent of striking workers. Based on court reports published throughout the strike in The Medicine Hat News, August through October, 1947.

[34] At the city council meeting October 21 at which Mayor Rae attacked Mine Mill leaders for lobbying on behalf of the jailed workers, Alderman Horne "asked if it was not significant that one man who volunteered to go back to work, received only suspended sentence." Horne's comment suggests that the main motivation of the judiciary was political rather than a concern about seriously violent workers. Medicine Hat City Council Minutes, October 20, 1947, MHM..

[35] Under questioning rank-and-file unionist Paul Pasternak denied pulling a strike breaker by the arm or striking him in any way but admitted that he did "'brush him with his body' because he was standing very close to him." The intimidation charge that was later dropped stemmed from Pasternak's words to the strike breaker that he "did not want to go to work and had better go home before the police came." The strike breaker then testified that he was "frightened" to try to enter the plant.[35] Longridge and Pasternak were each convicted of common assault and fined $20 plus court costs. "Assault Charges and Injunctions Medalta Strike," The Medicine Hat News, August 21, 1947; "Two Union Men Convicted on Assault Charges," Ibid., August 29, 1947; Ibid., August 22, 1947.

[36] Ibid., September 6, 1947, September, 29, 1947.

[37] Ibid., October 11, 1947.

[38] The union made restitution for the damaged goods, Ibid., October 11, 1947.

[39] Ibid., October 1, 1947.

[40] Ibid., September 29, 1947.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Only one conviction was obtained against Josie Longirdge, although two convictions were obtained against Matthew Wolfer. October 4, 1947, Ledger of Convictions and Dismissals by Magistrates Under Section 793 of Criminal Code Part XVI, Medicine Hat Courthouse.

[43] The man charged with assault was Ralph Lattery. Those charged with watching and besetting were: Matthew Wolfer, Mrs. William Longridge, Valentine Stach, Olga Bierbach, Laura Rife, Ralph Lattery, Bertha Heller, Annette Heller, Clarence Sailer, Selma Stickel, Irene Entzminger, Ruby Kessler, Arthur Reiger, Les Bogie, and Albert Pawlawski. Ibid.

[44] News reports say the charge was "watching and besetting", however, the police arrest record October 11, 1947 state it was "intimidation," which was coded 501-F in the Criminal Code of Canada. MHM, Arrest Records, M93.1.5. Medicine Hat Courthouse records for October 14, 1947 cite the charge as "Beset the premises of Medalta Potteries." Ledger of Convictions and Dismissals by Magistrates Under Section 793 of Criminal Code Part XVI, Medicine Hat Courthouse.

[45] Again the shift in a worker's political allegiance ameliorated the court's view of a violent strike-related charge. The Medicine Hat News, October 11, 1947.

[46] Ibid., October 11, 1947.

[47] In her assessment of two Canadian murder cases around the turn of the twentieth century in which women were acquitted largely because of judicial chivalry, Carolyn Strange argued that "A generous verdict can mystify rich white men's generally unchallenged abuse of their power," in effect reinforcing systemic inequality. Carolyn Strange, "Wounded Womanhood and Dead Men," in Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History, Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 176.

[48] Valentine Stach was eighteen. The Medicine Hat News, October 11, 1947.

[49] Alex Pocsik's questioning in the October 3, 1947 Examination for Discovery, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Affidavits, Ibid.

[52] Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[53] Dorothy Beierbach interview December 14, 2000.

[54] Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[57] The former worker who was jailed declined two invitations to be interviewed, but stated in a letter: "In regards to the strike, I wish to inform you that John (a pseudonym chosen by the author to respect the former worker's request for anonymity) was not on the picket line at the time of the incident that lead [sic] to the court case. Therefore he does not wish to comment on it." There was no explanation for this decision. Letter in the author's possession.

[58] The Toronto Globe and Mail and the Edmonton Journal published accounts of the mauling incident. At other points during the strike newspapers in nearly every major city in the West published at least one report. NAC Department of Labour RG 27, Vol. 456, Strike 154.

[59] Memo from J.W. McLane to the Director of Industrial Relations, the Department of Labour in Ottawa, September 30, 1947, NAC Department of Labour RG 27 Volume 456 Strike 154.

[60] The Calgary Herald, August 28, 1947.

[61] The Medicine Hat News, September 6, 1947.

[62] In a memo to his superiors in Ottawa the manager of the local employment office, J.W. McLane asked for an opinion on whether the labour dispute was considered a lock-out or a strike after the company discharged all employees August 18 with an advertisement published in the local newspaper. McLane's uncertainty indicates that the provincial government's tacit consent to this reactionary move betrayed the spirit of new labour legislation, NAC Department of Labour RG 27, Vol. 456, Strike 154.

[63] Jack Cunliffe's testimony in an Affidavit August 19, 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[64] Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[65] Medicine Hat Police Arrest Records, October 11, 1947, M93.1.5, 452-453, MHM.

[66] William Longridge Examination for Discovery, October 3, 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85.289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[67] Based on research into gender segregation in the American workforce during WWII, Ruth Milkman found that equal pay arguments were used by some unions as an expedient measure to safeguard male jobs, particularly when women made up a large proportion of the workforce – which was the case at Medalta Potteries in 1947. Ruth Milkman, Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 7-10.

[68] Les Bogie affidavit, September 3, 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed August 19, 1947, PAA 85. 289, S/C44436, Box S.C. 1318.

[69] Engelina Kessler said she heard "something" about women workers using their fingernails in the most serious incident of picketline violence. Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.

[70] Ibid., February 1, 2001.

[71] The Medicine Hat News, October 24, 1947.

[72] Ibid., October 21, 1947.

[73] Labour candidate Roger Jaeger said wage rates for civic workers were 10 to 15 per cent lower than elsewhere in the province. Ibid., December 4, 1947.

[74] Ibid., October 20, 1947.

[75] The Medicine Hat News, December 9, 1947.

[76] Ibid., November 7, 1947.

[77] Dorothy Beierbach interview December 14, 2000.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I felt a personal victory every time we won a little":[1] Survival and Struggle

The Mine Mill local representing Medalta Potteries workers maintained enough support to survive the devastating 1947 strike and was still advocating on behalf of workers a year after the company went bankrupt in September, 1954.[2] The post-strike era demonstrates that there was a substantial core of grassroots support for unionization among Medalta workers in the late '40s and early '50s. Although support never approached pre-strike levels again, the union maintained sufficient membership to develop an active program throughout most of the seven years. It also achieved significant contract gains within a harsh political and economic climate, regularly pushing negotiations into government-mediated conciliation and, in 1949, arbitration. The persistently hostile and uncooperative attitude of management toward the union during this period makes these achievements remarkable.

The union's survival and achievements at Medalta Potteries undermine contemporary interpretations of the strike as primarily the work of union leaders from outside the community who placed the needs of Soviet Communists ahead of Canadian workers. Apart from its blatant red-baiting aspect, this interpretation underestimates the level of grassroots union support and militancy among Medalta workers throughout the post-war period. Persistent company resistance to cooperating with an independent union also lends credence to the argument that Medalta's management subtly manufactured and manipulated the strike, with the aid of the state, in an attempt to destroy the union. There is evidence that publicity surrounding anti-communist attacks on Mine Mill in Alberta and elsewhere after the strike helped erode rank-and-file support for union involvement. The "red scare" cultivated by capital and the state in Alberta during the postwar years was an effective means of discrediting organized labour and rolling back its wartime gains in the province. This chapter will detail the extent and effectiveness of worker support for the union as well as company efforts to undermine it. Finally, the larger historical forces that shaped the post-strike era will also be elaborated. These forces eventually eroded rank-and-

file support for the union and forced Medalta's closure, despite extraordinary union efforts to save the factory.

The strike embittered many workers and cast a long shadow over relations between employees and management. Engelina Kessler, who enjoyed her job in the art department, where piecework allowed her to earn a good wage, felt the price paid for the union and the strike was high.

> I think it served a cause because it did give higher wages but it was sad because it turned ... people so bitter ... Department heads really weren't pleasant to staff when they came back. They carried grudges ... they more or less felt that they were ... superior ... because they were employed all the time and strikers were unemployed. And a lot of people quit after coming back to work and they tried working for a while. My husband did. I think it left a bitter taste in a lot of people's mouths.[3]

Bertha Riegel said: "It was a waste of time ... because of the end result. [Why?] Because there was no give and take on the union's part, there was really no give and take on the company's part, so what did we do it for?"[4] Riegel worked at Medalta Potteries from 1945 until 1951 and felt there was no real change after the union came in. Rosetta Brosnikoff, who started work at the factory two years after the strike, speculated that the high level of hostility between management and the union that she witnessed as a member of the negotiating committee, stemmed from the strike.

> Any little victory we had was very hard won. I don't know, maybe there was bitterness between the union and the management because of that strike. I mean once in a while you heard a little reference about it ... Sometimes I ... wonder ... is it that the management hated the union? And there might have been some bitterness with some of the older workers too.[5]

A number of male workers expressed their disillusionment with the union by leaving the pottery for more secure, better paying jobs. Most workers, particularly women, who had fewer alternatives, returned to the pottery. But few of the names of workers charged during the strike reappear with frequency in the union's Minutes book. At least some left the pottery and it is possible that most of those who stayed did not remain actively involved in the union.[6] Brosnikoff said a lot of the older male workers who were involved in the strike probably moved up into supervisory positions, which made them ineligible for union membership. For others, she said union membership may have compromised their opportunities for job promotions.[7]

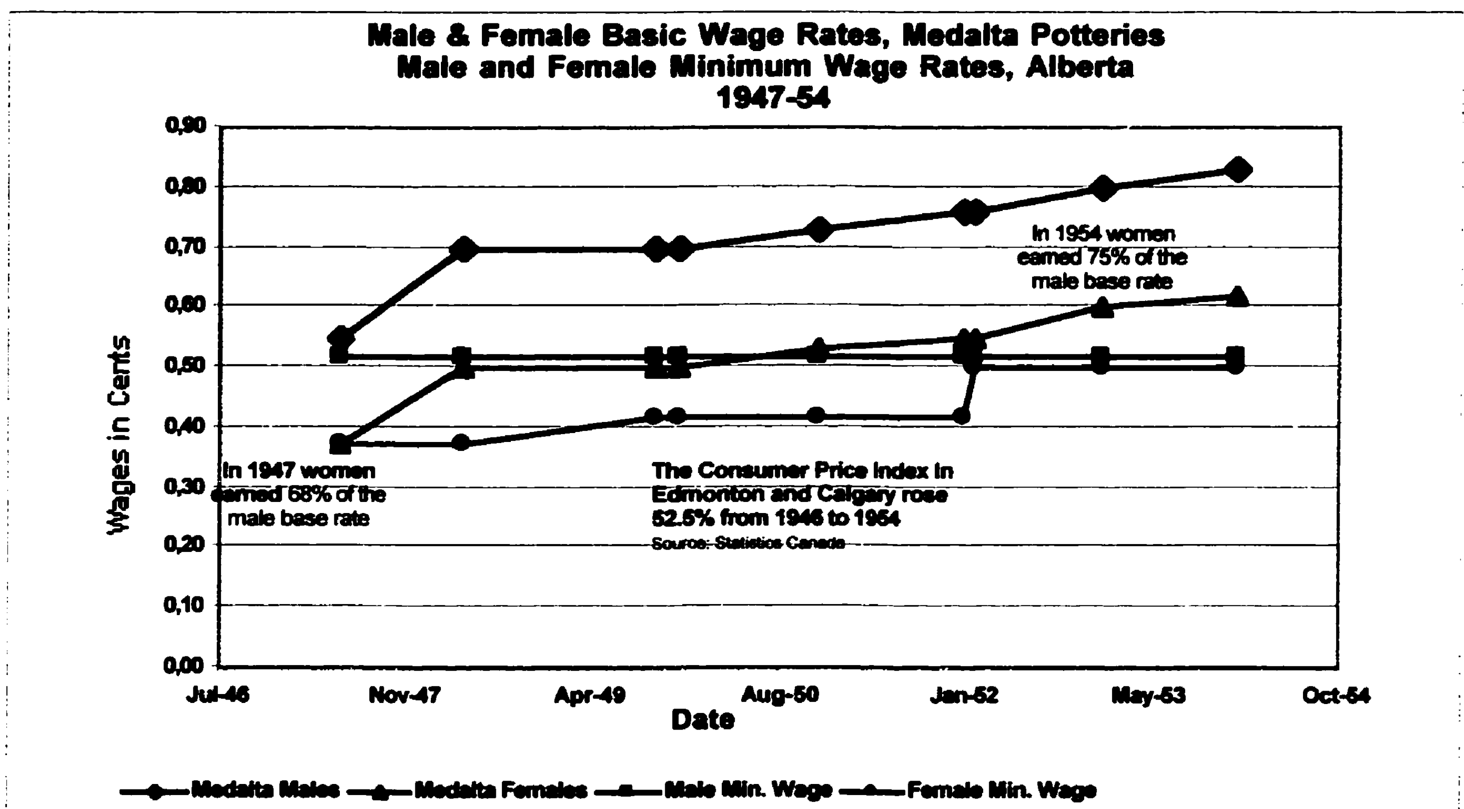
The level of disillusionment was most apparent in the rate of union membership, which dropped from nearly 100 per cent in August, 1947 to 50 per cent in May, 1948.[8] It is clear that developing a strong membership base was a constant struggle for the union. Throughout much of the post-strike period the union maintained an incentive campaign to increase membership.[9] In October, 1948 a regular union meeting failed to proceed because it lacked a quorum.

Low membership weakened the union's bargaining strength and activism as well as its financial position. In April, 1951 union funds were said to be "very low." That summer Mine Mill's international representative for Medicine Hat, William Longridge, narrowly averted arbitration over statutory holidays to save on the expense it would incur "which frankly they could not afford."[10] More than once the union local did not have enough money to send a delegate to Mine Mill meetings held out of town.[11] The union's difficult financial situation was aggravated by the theft of funds by its business agent Pat Dillon until April, 1951, when he was replaced by his wife, Marie Dillon, who took over as business agent and apparently repaid at least part of the stolen money.[12]

Despite its precarious financial position and relatively low membership rate, the union attracted sufficient support among workers to develop a wide-ranging program of meetings, committee work, education, publicity and social events. Its effectiveness as an advocate for workers can also be gauged in part by the significant contract gains that were exacted from a vehemently anti-union company whose entire industry was in decline due to foreign competition after the war. Between May, 1948, when the first contract was signed,

and January, 1954, when the last memorandum of agreement was signed, the basic rate for women rose 65.3 per cent. The basic rate for males rose 50.9 per cent, which meant the union was able to narrow the gap between male and female wages. Women earned 75 per cent of the male rate in 1954 compared to only 68 per cent in 1947 (see figure 5). During the same period the cost of living increased 52.5 per cent, which made the Medalta increases rather modest compared to other organized workers.

Figure 5



The largest wage increase, which was achieved in the first contract, reflected the company's attempt to undermine the union and prevent a first contract from being signed. In the two months before it was signed Medalta used a subsection of the Labour Act to

force another supervised vote among employees on whether or not they supported Mine Mill. Longridge and the union's lawyer, Joseph Cohen, went before the Board of Industrial Relations to voice their objection and presented the board with a stack of 156 signed union memberships, which represented more than half the workers eligible for union membership at Medalta. Longridge also complained that the company had distributed leaflets to employees about the union for four days in a row since applying for a new vote and that the union required an opportunity to respond to these flyers should a vote proceed. He objected to the vote because the two parties were in the middle of negotiations. He was also concerned because he felt the union had the support of only a narrow majority of workers.[13] Finally, Longridge pointed out that in April the company had suddenly increased wages by five cents across the board during negotiations, which violated the Alberta Labour Act. Cohen commented that the company did not have "a desire to have a boni fide meeting to get down to brass tacks and get a contract because every loop hole in the law had been used."[14] Although Board officials were sympathetic toward the two union men during the meeting they chose to side with the company and the vote proceeded. As mentioned above, according to the contract Mine Mill won with only a 50 per cent majority.

Medalta also took advantage of new labour legislation passed in March, 1948 that prohibited any union discussion or union organization by workers on company property during working hours without the company's permission.[15] As a result, William Longridge was forced to "broadcast" to employees from a location just outside the factory during the lunch hour to communicate with workers.[16] Medalta management's hostility toward Longridge, which is apparent in the tone of much company correspondence, may account for the fact that the first contract was signed by the Canadian Congress of Labour's (CCL) provincial representative, Jan Lakeman who, ironically, was a more senior Communist than Longridge.

Two memos issued to employees shortly before the first contract was signed demonstrate that the manipulative and paternalistic attitude Medalta management exhibited during the strike did not change after the strike ended. In the first memo, management's derogatory tone betrays its fundamental disrespect for the judgment of workers as well as

their legal right to choose their own bargaining representative. The memo described Longridge's presence near the factory gate as an attempt to "exploit" workers and generate distrust toward management: "Surely you people are intelligent enough to think for yourselves and can form your own opinions, and can depend on any statements made by the Management that they will be fully carried out."[17] In an address to employees during the crucial weeks prior to signing the first contract, company president A.E. March made numerous promises that the company failed to keep. Although the promised five-cent wage increase materialized, the company failed to deliver a lunchroom, factory uniforms that were to be laundered weekly by the company, a group life insurance plan, a hospitalization insurance plan and a pension plan as it had stated. It was also unable to live up to its guarantee to pay Medalta workers as much as workers were paid in any pottery plant in Canada.[18]

The legacy of this incident was resentment and distrust on the part of many workers that may help explain examples of worker resistance to management's rigid production standards and insensitive attitude. Reports about Medalta by a government conciliator reveal company complaints that production was wasted due to the alleged "willful damage" of employees who were accused of "making a laugh of it."[19] In 1952 a government inspector's report indicated that a number of women workers were making an excessive number of trips to the washroom. Some workers were performing only one-third of the capacity of the machinery they operated while others went for a drink two or three minutes before the rest period was called. The inspector's comments indicate that he found the plant manager's harsh attitude toward workers taking washroom breaks because of illness "astounding," although he was critical of both parties in the end.[20] It is difficult to gauge the extent to which workers actively resisted the difficult work conditions to which they were subjected; however, these incidents demonstrate a high level of suspicion on the part of management.

The first contract Medalta signed with Mine Mill gave workers the exact wage increase that was proposed by the union and rejected by the company on the eve of the strike nine months earlier. Within the labour movement it was viewed as a success.[21] The base rate for women workers rose 33 per cent from thirty-seven-and-a-half cents to fifty

cents, while the male starting rate rose 25 per cent from fifty-five cents to seventy cents.[22] But the contract received no publicity in the local newspaper when it was signed, despite the lavish publicity accorded the strike. J. H. (Hop) Yuill, who owned the local paper, undoubtedly wanted to minimize this achievement since it had implications for Medicine Hat Potteries, which he owned. The stark contrast between the enormous publicity that surrounded the strike and lack of publicity when a successful first contract was signed demonstrates the power of local industrialists to shape public perceptions of organized labour.

Throughout the following six years Medalta workers struggled to achieve wage increases that amounted to only a few cents in a good year and resulted in no increase some years. As Brosnikoff explained, "We felt really good if we did succeed in maybe getting an extra cent an hour or something. I mean that sounds like nothing nowadays, but to us, we knew how hard we fought for it."[23] Compared to other groups of workers represented by Mine Mill in Alberta, which were probably almost exclusively male, the wage increases negotiated in Medicine Hat were low.[24] By 1952 the average wage at Medalta, based on a random sample of thirty workers' wages over a six-month period, was still only 80 per cent of the average wage in the Canadian manufacturing industry.[25]

The company's attitude toward the union remained hostile throughout the post-strike era, until the ownership changed in 1953. In only one year a contract was signed without going to conciliation, and that year – January, 1952 – a "gentlemen's agreement" quickly degenerated into company accusations that the union was not bargaining in good faith.[26] In 1949 arbitration was required. In 1951 the company stalled for so long on an interim wage increase that workers threatened a "wildcat walkout."[27] In December, 1952 Longridge reported: "Membership rejection of .3 cent brings about vicious attack by Company, layoffs and discrimination."[28] Brosnikoff remembers feeling uncomfortable as the plant manager watched her performing her job after she participated in tense contract negotiations:

> I used to cringe sometimes after sitting up in Mr. Phillipson's office or in the boardroom and openly arguing with him, challenging him. And then the next day you're doing your job and you can feel that somebody's watching you. And you turn around and there's Mr. Phillipson standing there on the other side of the racks and he's watching you. And you just had that feeling, 'Oh god, don't make a mistake because he's waiting to get any excuse to fire you.' Then I would have been out of the union too![29]

Despite the company's hostile attitude new members signed up at a fairly steady rate with as many as forty sign-ups in one month late in 1950, although high employee turnover at times hampered organizing efforts.[30] Some departments reported 95 per cent union membership.[31] Former workers agree that union meetings were generally well attended by both men and women. According to the minutes book regular monthly meetings were held from September, 1947 until January, 1952, apart from one month when a quorum was not reached. Although meeting minutes do not exist for the last two years that the company operated, a new contract was signed in January, 1954, which suggests that the union existed but it is unknown whether regular meetings continued.[32]

Local leadership of the union changed over time as some male workers left for better jobs and some of the women left, primarily because of marriage or pregnancy. A crop of younger workers who started working at the pottery after the strike and were not scarred by its bitterness, became the lifeblood of the union. Brosnikoff started at the pottery in 1949 at the age of fifteen-and-a-half and soon took on union positions, including financial secretary and recording secretary as well as a place on the negotiating committee. She left the factory in February, 1953 when she was three months pregnant with her first child. Brosnikoff speculated that older workers and many who had been through the strike were skeptical about the union's ability to change things. New workers, particularly those who were young and single with few responsibilities like herself, became involved in the union "for something to do" as well as to improve their wages and working conditions. Social activities like picnics and dances were an important attraction and benefit of union membership.[33]

There was a serious commitment to organization by both the original unionists and the new ones. To represent the pottery workers more effectively, the original Mine Mill local that was formed with workers at Dominion Glass in 1947 separated less than a year later to form two locals. Local 895 represented only Medalta pottery workers.[34] Other changes also signalled that the local was becoming well established. The union began paying its financial secretary, Christine Steigel, a salary and a concerted effort was made to educate workers and the community about labour issues. The union took out a subscription with the National Film Board and showed labour films to the extent allowed under Alberta's restrictive film censorship law.[35] Current events affecting organized labour were discussed at meetings, sometimes with an invited guest speaker.[36] To raise labour issues in the community Mine Mill international representative William Longridge wrote five-minute radio broadcasts that were aired in Medicine Hat.[37]

The Medalta local also became actively involved in the larger community of organized labour and engaged in the political process. The membership regularly sent its own delegates to labour meetings and conferences across the province, as well as to government hearings on legislative changes that affected workers. Union members supported efforts to organize an industrial labour council in Medicine Hat in 1947 and 1948.[38] The breadth of committee work initiated by the union revealed ambitious plans to improve the situation of workers. A Safety Committee was instrumental in forcing the company to buy a stretcher and install seven first aid boxes throughout the plant.[39] The committee also flagged dangerous sagging in the floor of the clay room and instigated the installment of additional guard rails on moving equipment after a worker was injured.[40] A Sick Committee arranged for a member to visit and present a small gift of chocolates or cigarettes to any workers who were off the job because of sickness or injury.

The substantial contract improvements achieved in addition to modest wage gains through long and difficult negotiations also demonstrate the union's commitment to its membership. Workers secured two additional holidays paid at a rate of double-time-and-a-half, as well as extra pay for those who worked shifts. The union also secured the Rand formula, which provided that all workers pay union dues regardless of whether or not they chose to become union members. This gave the union more security.[41] Over time the

terms of the contract were made more explicit to ensure that workers were protected, particularly regarding the grievance procedure and seniority rights. Eventually all wage rates and job classifications were written into the contract rather than only the base rates, which prevented the company from arbitrarily changing any wage rates between contracts. As noted above women workers won larger wage increases than men, narrowing the gender gap in wage rates. A clause regarding equal pay for equal work was also inserted in the 1954 contract. A contract stipulation that piecework rates be posted helped workers detect underpayments. The work week was reduced from forty-eight hours to forty-four hours in 1953 and then to forty-two-and-a-half in 1954. The first reduction was simply a response to new labour legislation that mandated a forty-four-hour work week, but the second hours-of-work reduction surpassed the minimum required by law.

Mine Mill's emphasis on democratic processes meant that rank-and-file members and local leaders played a major role in setting the union's agenda and making decisions, despite lack of strong local leadership.[42] The vast majority of issues pursued by the union in contract negotiations, grievances and various campaigns, were instigated by motions from rank-and-file workers on the floor. The membership voted on every aspect of union business, from whether or not a non-member could sit in on meetings to the bill for chocolates delivered to an injured worker. Also, the union executive and committees were not dominated by a handful of workers, but saw a steady turnover. No union president served for more than one term.[43]

The increasing number of grievances mentioned in the union minutes and the nature of those grievances suggests that it took time for workers to become familiar with the grievance procedure. It may also have taken time for workers to become comfortable with the idea of challenging their employer. Management's resistance to the union may also have generated a growing sense of disillusionment that resulted in more grievances over time.[44] Most of the grievances raised in the union meeting minutes concerned the underpayment of wages, and the majority of those wage grievances related to women.[45] This imbalance indicates that the company continued to be more lax about ensuring the accuracy of wages paid to women. A frequent complaint concerned newly-hired workers who were maintained at the base rate beyond the period stipulated in the contract. This is

one area in which the union's presence made a real difference for workers. It is difficult to know the overall success rate of wage grievances but on balance more successes than losses were noted in the minutes.[46]

In broad terms the union improved the situation of women workers in several respects. As noted previously the gap between male and female base wage rates narrowed by 21 per cent between 1947 and 1954. Although the union clearly advocated egalitarian ideals, it is possible that male workers were also motivated by the threat that lower-paid female workers posed to their jobs. The large proportion of women workers at the factory made equal pay more advantageous to male workers because it reduced the risk of males being replaced by females. In addition, by 1954 the contract included a clause stipulating that the principle of equal work and equal pay applied regardless of sex.[47] Unlike mainstream unions at the time, Mine Mill argued throughout the postwar period that "women eat as much as men" and were entitled to be paid the same as men if they were performing the same work.[48] Women also played a fairly active role in the union. Two female union presidents are noted in the union minutes and there was usually at least one woman on important committees like the negotiating committee. The ability of women to hold powerful executive positions as well as the job of business agent was an indication of Mine Mill's progressive attitude toward women.

But the participation of women workers in the union was not substantial given that they made up roughly half of the workers eligible for union membership. Although actual figures are not available for the post-strike period, Brosnikoff estimated that women composed the majority of rank-and-file workers who were eligible for union membership because men dominated the supervisory and foreman positions, which were not eligible for union membership. Therefore, although women and men turned out at union meetings in roughly equal numbers, men dominated union positions. Brosnikoff said she was often the only woman working on an executive or a committee.[49]

Although Mine Mill was progressive in its approach to gender issues, the union's effectiveness as an organization was constrained by traditional cultural gender stereotypes. Brosnikoff said married women tended to avoid union responsibilities because of their domestic obligations while married male unionists such as John Lang, who was a "father

figure" to many of the young workers, played an active role in the union.[50] There is no evidence that the union tried to challenge the segregation of jobs by gender, which was at the heart of gender-specific wage rates. Instead, Mine Mill adopted an essentialist view of women workers in its briefs to government, calling for strict weight restrictions for women because "serious injury can easily result when delicate muscles are overstrained." There was also a call for closer inspection of workplaces to ensure female employees were provided with seating facilities. Mine Mill suggested that the fine for violating this law be increased substantially. No equivalent concern was raised about male workers.[51] Finally, weak rank-and-file support for the union's capable business agent, Marie Dillon, demonstrated the fundamentally sexist view of women held by many workers. Marie Dillon stepped into the job in April, 1951 when her husband, Pat Dillon, disappeared because of missing union funds. Brosnikoff said a lot of workers had less confidence in Mrs. Dillon because she was a woman, which eroded support for the union.[52]

The escalating attacks on Communist labour leaders across North America during the postwar period also had a major impact on rank-and-file support for Mine Mill's local at Medalta. The attacks were instigated in Canada during WWII by the political flip-flop of Canadian Communists who opposed the war effort before Hitler's attack on Soviet Russia, then supported it afterward. Communists were accused of placing the interests of the Soviet Union before those of Canadian workers. Yet, as Palmer has argued, for many in the labour movement "communism was a product of their militancy and their intense activism rather than a measure of doctrinal purity or, even, steady adherence to the party."[53] Historians have found insufficient evidence to vindicate the harsh and repressive measures used during this period against Communists, essentially because of their political beliefs. Instead, the extent and intensity of anti-communist fervour has been attributed to the ruthless determination of big business and the state to reverse the gains labour achieved during the war.[54]

Yet its effect on labour throughout the '40s and '50s was profound, particularly for left-wing unions like Mine Mill, which were attacked by fellow unionists as well as employers and the state because of their Communist leadership. Mine Mill was expelled from the Canadian Congress of Labour in 1949 on a pretext to disguise this underlying

reason.[55] The expulsion was part of a campaign by mainstream unionists to get rid of Communist labour leaders as a way of consolidating the labour movement's newly won public respectability and legitimacy. Once Mine Mill had been expelled, mainstream unions declared open season on its membership, mounting raiding campaigns to steal members. This internecine battle caused the labour movement to lose some of its most effective and committed organizers, which severely weakened organized labour for decades to come.[56]

In Alberta, Mine Mill was a major base of Communist Party support in the labour movement. Consequently Longridge, as a Mine Mill official who was a member of the Communist Party of Canada, became the target of CCL attacks. Anti-communist forces in the CCL orchestrated a "rout" of Mine Mill leaders from its executive at the annual conference in 1949.[57] In December, 1953 a front page article in The Calgary Herald used vague allegations and innuendo to discredit Longridge as a Communist. He was accused of using "shady manipulations" to defeat democratic unionism in recent elections for Mine Mill's international executive. Longridge was said to be part of a group of "shrewd, hard reds" aimed at keeping "communist elements on the international executive in power." More generally The Herald accused Communists of "selling out labor's legitimate demands in favor of a policy of political and economic subservience to large companies."[58] High-profile national news stories describing Mine Mill leaders being detained by U.S. and Canadian immigration officials as they tried to cross the border further damaged the union's image.[59]

Initially Medalta workers remained steadfast in their support for Mine Mill despite the negative publicity and periodic CCL membership drives. In November, 1950 Longridge reported: "C.C.L. organizer still trying to get a campaign going in the hat at Medalta, not dangerous, but Pat [Dillon] must spend some time there."[60] But over time the negative publicity hurt the union's image and eroded the confidence of its own membership. Brosnikoff noted that by 1953, when she left the pottery, there was a perceptible loss of support among workers who, because of the publicity, began to question whether the union was genuinely committed to helping its workers.

> Towards the end, before I quit, I think people seemed to be drifting away from the union. That's just a feeling I had . . . I think they kind of felt – I don't know whether betrayed would be the word: "Well, what's the use of fighting. The union was for itself and to heck with the worker." I think it did some damage.[61]

Others feared being seen as Communist sympathizers. Brosnikoff remembered attending a meeting about farming in the Soviet Union along with fellow executive members of the union Basil Leismeister and John Lang at the request of the local union business agent, Marie Dillon. The three unionists quickly walked out of the meeting when it ended because they suspected the meeting "was about Communism." This was the one occasion Brosnikoff could remember when she suspected that workers were being pressured by the union to become Communists, although she said the word Communism was never used at the meeting. She said Dillon seemed to be following orders that she was uncomfortable with and revealed nothing about the meeting when she asked the three workers to attend it. Brosnikoff said after that incident she began reading the newspapers about Communism and became concerned about whether her union involvement would get her into trouble. Aware of the attacks on Mine Mill for its Communist leadership at the time, she speculated that other workers also became uncomfortable with the union's deteriorating reputation and began to "drift away from the union."[62]

There is no indication that union members at Medalta Potteries were Communist or in any sense radical. The membership formed a Political Action Committee and a Legislative Committee to engage with the existing political system to achieve change. There is ample evidence that their goal was to work within the system, not to overthrow it. Prior to the civic election in November, 1947, a motion was carried to encourage all union members "collectively and individually ... to do all they can to give their help" in the upcoming election.[63] At a regular meeting in July, 1948, a pottery worker who was running in the upcoming provincial election as a CCL labour candidate "gave a few words" before the end of the meeting.[64] Resolutions promoting international peace and opposing war were

passed in May, 1949, and again on Armistice Day, 1950 when the union local unanimously passed a resolution "in support of the Stockholm Peace Petition and opposed to war."[65] These resolutions were an explicit rejection of the escalating Cold War. At the time such resolutions bucked a national consensus in support of American international power and invited allegations of Communist sympathy. But they were not radical because they did not indicate a rejection of the existing political and economic system.

Both Mine Mill's commitment to promoting the well being of its rank-and-file membership and its progressive leadership were further demonstrated during the final years of Medalta Potteries' operation, when the Canadian pottery industry went into decline. In October, 1949, as pottery sales plummeted because of an influx of low-priced British and Japanese imports after the war, the union lobbied Medicine Hat City Council to pressure Ottawa for federal intervention. The federal government decided not to take action, hoping new developments would obviate the need for it to act. A month later Medalta Potteries shut down for three months, throwing 280 employees out of work.[66] The union went to City Council again, in September, 1951, when foreign competition caused company losses that made wage increases out of the question, despite wage rates below the provincial average. This time Mine Mill released to the media a cogent brief directed at the federal minister of mines and resources on the "critical condition" of the pottery industry in Canada. The union pointed out that Medalta's failure to grant wage increases that stayed abreast of the cost of living meant local workers were subsidizing the local pottery industry.[67] Despite receiving extensive and favourable publicity, Mine Mill's challenge was not not endorsed by the company or taken up by the government and the pottery industry continued to decline.

A serious car accident that paralyzed one of the owners, Ed Janes, who was the operations manager, triggered the sale of Medalta Potteries early in 1953 to a new group of out-of-town businessmen led by W.G. Pulkingham, who had previously owned a major Ontario pottery. A memorandum of agreement signed between the new owners and the union in January, 1954, reveals a more conciliatory tone toward workers. The new owners removed a clause giving the company sole control over the determination of seniority, and added a clause stating it was open to negotiating when workers brought complaints of

unfair conditions. But the clause prohibiting union business on the company's premises was retained.[68]

Medalta's bankruptcy eighteen months later has been attributed to an unexpectedly lengthy retooling process to produce "give-away" merchandise for the movie theatre market just as television's appearance began to hurt the movie theatre market.[69] Again the union stepped in to seek help from Medicine Hat City Council. However the business was insolvent and had been for some time so no attempt was made to revive it. During the company's final months of operation, as hours were steadily cut back, the union wrote the Unemployment Insurance Commission in Medicine Hat to point out that the company's policy of "short shifts" instead of complete layoffs meant workers were "unable to obtain unemployment insurance benefits and yet their pay cheques [were] not sufficient to maintain a decent living." The union requested that unemployment insurance be awarded on a pro rata basis according to the hours worked.[70]

At least part of the tension between the owners who operated Medalta during the strike and workers throughout the post-strike era must be attributed to the company's deteriorating financial position after the war. But the fact that there is no evidence of company support or cooperation for union initiatives to address the crisis reinforces the idea that Medalta's management was fundamentally anti-union. Management's paternalistic and autocratic attitude toward workers and labour relations prevented the development of a partnership relationship. Instead the company continued to oppose the union throughout the years after the strike.

Within this complex web of adverse political and economic circumstances the survival of a union local at Medalta Potteries after the strike and the modest material gains it achieved are significant. The less tangible gains in terms of self respect, greater equality, and becoming engaged in and informed about the political process are equally significant. As Brosnikoff explained, "I felt a personal victory, I think, every time we won a little ... It was very satisfying."[71] The union enhanced worker dignity by providing Medalta workers a vehicle for negotiating with their employer on a more equal footing and enforcing the terms of each contract.

Most importantly, for the purposes of this study, the strength and breadth of worker commitment to the union, demonstrated by its survival and record of achievement during the post-strike era, undermine contemporary interpretations of the 1947 strike that blame the unrest on Communist union leaders from outside the community. Instead, the strike emerges more clearly as a blatant and relatively successful attempt to discredit organized labour and suppress genuine worker unrest in Medicine Hat.

NOTES

[1] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[2] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 143.

[3] Engelina Kessler interview February 1, 2001.

[4] Bertha Riegel interview December 14, 2000.

[5] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[6] The names of Clarence Sailer, Valentine Stach, Ralph Lattery, Art Steiger and Rueben Kessler , who were among those jailed, appear in the minutes of the first year of meetings, then become much less frequent or disappear. Women workers who were charged, including Ruth Sandau, Mabel Degg, Selma Stickel, Dorothy Sailer and Christine Steigel, also appear in the first year then disappear from the meeting minutes. UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[7] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[8] The first contract, signed May 22, 1948, states that approximately 50 per cent of employees were not members of the union. UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[9] At one point William Longridge offered one dollar for each new member signed up by existing members. UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[10] William Longridge reports, June 15, 1951, UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2.

[11] July 17, 1951 Meeting Minutes, UBC Mine Mill 128/26; William Longridge internal report December 15, 1951, UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2.

[12] In his report Longridge described the "bad financial situation" as a "matter of unpaid per capita" Regarding Pat Dillon Longridge said: "Was advised by Dilllon, on april 2nd thathe was leaving the Hat that day no explanation... Made arrangements for Mrs. Dillon, who had been left with 2 kids without any money, to look after Pottery local and office. It appears as if he started boozing and cracked up." Longridge blamed himself for neglecting the Medicine Hat area. William Longridge report, April 15, 1951, UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2; Brosnikoff said as a member of the union executive she was asked by Marie Dillon to sign a letter stating that she knew nothing about the missing funds. Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001. A letter from Pat Dillon to the union membership announcing his resignation and explaining the reasons for his actions resulted in a unanimous vote of the membership to reject his resignation. Meeting Minutes, March 20, 1951, UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[13] Longridge's comment that he had been asked by employees not to hand in the union cards because "down there ... there is a great deal of fear about their jobs," also reveals some intimidation on the part of the company. Meeting Minutes, Alberta Board of Industrial Relations, PAA 79.46/214.

[14] Meeting Minutes, Alberta Board of Industrial Relations, PAA 79.46/214.

[15] CCL brief to the provincial government in 1948 concerning Bill 91, UBC Mine-Mill 128/3. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 111.

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[16] Memo from management to Medalta workers dated March 20, 1948. Longridge used a bullhorn, or some other voice-projecting device to speak to groups of workers outside the factory. UBC Mine Mill 128/25. In an address to Mine Mill's first Alberrta conference in 1949, Longridge described the new organizing strategy developed by the union in response to the new legislation: "the old days of factory gate organization are gone, fear makes it necessary that organization be carried on in the members home, in a secret campaign, that will not come into the open until the workers are organized and ready to meet the Boss. [*sic*]." UBC Mine Mill 127/2.

[17] Company memo to workers, March 20, 1948, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[18] Address to Medalta Employees by A.E. March, April 8, 1948, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[19] The "willful damage" may also have resulted from the fast pace of production. Sometimes pottery pieces went over the end of the conveyor belt and smashed on the floor because workers could not keep up, Rosetta Brosnikoff interview September 23, 2000. Decembeer 19, 1950 concilator's letter, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[20] Internal government memo, February 9, 1952 Re: Medalta Potteries – labour welfare, PAA 63.5 482.50.31.

[21] Vancouver B.C. District Union News, June 19, 1948.

[22] May 22, 1948 contract UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[23] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[24] An address at Mine-Mill's Alberta convention in 1950 revealed that all Mine Mill members in the province were expected to be earning a labour rate of at least one dollar per hour that year except those in Medicine Hat. Alberta Mine-Mill Executive Council Report to the 1950 Conference of the Alberta Local Unions of Mine Mill, Nov. 1950. UBC Mine-Mill, 127/1-1a.

[25] "Individual Average Earnings, Picked At Random Over Six-Month Period, January-June, 1952, October 16, 1952," UBC Mine Mill 128/125; F.H. Leacy, Ed., Historical Statistics of Canada Second Edition (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1983), E41-48.

[26] Letter from E. Phillipson to W. Longridge, February 13, 1952, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[27] William Longridge internal reports, July 15-August 15, 1951. UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2.

[28] Ibid., December 15, 1952.

[29] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[30] William Longridge internal reports, September, 1950. UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2.

[31] Meeting Minutes, October 5, 1950, UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[32] The minutes book ends only a few pages from the end of the book so it is possible that another book was started but is lost. Also, Brosnikoff who left the pottery in February, 1953, did not remember the union pulling out before she left a year after the minutes book ended. Rosettta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Meeting Minutes, July 25, 1948, UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[35] In 1946 the Alberta government began reviewing 16 mm films to prevent 'communist propaganda' films from entering the province. Finkel, The Social Credit Phenomenon, 108. In a 1950 report to the union William Longridge mentioned having difficulty getting "union films" in Alberta. UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2.

[36]Some of the topics addressed included the deportation of Mine Mill President Reid Robinson in 1948 and a back-to-work order imposed on Alberta railway workers in 1950. Meeting Minutes, April, 1948, September 7, 1950, UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[37] William Longridge internal report, April, 1950, UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2.

[38] Meeting Minutes, September 25, 1947 and January 22, 1948. UBC Mine Mill 128/26.
[39] The company initially refused to buy the stretcher and first aid boxes when approached by the Safety Committee. It reversed that decision shortly after the Safety Committee wrote to the provincial health department about the issue. Ibid., Aug. 15, 1950.

[40] Meeting Minutes, September 19, 1950 UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[41] The Rand formula was devised by Canadian Supreme Court Justice Ivan Rand in 1945 to resolve a major strike at the Ford auto plant in Windsor. It soon became a standard clause in labour contracts. Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 280-81.

[42] In one of his regular reports William Longridge said the situation in Medicine Hat was "static" because "I have not had time to do much there and there is no local leadership." William Longridge internal report November 15, 1948, UBC Mine Mill 135/1&2. Brosnikoff also said that lack of strong local leadership due to low levels of education and lack of familiarity with unions made the membership more vulnerable to the fear mongering of anti-communists, Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[43] UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[44] Another reason for the increase in grievances after 1948 may be that the grievance procedure was modified significantly in October, 1948 through a Grievance Procedure Order issued by the Board of Industrial Relations. The union applied to the board to prescribe a procedure for final settlement of grievances because the procedure specified in the first contract signed May, 22, 1948 was inadequate. Board of Industrial Relations grievance Procedure Order, October 1, 1948, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[45] Forty-nine of the sixty-four grievances that were raised in the union meeting minutes concerned wages paid to women. UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[46] UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[47] Memorandum of Agreement, January 11, 1954, UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[48] In Alberta a 1945 judicial decision rendered in a strike by United Packinghouse Workers of America in Edmonton over the issue of equal pay for equal work determined that women were entitled to earn only eighty per cent of the male wage when doing the same job. The AFL cited the judicial decision when justifying their recommendation to government for gendered minimum wage rates in 1949. Caragata, Alberta Labour, 131. An AFL brief to the Alberta Board of Industrial Relations, Alberta, April 4, 1949, cited the judicial decision as justification for paying women 80 per cent of the male rate. PAA 67.1/470.R. Briefs issued to the provincial government by Mine Mill in 1949 and 1951 argued that the female rate should be the same as the

male rate when the same work was performed. Mine Mill Briefs presented to the Board of Industrial Relations April 4, 1949 and October 4, 1951. UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[49] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Mine Mill Brief to the Board of Industrial Relations, April 4, 1949, UBC Mine Mill 127/2.

[52] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[53] Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 290.

[54] Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise; Lorence, The Suppression of Salt of the Earth.

[55] The pretext was that Mine Mill was constantly attacking Congress leaders and policies. Mine Mill had legitimately attacked Congress leaders for watering down the demands of workers and accepting inadequate wage agreements. Abella, Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour, 101-103.

[56] Bryan Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 290-292.

[57] Longridge managed to retain a position on the CCL executive despite this campaign. Caragata, Alberta Labour, 139-140.

[58] The Calgary Herald, December 10, 1953.

[59] Canadian Communist Mine Mill delegate Jack Scott was detained as he tried to cross the border into the United States to attend a Mine Mill convention in San Francisco. Bryan Palmer, Working-Class Experience, 291. Mine Mill International President Reid Robinson was arrested by the Canadian government "and held for deportation on a charge that he advocated the violent overthrow of the Canadian government." Irving Abella, Nationalism Communism, and Canadian Labour, 98.

[60] William Longridge internal reports. November 29, 1950, UBC Mine Mill 135/1 & 2. On November 2, 1950 the membership passed a resolution against raiding, as well as resolutions against Immigration and "Repressive Legislation" to "protect" the union. Meeting Minutes, November 2, 1950. UBC Mine Mill 128/26.

[61] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Meeting Minutes, November 28, 1947, (UBC Mine Mill 128/26).

[64] Ibid., July 25, 1948.

[65] Ibid., November 11, 1950.

[66] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 140.

[67] Brief to George Prudham, federal minister of mines and resources from Mine Mill, Local 895, dated approximately September 15, 1951. UBC Mine Mill 135/2.

[68] January 2, 1954 Memorandum of Agreement between Medalta Potteries and Mine Mill Local 895. UBC Mine Mill 128/23-25.

[69] Hayward, The Alberta Pottery Industry, 141-143.

[70] Letter to J. W. McLane, U.I.C. office, Medicine Hat, from Charles J. Barber, Secretary, and M. Dillon, Business Agent, Mine Mill Local 895, April 5, 1954. UBC Mine Mill 128/25.

[71] Rosetta Brosnikoff interview May 20, 2001.

CHAPTER FIVE

New Layers of Meaning:

Conclusion

The 1947 Medalta Potteries strike has long been viewed as an ignominious chapter in the history of Medicine Hat labour. Union leaders have been blamed and workers shamed by an interpretation of the labour conflict that portrayed the men and women who struck as the dupes of malicious, self-aggrandizing communist union leaders bent on serving Soviet Russia. This contemporary view depicted the strike as an anomalous blight on the province's otherwise peaceful labour front. The inordinate degree of violence that was alleged in Medicine Hat, which was carefully attributed to disruptive and subversive leaders rather than unknowing workers themselves, was used to justify harsh penalties and more repressive provincial labour legislation.

Examining closely the actions of the state, in its many forms, company management, and the press, as well as the union and its members, provides insight into the larger structural forces that shaped the Medalta Potteries strike. Labour department officials, the premier and cabinet members, the mayor, and a supportive judiciary, used the Medalta strike to intimidate workers and crush organized labour in the province during a crucial period of economic transition. The government's refusal to intercede in the early days of the strike, unlike the way it handled similar strike situations in Medicine Hat that year, helped brand the strikers as outlaws. Its persistent criticism of the union, but not the company, for failing to initiate conciliation contributed to the union's image as intransigent, and left the company's behaviour unexamined. Government delay and obfuscation on the issue of union certification and its harsh judicial interpretation of injunctions and picketline behaviour further construed the strikers as unreasonable and dangerous. Finally, the inflammatory allegations of communist conspiracy that government officials leveled at union leaders in the midst of escalating Cold War fear and suspicion, damaged the public credibility of Medalta workers.

The actions of Medalta Potteries, which escaped public comment, show that management rejected the spirit of new labour legislation that was to make labour a partner in determining the terms of its work. Instead, management clung to an out-dated view of labour relations that was autocratic and paternalistic. The final contract that was signed after the strike ended contained the exact wage terms that the union first proposed, which indicates that the company refused to bargain in good faith. The company's decision to fire all 213 striking employees only a few days after the strike began epitomized its controlling approach to employee relations. During the strike the company's initial refusal to meet with the union, followed by its rejection of a major wage concession by workers, signalled an underlying intent to crush the union. The final issue that kept the two parties apart before the union conceded defeat was the promise that all workers could have their jobs back. Significantly, management held out for "unconditional surrender" to ensure that it had total control over rehiring and could discriminate freely against those workers who were most active in the union.

The media also played an important role in shaping the strike. Both the newspaper and the radio station in Medicine Hat were owned by local industrialist, Hop Yuill, who had a major stake in maintaining low wage rates in the city's clay products industry. Although broadcast coverage was beyond the scope of this study, press coverage analysis reveals reporting that was persistently sympathetic toward the company. It portrayed male workers as ignorant and violent and underplayed the role of women workers.

The interplay of class and gender accentuated traditional patriarchal gender roles during the dispute in a way that weakened the position of workers. Operating on middle-class assumptions that linked working-class males with violence, company officials targeted male workers with more numerous and more serious strike-related charges than those laid against female workers. Women workers, who also participated fully on the picketline, were virtually ignored in the press and by the union itself, as well as in court actions. When forced into the public spotlight by their activities, either on the picketline or as union spokeswomen, female workers tended to be constructed as innocent victims. The historical evidence suggests that such a stark difference between the behaviour of men and

women workers during the strike was a distortion and that their actions were more similar and less violent than was projected at the time.

This gender difference reflected the fundamental ambivalence of a male-dominated society toward women in the workforce, whose growing, and increasingly permanent presence threatened the definition of men as breadwinners. The middle-class company and government officials faced with the effectiveness of women on the picketline chose to underplay their behaviour and construct them as innocent victims. The alternative was to emasculate themselves by acknowledging the strength and effectiveness of women's presence on the picketline – a picketline that kept production at a minimum throughout the entire seventy-two-day strike.

Ambivalence was also apparent in the union's adherence to essentialist notions about women workers and to the ideal of a male breadwinner. At the same time it strove to narrow the wage gap between male and female workers and advocated equal pay for equal work. Traditional gender roles that accorded men a privileged place in the workforce as breadwinners were not easily reconciled with the needs of women wage earners who comprised nearly half of the industrial workforce at Medalta.

These larger structural features of the postwar era may have shaped the circumstances within which individual workers at Medalta Potteries found themselves in 1947; however, they did not determine the choices that were made. Instead, oral history interviews reveal a variety of competing influences on individual workers that reflected their own life experiences. Factors such as gender, military service, marital status, and a rural upbringing shaped the reaction of each worker to factory work, to Mine Mill, and to the strike. Each worker made pragmatic choices that reflected the particular advantages and disadvantages they experienced as pottery workers in postwar Medicine Hat.

Amidst these competing forces of class cohesion and fragmentation a critical mass of workers in 1947 saw organized labour and strike action as the most effective vehicle for improving their situation as workers. Growing class consciousness reflected the establishment of a large and stable industrial workforce in Medicine Hat. A new sense of entitlement following the war and workers' relative strength stemming from a postwar labour shortage consolidated the push for class action.

This study provides a clearer picture of the extent to which a nascent class consciousness existed in Medicine Hat during the turbulent postwar years in Alberta. It also reveals the range of tactics used by employers and the state to intimidate workers and inhibit the growth of organized labour. Finally, by considering the ways in which gender and class interacted in the Medalta Potteries strike it is possible to see how cultural ideologies about gender roles operated to weaken the impact of labour's remarkable solidarity and to obscure the legitimacy of its claims.

The long-term impact of the strike for workers touched by the dispute appears to be an enduring suspicion and ambivalence toward organized labour. Several workers explained that they were not "totally anti-union" but they were "not totally for them either."[1] Some workers blamed the union leaders, others company management for what was felt to be a major economic loss for workers. There was little awareness of the role of governments in the strike. The remarkable long-term silence of some people involved in the strike suggests there was also a significant personal loss, which evoked feelings of embarrassment, possibly even shame, as well as bitterness. More in depth interviews with former workers could uncover new layers of meaning around the strike that would give insight into the long-term impact of the Cold War's anti-communist hysteria on the attitudes of Alberta workers. A potentially fruitful line of inquiry would involve trying to establish the effect of a fifty-year memory filter on the attitudes of workers. In particular, how have their views of organized labour and labour activism changed since the turbulent postwar years in Medicine Hat? How do they feel today about the attitudes, values and beliefs that shaped their actions in 1947?

This study has triggered ideas about a number of other possible research avenues. One would involve an investigation of Medicine Hat's role in Alberta's labour history as an important industrial centre in the early to mid-twentieth century. In particular, how did its unique location in the midst of the prairie drybelt influence the terms of industrialization in Alberta? A study exploring the experiences and impact of female industrial workers in Alberta also has not been written. The strong representation of women workers in the province's meatpacking industry makes that industry particularly useful for studying the role of gender in Alberta's labour relations. Under the leadership of the United

Packinghouse Workers of America the provincial meatpacking industry staged several important strikes in the province that influenced standards for women's wages in the 1940s and achieved major gains for workers in general. For a broader perspective, a comparative study of that industry's national strike in 1947 could yield new insight into regional and provincial differences with respect to labour. The 1940s was a crucial transition decade in the history of Alberta labour because of major political and economic shifts. A regressive attitude toward labour was established in Alberta in the immediate postwar years that has had remarkable staying power. More case studies from this period could shed new light on the factors that contributed to that stance and how they affected the balance of power between labour, industry, and the province.

Medalta Potteries occupies a unique place in Canadian, and particularly Western Canadian, history, that is reflected in its growing value. Sturdy pottery products that were bought by ordinary Canadians in the early decades of the last century for their affordability and functionality as much as their contemporary styling, today fetch hundreds of dollars at auctions that attract bids from across North America.[2] The meanings behind this increasing value encompass primarily nostalgia and national and regional pride. The Clay Products Interpretive Centre in Medicine Hat was established in 1989 by community members dedicated to preserving the history of the region's pottery industry. It showcases the former Medalta factory, its beehive kilns and equipment and its products, ranging from simple crocks and brown betty teapots produced in the 1920s to distinctively modern 1950s dinnerware cast in deep apple greens and lemon yellows. It is a final irony that this pottery, produced by hundreds of workers earning subsistence wages under primitive working conditions, is now a valuable collector's item held at Canadian museums and in countless personal collections.

This study of the Medalta Potteries strike expands our understanding of the people whose hard-earned labour was a vital ingredient of the factory's success. Recovering their stories and reevaluating that event from the new perspective they provide has uncovered additional layers of meaning. As a material link with the past, Medalta pottery pieces signal the emergence of a class conscious industrial workforce in postwar Alberta, which has not yet found its place in history.

NOTES

[1] Engelina Kessler interview September 16, 2000.
[2] A Medalta mixing bowl recently sold for $650. The Ottawa Citizen, May 1, 1999.

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APPENDIX A

Methodology

My goal of exploring the ideas and attitudes of rank and file men and women workers required that I conduct oral interviews because there is so little evidence in textual records and photographs. More women than men were interviewed because it was possible to locate more women. I would have preferred to interview an equal number of men and women. The names of those interviewed were provided by the Clay Products Interpretive Centre in Medicine Hat. Although all of the people interviewed were offered anonymity, no one chose to remain anonymous, so the names provided in the study are actual names. I elected not to identify several quotations out of consideration for still living people.

The lives of nine former workers at Medalta Potteries were profiled for the purposes of this study. Eight people were interviewed in person. Information about the ninth person, now deceased, was collected in an interview with his wife. All but one of the nine individuals were directly involved in the strike. One former worker did not work at the pottery until after the strike, however she was heavily involved in the union and provided insight into the post-strike era. Six of the individuals interviewed were women and two were men. All of the workers interviewed were under the age of twenty-three when they worked at Medalta except one, who was twenty-nine. Most were teenagers. For most of the men and women working at Medalta Potteries was their first paid job.

Each of the individuals was interviewed in person for one-and-a-half to two hours using a list of topics to trigger discussion. Two sets of couples were interviewed only together, which may have limited their discussion of more personal topics. Two people were interviewed a second time by telephone. One interview lasted forty-five minutes, the other ninety minutes. Lack of time to conduct further interviews limited the depth of the study.

Two of the women interviewed had a collection of roughly ten photographs each from the period of the strike that provided insight into picketline activity and camaraderie. They also revealed aspects of the strike such as a fundraising tour in the Crows Nest Pass, that would otherwise have been lost to the historical record.

Extensive company records of Medalta Potteries extending back to the original company's inception are available at the Provincial Archives of Alberta in Edmonton. Unfortunately, a somewhat haphazard collection of company records was recovered from the abandoned factory after years of exposure to the encroaching elements. There are no company records in that collection for the year of the strike. The best source for records relating to the strike was the Statement of Claim filed by Medalta Potteries against twenty union members. This civil court file contained invaluable strike material ranging from strike bulletins to court affidavits precisely detailing some picketline activities. Mine Mill records held at the University of British Columbia related mainly to the period after the strike, however, a few strike bulletins and pieces of correspondence remained. It is impossible to know whether the absence of strike records in the UBC collection signals lack of time and attention to record-keeping at the time of the strike, or whether it means there are records sitting in someone's basement or attic that will some day come to light. It is less surprising that there are no company records for the years right around the strike because many Medalta records were damaged in the crumbling factory.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

APPENDIX B

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS REVIEW

This is to certify that the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary has examined and approved the following research proposal:

Applicant(s): **Cindy Loch-Drake**

Department/Faculty: **Department of History**

Project Title: **Gender, Class and Community: Medalta Potteries in Post-War Alberta**

Sponsor (if applicable):

Chair
Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board

Aug 30/00
Date:

Distribution: (1) Applicant, (2) Supervisor (if applicable), (3) Chair, Department/Faculty Research Ethics Committee, (4) Sponsor, (5) Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (6) Research Services