

The One Big Union in Washington

BY DAVID JAY BERCUSON

CANADIAN scholars have long been aware of the tremendous impact of the American labor movement on Canada, but only rarely can it be demonstrated that Canadian influences helped to shape events in the United States. Nonetheless, some students of labor in western Canada and the northwestern U.S. are now beginning to conclude that the 49th parallel was not a real barrier to the flow of people and ideas that connected events and movements in the two countries. This is merely belated recognition of facts acknowledged by the workers themselves three-quarters of a century ago. When, in 1901, the hard-rock miners of Rossland, British Columbia, joined in a cross-border strike with smelters in Northport, Washington, the secretary of the Western Federation of Miners local in Rossland observed: "There is no 49th parallel of latitude in Unionism. The Canadian and American workingmen have joined hands across the boundary line for a common cause against a common enemy."¹

Canadian influence in the northwestern American labor movement was strong in the spring and summer of 1919. Beginning in June and for several months thereafter, the Washington State Federation of Labor seriously considered reorganizing itself into a One Big Union, following a path only recently embarked upon by tens of thousands of western Canadian union members. This One Big Union was not an offshoot of, or a stalking-horse for, the Industrial Workers of the World but was a much more fuzzy concept hatched in the minds of several western Canadians. The IWW took great pains to separate itself from the Canadian OBU, and the advocates of the One Big Union in Canada disavowed both the aims and methods of the IWW.²

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For at least two decades, western trade unionists had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the leadership of their international unions. The nature of western industry, the numerical weakness of western trade unions, and the tensions caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization created a radical union movement. Western Canadian workers increasingly sought industrial unionism and Socialist political action but found no room for either within the confines of the American Federation of Labor and its Canadian subordinate, the Trades and Labor Congress.

At the September 1918 Trades Congress convention held at Quebec City, westerners introduced resolutions favoring industrial unionism, condemning the war effort, and calling for an end to government excesses such as the jailing of war opponents. Every motion was defeated, and the westerners decided to call a caucus of western and progressive eastern union members to meet just before the next national convention. But in the months following, Quebec City radicals, led by members of the Socialist party of Canada, placed themselves at the head of the new wave of protest and succeeded in having a full-fledged convention called for March in Calgary. At that meeting delegates representing over 50,000 workers, almost all from western Canada, decided to hold a referendum on the question of secession, and the OBU was created in a four-day meeting at Calgary, Alberta, June 7-10.³

Far different from the IWW, the One Big Union consisted of skilled workers who had left

¹"Account of the Labor Troubles at Rossland," Aug. 20, 1901, p. 11, PAM HD 6521 W2R61, University of British Columbia Library (UBCL).

²Canada Department of Labour, *Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada* (Ottawa, 1920), 67. C. Berg to W. Kollings, May 2, 1919, R. B. Russell Papers, Winnipeg Strike Trial Records, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (MPA).

³These events are covered in several sources, including David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg* (Montreal, 1974), 90-102, and Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston, 1968), 178-98.

their AFL craft unions *en masse*, and it made little effort to organize the unskilled labor in harvest fields or logging camps. The OBU was basically a syndicalist union with its revolutionary thrust blunted by an almost unquestioning faith that revolution as forecast by Marx was inevitable. It was not necessary to actively promote or take part in revolution since Marxist predictions, the OBU leaders believed, were infallible. The organization was antipolitical, but its constitutional preamble contained nothing more radical than the assertion that workers must prepare for the inevitable revolution through organization and education. OBU ideas reflected the ideological sterility of the Socialist party of Canada, of which most OBU leaders were members. The OBU's constitution contained a mechanism for resorting to general strikes in industrial disputes but not a hint of the revolutionary general strike so essential to revolutionary syndicalism. Although it pledged itself to industrial organization, the OBU also promoted organization and affiliation by geographic area (not unlike the Knights of Labor) and, in fact, created very few industrial unions. In most cases, old craft divisions were perpetuated in the new OBU on a local basis. Consistent in few things, the OBU suffered from massive ideological confusions which weakened it internally and helped its enemies destroy it.⁴

But in 1919 western Canadian workers were ready for a radical alternative to replace the AFL-TLC. The overwhelming majority of workers did not realize that the OBU was so ill-defined a program—they heard the rhetoric of radicalism and saw only that years of talk had finally become action. By January 1920, some 50,000 to 70,000 trade union members had taken out OBU cards. The new organization at first swept everything before it. It captured the British Columbia Federation of Labor; the Vancouver Trades Council and its newspaper the *British Columbia Federationist*; District 6 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers in the B.C. interior; District 18 of the United Mine Workers in eastern B.C., southern and central Alberta, and southwestern Saskatchewan; and the Winnipeg Trades Council and its newspaper, the *Western Labor News*. The only major holdouts were the Calgary and Edmonton trades councils and the Alberta Federation of Labor.

THE AFL viewed the OBU with alarm. Because AFL President Samuel Gompers spent most of

1919 recovering from an automobile accident and hobnobbing with statesmen and politicians, the task of conducting an anti-One Big Union campaign fell to Frank Morrison, AFL secretary. A good, faithful, and—more important—effective servant, Morrison knew by late March that special measures would be necessary to combat the OBU. He quickly hired Alfred Farmilo, a prominent official of the Edmonton Trades Council and the Alberta Federation of Labor, to act as special AFL organizer in the Canadian west.⁵

Morrison then began to circulate news of the OBU to the executive council, and he took the unusual step of withholding some payments on the mortgage of the AFL headquarters in order to provide monies for his program. This, he told Daniel Tobin, AFL treasurer, was necessary because the OBU and IWW were becoming active in “northwestern Canada” and the U.S. at a time when the federation's peace mission to Europe tied up AFL finances, and he believed that “it was the part of wisdom to have a considerable fund available for organizing work” at home. Morrison was soon looking for a second organizer and by mid-May hired William Varley of Toronto, a member of the Street Railway Employees Union. Morrison's actions, combined with the later hiring of special organizer R. A. Rigg by the Trades and Labor Congress, put three paid roadmen backed by a special fund at the disposal of the AFL, as well as many organizers dispatched to the area by individual unions.⁶

On the Northwest Coast, none of these moves had any immediate effect. Vancouver, B.C., was a bastion of OBU strength, and the labor movement in this city was close in spirit, as well as proximity, to that in Seattle. Seattle attracted thousands of workers who were prepared to make their fortune on the northwest frontier in much the same fashion as those settling in the cities of western Canada. They read each other's newspapers, listened to the same speakers, and harbored similar resentments toward eastern trade union leaders who showed little understanding for western problems. Canadian

⁴ For OBU constitution, see *Constitution and Laws of the One Big Union*, Box 160-1, Mine Mill Collection, UBCL. For OBU failure, see David Jay Bercuson, “Western Labour Radicalism and the One Big Union: Myths and Realities,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (May 1974), 3-11.

⁵ F. Morrison to P. M. Draper, April 7, 1919, Frank Morrison Letterbooks, Vol. 508, p. 417, Perkins Library, Duke University (hereafter cited Morrison Letterbooks).

⁶ Morrison to AFL Executive Council, April 9, 1919; to D. J. Tobin, April 14, 1919; and to Draper, April 30, 1919, Morrison Letterbooks, Vol. 508, pp. 496, 593, and 930. R. Rigg to J. Winning, July 30, 1919, Rigg/Rees Papers, MPA.

secessionists were, therefore, determined to make sure that Seattle heard the OBU message.

In April 1919, the Seattle labor movement was ready to listen. Workers had been increasingly restless for some time. The IWW had strong local influence because of the extensive logging industry around Puget Sound. Though nominally loyal to Gompers and the AFL, the labor movement began to display disquieting signs of independence. The most dramatic of these was the general strike of February 6-10, 1919, called by the Seattle Central Labor Council in support of shipyard workers locked in a dispute with the government-owned Emergency Fleet Corporation. This walkout was strongly condemned by the AFL, which also took partial credit for ending it, to the disgust of the Seattle labor movement.⁷

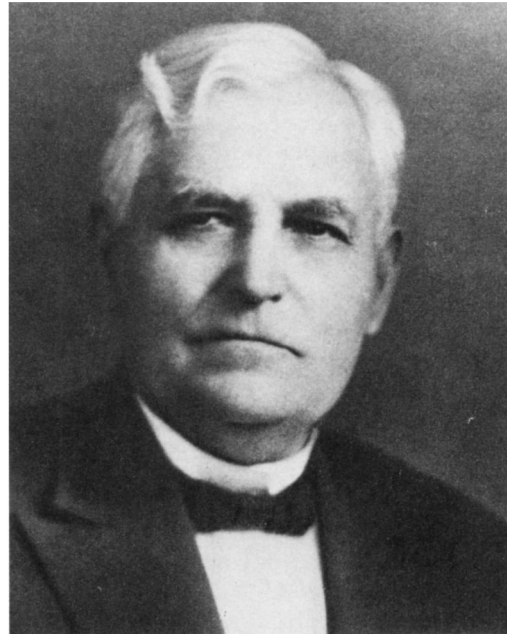
But the general strike was only one sign of Seattle's refusal to play by AFL rules. Another was "Duncanism," a movement—named for James A. Duncan, Central Labor Council secretary—which stood for strong control of local unions by the council, close cooperation among kindred trades, and simultaneous expiration of agreements within a single industry. A campaign launched by the Central Labor Council in early March 1919 standardized this informal system into the Duncan Plan, a proposal to reform the AFL from within. Nothing less than a direct challenge to the craft union nature of the AFL, the Duncan Plan called upon AFL members to vote on the reorganization of the federation into 12 industrial units in order to provide the unions with a more effective strike weapon. Clearly, there was significant dissatisfaction with the AFL in Seattle just at the time that western Canadian workers were rising in revolt against the Gompers system. It was natural for some Seattle workers to look with more than passing interest at the One Big Union.⁸

WHEN Canadian OBU leaders received inquiries about their campaign from Seattle, they decided to go there to tell their story. William A. Pritch-

⁷ Robert L. Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike* (Seattle, 1964), 139-40, 152-54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48-49. Seattle Central Labor Council circular, March 12, 1919, "The King v. William Ivens et al" evidence, Ivens Papers, MPA.

⁹ R. B. Russell to V. Midgley, April 11, 1919, and Midgley to J. Taylor, April 21, 1919, One Big Union (OBU) Papers, MPA. *British Columbia Federationist*, April 25, 1919. Minutes of the Central Labor Council meeting, April 16, 1919, Box 8, King County Central Labor Council Records, University of Washington Library (hereafter cited CLC Minutes with appropriate date).



Photography Collection, University of Washington Library
Frank Morrison—he organized the AFL's campaign to crush the OBU movement.

ard, a longshoreman and longtime Socialist party member, and Victor Midgley, secretary of the OBU organizing committee, appeared before the Central Labor Council in April to speak about the OBU. They received a "tremendous burst of applause" when they declared that "a class conscious labor movement must at once take the place of the old craft form of organization in which one set of workers [is] pitted against . . . another." The council did not debate the merits of the OBU idea, but Midgley came away with the belief that Seattle would eventually break with the AFL. On the same trip, Pritchard spoke to a large group of longshoremen and laid plans for a later expedition to Tacoma.⁹

Though the Canadians did not realize it, they were beginning to figure in a local argument over the Duncan Plan. Harry Ault, of the Seattle *Union Record*, supported Duncan and tried to make it appear that Pritchard and Midgley did also. After the two B.C. men departed from Seattle, Ault published an interview with Pritchard, conducted by Anna Louise Strong, in which the Canadian reportedly observed that the Duncan Plan was best for normal times but that the crisis was already at hand in Canada. "If the Duncan plan succeeds," he was purported to have said, "we will be back in the reorganized A.F. of L. almost automatically." This story upset OBU supporters in Seattle, who quickly wrote Pritchard to let him know what was happening. They

insisted that he send a letter of denial as soon as possible and that he send it not to Ault (who was a "God Damn Labor Faker") but directly to them for insertion in the paper. Pritchard complied, declaring: "Since . . . time is denied us, and the problem demands, and will continue to demand, immediate action, it seems . . . the height of folly to expect any sudden move [to reform] on the part of the A.F. of L."¹⁰

When Canadians appeared before Washington labor bodies to talk about the One Big Union, they were essentially outsiders, at the mercy of rules and gavel. But when they participated in meetings as delegates, their influence was greater. In fact, it was as representatives to the May 1919 convention of the Pacific Coast District of the International Longshoreman's Association that they were able to firmly plant the OBU seed in Seattle soil. Joseph Taylor of Victoria was district president; other Canadians, from Prince Rupert south, attended—including a friend and colleague of Pritchard in the ILA and Socialist party, OBU leader Jack Kavanagh. Determined to "use his influence on behalf of the O.B.U.," Kavanagh delivered one of the opening addresses at the convention, telling the gathering about the OBU and outlining the plans under which it proposed to operate. While in Seattle, he also spoke to the Seattle Central Labor Council; after explaining why western Canadian workers were resorting to secession, he claimed that "the one big union idea [was] growing by leaps and bounds, and [had] applications for membership from local unions from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast." Even though he attacked the popular Duncan Plan, he was "listened to with great interest" and received "much applause."¹¹

Kavanagh and the other Canadian delegates did a thorough job. The ILA convention went on record "in favor of forming an industrial union patterned after the British Columbia 'One Big Union'" and declared its intention of submitting an OBU proposal to all ILA locals and all dock work and marine transport unions on the coast. Shortly after the convention, Taylor issued an explanatory circular to district members. In it, he noted that the proposed American OBU had nothing to do with the IWW since the Canadians who had met at Calgary in March and the delegates to the coast ILA convention were "men who have been in the Trade Union Movement for many years."¹²

Having been converted, the longshoremen now set out to spread the word. In late May they communicated with the Seattle Central Labor Council, urging "consideration of Canada's seces-

sion movement." The council was not, at this moment, ready to entertain such notions and resolved to "ignore all communications and persons advocating secession from the A.F. of L." But this was only a temporary setback for OBU supporters. The big prize was the Washington State Federation of Labor itself, and OBU supporters made considerable effort to send large delegations to the state federation's annual convention scheduled to open in Bellingham in mid-June. William Short, president of the federation, warned Frank Morrison that One Big Union advocates planned to control the federation and "replace present officers with officers favorable to this policy . . ." As the convention drew near, policy and ideological issues narrowed to a fight over the election of executive officers. Short and Charles Perry Taylor, federation secretary, represented the "more conservative element," while Thomas Russell of Tacoma and L. W. Buck of Seattle were the "progressive" candidates.¹³

On Monday, June 16, 1919, the Washington State Federation of Labor met in its 18th annual convention. It was evident from the beginning that delegates were in a boisterous mood and were feeling somewhat defiant of AFL authority. On the first morning of the gathering, they voted to back the fight of Seattle Local 40 of the Steam Engineers against its international officers, who had suspended the business agent for boosting the Duncan Plan and advocating general strikes. The discussion clearly indicated that many were using the opportunity to express their support for the general strike of the previous February.¹⁴

Canada received more than the usual attention at this meeting. Jack Kavanagh was back, this time in his capacity as president of the British Columbia Federation of Labor, to address the convention on the Canadian strike situation. He told delegates that the Canadian government did not dare to send troops into Winnipeg and Vancouver, where general strikes were in progress, because the soldiers might join forces with the strikers. Kavanagh declared that his colleagues

¹⁰ Seattle *Union Record*, April 18 and May 5, 1919. J. Lighter to Midgley, April 19, 1919, and "Billie" to W. Pritchard, April 18, 1919, OBU Papers.

¹¹ *Union Record*, May 5 and 8, 1919. Midgley to Russell, April 21, 1919, "The King v. William Ivens et al" evidence, Ivens Papers. CLC Minutes, May 7, 1919.

¹² *Union Record*, May 9, 1919. ILA circular, n.d., Box 7, Ivens Papers.

¹³ CLC Minutes, May 28, 1919. W. Short to Morrison (telegram), May 9, 1919, Box 41, Washington State Federation of Labor Records, University of Washington Library

were on strike not so much against the employers but "against the government of Canada" because it had interfered on the side of the employers in Winnipeg. He appealed for financial assistance and was rewarded with "a heavy collection," as the convention pledged "its full moral and financial support to the general strikers of Winnipeg, Vancouver and all Canadian cities."¹⁵

In the elections William Short was reelected, but Charles Perry Taylor was defeated by L. W. Buck. Taylor's defeat was not, however, a clear victory for the progressive bloc because Taylor, a paid AFL organizer, had made many personal enemies over the years, and Buck, a Socialist, was not of the "ultra-radical type" as Short put it. On the last day of the convention, however, when many Short supporters had departed, the progressives scored their major victory. Harry Wright, a Tacoma longshoreman and secretary of the Pacific Coast District of the ILA, proposed a resolution that called for a referendum on the holding of a One Big Union conference. Despite the opposition of the convention resolutions committee, the delegates adopted the proposal by a wide margin. Short's fears had been realized; the One Big Union was launched.¹⁶

Though Wright and other OBU supporters borrowed much of their ideas and terminology from Canada, no actual connection between the Canadian and Washington OBU existed. Canadian speakers supported the American movement, lent their ideas to it, and in part provided the example, but they gave no real leadership. It was in their interests to see the One Big Union succeed in Washington, and a link-up with the American OBU would have been almost inevitable, but Canadians were fully preoccupied with their own battle north of the border. For the moment, they could do little but cheer from the sidelines.

By mid-July, after one false start, the state federation's executive board settled the details of the referendum, and the printing and distribution of ballots began. The One Big Union issue was, as Harry Ault observed, the most important question that had faced the unions in a long

time, and debate over the OBU heated up as voting began. There was bitter division, reflected in a stormy, two-hour session of the Tacoma Central Labor Council, where a motion was introduced to spend council funds to spread the referendum message. Conservatives demanded a roll-call vote, while OBU supporters, led by Harry Wright, threatened to publish the recorded votes in the council newspaper. Many OBU opponents stormed out of the meeting and threatened to withdraw their unions if any money was spent on OBU propaganda. The council president struck a compromise by ordering AFL organizer W. J. Beard to do the job of acquainting locals with the importance of the referendum. This debate over funds echoed several days later in a Seattle machinist lodge, where it was charged that money raised to support Canadian strikers was being channeled into the OBU.¹⁷

To facilitate an exchange of views on the OBU issue, Ault opened the columns of the *Seattle Union Record*. Harry Wright took the opportunity to explain his position at length. The movement in Washington was, he claimed, "entirely different in its inception and fundamentally different in nearly every way from that of Canada." A vote for the OBU conference was not a vote to secede from the AFL, Wright assured. He believed that the labor movement could be changed from within and that it would be folly for anyone to try to destroy it. Thousands of workers were calling for reform of some kind; to prevent real splits from occurring, he had proposed the referendum as a means of providing a forum for the thrashing out of issues.

Wright emphatically denied that the OBU had anything to do with the IWW but argued that even IWW involvement would be no reason to oppose the OBU, any more than an American flag should be thrown away because it was made in Japan. His OBU would organize the unorganized, reconstruct the labor movement along industrial lines, assure that agreements in kindred trades expired at the same time, eliminate jurisdictional squabbles, and establish a universal transfer card. Above all it would never secede. His was the very voice of moderation and reason. But Short challenged him. In a letter sent to all affiliated locals and the *Union Record*, he pointed out that if the resolution passed, a convention would be called to form "One Big Union along industrial lines." This meant secession, and secession, Short claimed, meant failure and defeat as surely in Washington as it did in Canada. The resolution voted upon at Belling-

(hereafter, State Federation Records). *Union Record*, June 14, 1919.

¹⁴ *Union Record*, June 16, 1919.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, June 19, 1919.

¹⁶ Short to R. L. Guard, July 29, 1919, State Federation Records. *Union Record*, June 23, 1919.

¹⁷ Minutes of the Washington State Federation of Labor Executive Board meetings, July 10 and 12, 1919, Box 60, State Federation Records (hereafter cited EB Minutes with appropriate date). *Union Record*, July 14, 18, and 22, 1919.

ham, he charged, was "an exact copy of the one introduced in the Calgary conference which brought about the Western Canadian O.B.U." Charles Perry Taylor supported Short: "We don't want any O.B.U. What we want is closer affiliation. The colored gentleman in the woodpile [is] the I.W.W. . . . The O.B.U. is on a par with the general sympathetic strike in Seattle, which, as the Union Record said, is going 'no one knows where.'"18

Wright disavowed secession and claimed that he had never seen the Calgary OBU resolution, but the secession charge was the most effective weapon that opponents could use to beat back the OBU tide. Robert Harlin, President of District 10 of the United Mine Workers, speculated that behind Wright were other individuals who hoped "by trickery" to secure a favorable vote. If there were moves afoot to "stampede" the AFL membership, he threatened, a day of reckoning would come.¹⁹

WHILE the battle over the referendum raged in Washington, hard-rock miners in Butte, Montana, laid plans for a One Big Union conference. Labor councils in the Northwest were invited to send delegates to discuss the feasibility of forming a state OBU in Montana prior to the establishment of a national organization. Morrison reacted quickly. He wired the Silver Bow Trades and Labor Council in Butte not to send any delegates to the OBU meeting and to withdraw credentials already issued. He also sent as many international organizers as possible to the area. Gompers threw his weight into the battle, sending messages to the presidents of the machinists, boilermakers, and electrical workers to enlist their aid in maintaining the integrity of their unions. But even with these efforts the convention went ahead, and the Butte *Miner* welcomed "Bolsheviki" delegates from Canada and the Pacific Coast, and OBU organizer Joseph Knight, of Edmonton, Alberta, delivered the keynote address. There was no IWW representation at the meeting, even though the IWW was the largest miners' union in the area; one local Wobbly leader, invited to speak to the delegates, declared that his union would not cooperate with the OBU. The conference accomplished little, though there was discussion of linking the OBU of Washington and Montana.²⁰

As the OBU challenge moved south of the Canadian border, the AFL intervened. Secretary Morrison obtained an assessment of the situation in Washington from Short, then canvassed the

AFL Executive Council by mail to seek advice. The first vice-president, James Duncan (no relation to James A. Duncan of Seattle), suggested that the state federation be ordered to cease the referendum immediately or have its charter revoked. W. D. Mahon, sixth vice-president, agreed. He believed any organization holding an AFL charter had no right to submit such a referendum to its membership and should be expelled from the AFL for doing so. He urged Morrison to take a firm stand and bring the "one big union nightmare to a close as soon as possible." Matthew Woll echoed his fears:

We must prevent the poison now injected in the movement of the northwest from spreading to other parts and we must put out the smouldering fires now raging in that part of the country which may at some future time blaze up into a great conflagration in many of our industrial centers.²¹

On August 2 Morrison sent a toughly worded letter to the state federation. He reminded members of their statutory obligations according to the AFL constitution and told them that the Washington State Federation of Labor had "ignored its pledge to recognize and support the principle of the autonomy of the National and International unions . . ." The state federation had no authority to assume powers that belonged solely to the individual unions that comprised the AFL, Morrison wrote. If the referendum now under way was not immediately halted, the AFL Executive Council would revoke the state federation's charter, establish "a bona fide state organization" in its place, and seek to have the national and international unions affiliate with the new state federation.²²

The order itself, coming like an edict from Olympus, created almost as much dissension as the referendum. Short, who had opposed the OBU movement all along, was upset by the

¹⁸ *Union Record*, July 31, Aug. 1 and 5, 1919.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1919.

²⁰ Morrison to F. J. Hayes, June 30, 1919, and to J. Green, July 5, 1919, Morrison Letterbooks, Vol. 509, pp. 654 and 707. CLC Minutes, June 25, 1919. S. Gompers to W. H. Johnston, to L. Weyand, and to C. Ford, July 11, 1919, Samuel Gompers Letterbooks (microfilm), Vol. 256, p. 67, University of North Carolina Library. *Union Record*, July 24, 1919.

²¹ The correspondence, including votes and communications from AFL Executive Council members, is found in Morrison to AFL Executive Council, Aug. 20, 1919, Morrison Letterbooks, Vol. 511, p. 462 and *passim*.

²² Morrison to C. P. Taylor, Aug. 2, 1919, Morrison Letterbooks, Vol. 510, pp. 298-300.

²³ *Union Record*, Aug. 11 and 12, 1919.

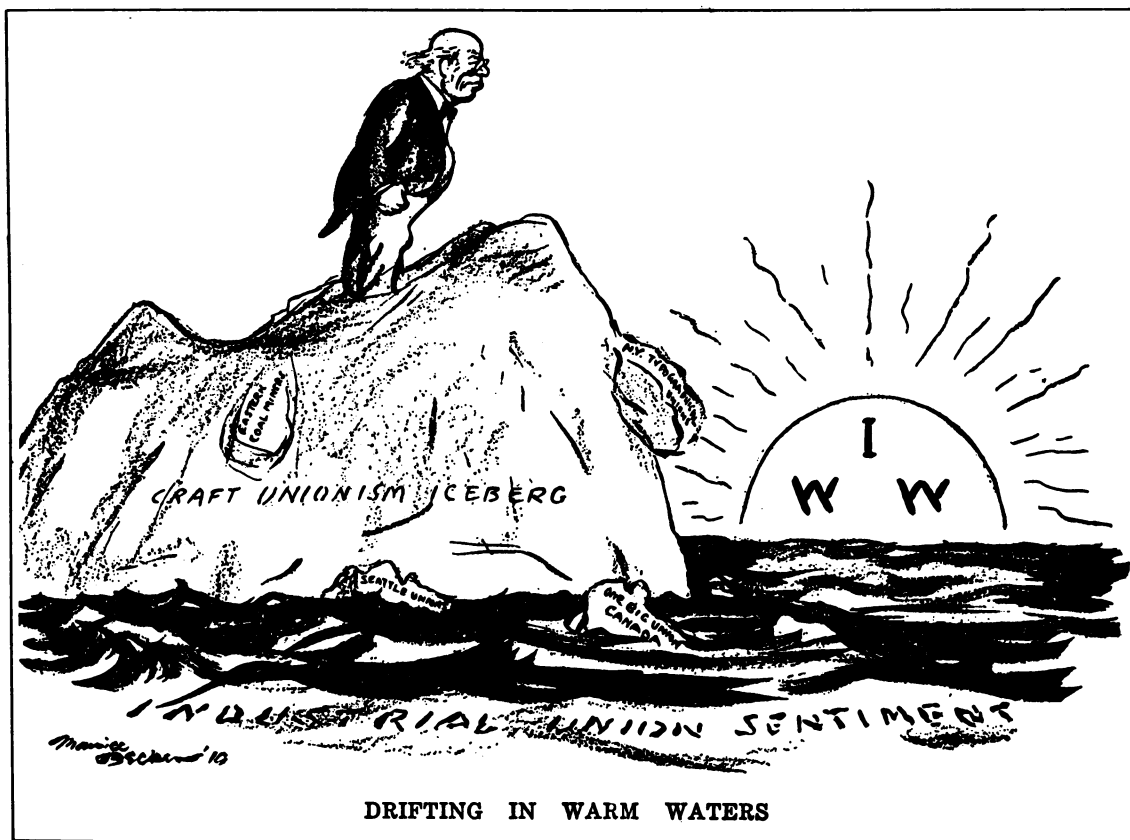
²⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 14, 1919; CLC Minutes, Aug. 13, 1919; EB Minutes, Aug. 14, 1919.

abruptness of the ultimatum. He had assured Morrison that the situation would not get out of hand and asked that the state labor movement be allowed to handle the matter in its own way. He believed that "the level-headed unionists would steer . . . through the dangerous channel without disruption." Harry Ault sympathized with this view. The "unfortunate wording of the resolution," which implied secession, had misled the AFL Executive Council. In a front-page editorial, he appealed for calm assessment of the new realities facing labor in Washington and suggested another referendum calling for a conference to discuss closer affiliation, the high cost of living, and other matters.²³

The Seattle Central Labor Council refused to give in to AFL dictation. At its August 13 meeting, it considered a resolution submitted by the longshoremen condemning the AFL action and demanding a continuation of the referendum. There was an attempt, supported by Secretary Buck, to shelve the motion by passing it directly to the executive board of the state federation, but this was easily defeated, and the resolution was carried. Some council delegates maintained that federation officers could not ignore the de-

mands of the largest labor body in the state even though moving ahead with the OBU vote meant secession. The state federation was now caught between the Seattle labor movement and the national federation.²⁴

On the following day, the state executive board met at Seattle to decide its future course. Faced with the power of the AFL, uncertain of the extent of grass-roots support for the OBU, and weakened by serious internal opposition to the entire referendum, it succumbed. Letters, telegrams, and resolutions from locals and councils condemning the AFL were to no avail, and a motion was unanimously adopted to obey Morrison's instructions. But the executive board members did not submit meekly: they told Morrison that they would obey his orders because, as officers of the AFL, they had no choice, but that they objected to the way the matter had been handled. They asserted that they should have been consulted about the order and expected such consideration in future. The OBU referendum issue was being handled satisfactorily prior to the AFL's interference and would have been resolved without disruption. Now, they charged, there would be serious difficulties:



One Big Union Monthly (November 1919)

Your action . . . has precipitated a situation that will require the most careful handling to avoid serious injury to both state and national bodies. We regret your action exceedingly, and sincerely trust that in future . . . you will at least ask for advice from . . . those of us who are on the grounds here . . .²⁵

WHETHER or not these emphatic statements were simply intended to assuage local feeling and keep the state federation's rank and file solidly behind an executive board that was, after all, committed to the AFL is not important. The board's action reflected a strong resentment of outside interference. But even had Short's assessment been correct and had the OBU matter been under control, the AFL could not have allowed the vote to continue. That a state federation could vote on an OBU resolution without swift AFL reaction would have been seriously damaging to the AFL, for it would have indicated a dangerous drift of its leadership. In August 1919, the craft union cause was beset by secession in Canada, internal division in the U.S., and the extremes of the Red Scare in both countries. Aimlessness might have meant disaster.

With the state federation's surrender, opposition to the AFL faded rapidly. The last great battle was fought in the Seattle Central Labor Council on the evening of August 20. OBU supporters condemned the state federation executive board's action and demanded that the Central Labor Council take over the conduct of the referendum and stop its per capita payments to the federation. A letter from Harry Wright urged that the Seattle and Tacoma labor councils continue the vote and proceed to organize the OBU themselves if the majority of the rank and file so decided. But Wright and his supporters could not overcome Short and his contingent, which included L. W. Buck and James Duncan. In the final vote, a resolution to uphold the action of the state executive board passed by a wide margin, even though the One Big Union advocates had "considerable following." As far as the orga-

nized craft union movement was concerned, the OBU in Washington sustained a fatal blow.²⁶

The One Big Union in Canada and the Pacific Northwest represented a greater potential threat to the AFL than any other rival movement up to that time, including the IWW. OBU advocates were not bums or bindlestiffs but skilled tradesmen, veterans of craft unionism, who attacked from within; they included the Canadians, who withdrew their locals, lodges, councils, and federations from the AFL, and the Washingtonians, who claimed that secession was not their intent. The Washington OBU strategy was surely a pipe dream, if not a ploy, because a state-based One Big Union could not have existed within the AFL and would not have been permitted even if it could have survived. The OBU failed in Washington, as it did in Canada, because its supporters had no clear idea of what they were trying to accomplish, and because the AFL knew exactly what it had to do to remain in power.

Wright's strategy, designed to attract the moderates, was simply wishy-washy. The Canadians, at least, knew that they had to destroy the AFL if they were to succeed, and they never tried to hide that reality. The OBU in Washington was, therefore, too uninspired to appeal to the well-established radical strength that existed in the state, but radical enough to scare Short, Taylor, and those who believed in the viability of the AFL. Without solid, grass-roots support, the OBU movement collapsed with the first AFL counterattack. It became little more than a peculiar incident in the development of trade unionism in Washington State.

²⁵ EB Minutes, Aug. 14, 1919; *Union Record*, Aug. 15, 1919.

²⁶ Report of Agent 106, Aug. 20, 1919, Records on Industrial Espionage, University of Washington Library; CLC Minutes, Aug. 20, 1919. *Union Record*, Aug. 21, 1919. Morrison to Short, Aug. 27, 1919, Box 10, State Federation Records.