

BLUBBER BAY STRIKE - 1938

One of the most infamous events in BC labour history occurred at the Pacific Lime operations in Blubber Bay. After years of good labour relations a new company policy in 1937 resulted in senior workers being fired and replaced by cheaper newcomers.

A 6-week strike caused the company to settle and agree to many union terms. But when employees voted to join the new IWA union in 1938, the company broke the agreement and fired 23 long-term men. Despite three conciliators' reports ruling against Pacific Lime, the company refused to rehire them. The BC government did nothing to enforce its own labour laws.

In June 1938, without notice, Chinese and white workers and families were evicted from their homes with no time to collect belongings. The police arrested many peaceful workers when a company boss pointed out the "troublemakers". Access was denied to the post office, telegraph and telephone offices, all on company property. Wives of strikers were jostled and harangued. Meanwhile, the Provincial Police (under Sergeant Sutherland) helped to recruit unemployed men to work at Pacific Lime!

Strikers' morale was high, though. The Chinese and white workers stood together in solidarity. Picket camp was established in a field about a kilometre away. Local people supplied food. Support for the strike was growing with international unions voicing concern.

New company/police tactics were now necessary. On September 17 the Union Steamship *Chelohsin* carried a contingent of Provincial Police to Van Anda. Some were to travel by road to Blubber Bay to cut off any land escape route, while the remainder continued to Blubber Bay wharf. There police and scabs used clubs and tear gas to drive picketers back up the road where they were met with more violence by the Van Anda contingent.

Injured strikers were taken to the hospital in Powell River. One striker, Robert Gardiner, was badly beaten by a constable in his jail cell. He later died in Oakalla prison. A biased judge ruled on the 23 charges laid against the strikers with resulting sentences ranging from 3 to 6 months. Dispirited, the men called off the strike (May, 1939).

The Blubber Bay strike was an illustration for BC workers of how the collusion of company, police, courts and government worked against them. It served as impetus for increasing trade union membership on the coast but left a lasting legacy of bitterness on Texada.