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Making Teacher Union History “Public”: The British Columbia (Canada) Teachers’ Union, and Its “Online Museum”

Abstract: The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF), founded in 1917 with a present membership of 43,000 teachers, is but one of seventeen independent educator unions in provinces and territories across Canada. However, BCTF stands out in relation to the emphasis, and resources, it has placed over past decades in researching, developing and mounting a public record of the history of the organization and its very diverse activities. Now very much web-based, this public history reaches out to a wide audience – in addition to its own members (present and retired), it is also accessible to schooling officials, academics, students, policy researchers, legislators and the public at large. Its portal is located at <https://wayback.archive-it.org/16900/20210707181403/https://bctf.ca/history/>. This chapter consists of three main sections. It starts with a history of the union, placing an emphasis on its activities at the community, national and international levels, particularly those related to their collaborative struggles for social justice and solidarity. The second section explores the background to the development of this “public record,” both the historical and contemporary aspects. Finally, I provide a survey and brief description of the various sections of the overall web portal.

Keywords: museum, teacher, union, public archives, school history

Introduction – Brief History of Canadian Teachers’ Unions

Like many other nations, Canada’s history is also marked by regional, linguistic, gendered, raced and classed divisions. The development of teacher unions¹

¹ It is certainly recognized that the terms “union,” “federation,” “association” and “organization” each have very specific, and differing meanings – including ideologically. However, for the sake of expedience, they are used interchangeably in this text.

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across the nation certainly has been affected by these differences. To begin, the country's founding "constitution,"² initially enacted in 1867, established a "confederation" of provinces, each with its own separate powers and responsibilities – not the least of which was control over the schooling of their residents. As their respective schooling systems evolved,³ associations of teachers employed within them developed in tandem – for the most part in response to the increasing bureaucratization of their employers. These activities began in the later half of the 19th century, as teachers in municipalities in a number of provinces grouped together in local associations, held meetings based on their concerns about salaries, (lack of) benefits, and working conditions, and wrote letters to provincial education officials outlining these concerns. In many provinces these early local associations of teachers were initially founded on the basis of identity and location of the specific group of teachers who had come together. Thus, there was often more than one association in each municipality or region, based on differences of geography (often rural vs. urban), language (usually English vs. French), religions (Catholic vs. Protestant), status (elementary vs. secondary school teachers vs. principals) and gender.⁴ British Columbia was no exception in this regard, with rural teachers, urban teachers, women teachers and secondary school teachers all forming their own local groups over the course of the later 19th century.⁵

By the second and third decades of the twentieth century, teachers in a number of provinces worked to merge their local organizations into province-wide structures, in part to increase their influence in response to the ever-expanding reach of provincial governments. Founded in 1917, the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) in many ways mirrored the development of similar associations across the country. Delegates to founding meetings of these province-wide teacher organizations often represented colleagues who had come together in previous decades within local municipalities, and who looked forward to the possibility of

2 Canada as a formal political unit was legislated into being by the British legislature in 1867, through the passage of the British North America Act, which served, with many ensuing amendments, as its "constitution."

3 Four provinces were identified in the original 1867 Act; British Columbia was added as an official province in an 1871 amendment to the Act.

Cf. for example, Paul Axelrod, *The promise of schooling: education in Canada, 1800–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

4 Cf. for example, Bruce Curtis, *Building the educational state, Canada West, 1836–1871* (London: The Athlouse Press, 1988).

5 Cf. for example, Terry Wotherspoon, "Occupational divisions and struggles for unity among British Columbia's Public School Teachers," *B.C. Studies* 107 (1995): 30–59.

increased strength through a larger organization.⁶ Not surprisingly, the differences in membership which had developed at the local level often replicated themselves when province-wide organizations were established, resulting in more than one regional association. Eventually however (with two significant present-day exceptions⁷) in each province teachers coalesced into one over-arching organization. (However, there is no question that, even after amalgamation, these internal social differences continued to plague many teacher unions.⁸)

The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation – Early History

While very similar in many ways to other early province-wide teacher associations (voluntary membership, democratic structures, annual conferences), BCTF’s historical record suggests that, almost from the outset, this organization stood out. For example, in contrast to most, if not all, other provincial unions, the BCTF became much more assertive, even during its early years, in actively – even aggressively – assisting teachers in their struggles for improvements in their material working conditions. In 1919 the first teacher strike in the British Empire was held in the provincial capital city of Victoria. At that time, 178 teachers refused to work for two days over a salary dispute, quickly resulting in a negotiated settlement. Two years later, teachers in New Westminster went out on strike for a week, before the school trustees agreed to negotiate. Again, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Rural Teachers’ movement occasioned renewed militance, and in 1943 teachers voted to engage in a province-wide strike over wages. That same year, the BCTF became the first provincial teacher union to join the national Canadian Trades and Labour Congress.⁹ By comparison, teacher unions in other provinces,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ In Quebec, teachers in the province’s two schooling systems – Catholic and Protestant – belong to separate unions representing the two divides. In Ontario four separate teachers’ organizations still exist: teachers in the province’s separate Catholic and French school systems, as well as elementary and secondary school teachers in the dominant English (non-religious) school system, each supporting their own union.

⁸ Cf., for example, Wotherspoon, “Occupational divisions.”

⁹ “Decade 3: 1937–38 to 1946–47,” accessed September 2, 2021, <https://www.bctf.ca/about-bctf/bctf-history>. A number of historians have suggested that these radical activities of teachers on the West Coast resulted at least in part as reflecting, and being supported by, the overall radical labour movement embedded in the province’s large and extensive primary industries – mining, logging and fishing (Cf., for example, Anne Hales, “A multitude of wedges: Neoliberalism and

particularly in Eastern Canada, were much slower at developing militant postures in advocating for improved salaries, benefits and working conditions.¹⁰

Another important initiative taken by the BCTF early in its existence was in promoting teacher union activities beyond its own provincial borders. In 1919 a national “Conference on Education, Character and Citizenship” organized by the federal government and held in Winnipeg Manitoba,¹¹ provided Charlesworth with the opportunity to arrange a meeting with teacher union leaders from the other western provinces. As a result, they agreed to establish a pan-provincial organization of teacher unions. Accordingly, the founding meeting of the Canadian Teachers’ Federation was held the following summer in Calgary Alberta, with Charlesworth serving as its first president.¹²

The BCTF also stood out in engaging in activity at the international level. In 1923, Charlesworth participated in an international education conference in San Francisco, organized by the National Education Association of the USA. The main outcome of this meeting was a resolution establishing the World Federation of Education Associations. Representing Canadian teachers, Charlesworth was elected to serve on its first Board of Directors, serving as vice-president; he remained active in this organization until its demise during the Second World War.¹³

The British Columbia Teachers’ Federation in the Post-Second World War Era

BCTF’s activist orientation did not diminish as a result of the Second World War and its aftermath. In fact, the new era served not only to recommit to its involvement in community, national and international affairs, but also to initiate, and

micro-political resistance in British Columbia’s public schools 2001–2014,” *Workplace* 25 (2015): 53–63.

10 For example, by comparison, the first teacher strike in Ontario did not occur until 1973, over 50 years later.

11 This national conference was organized by the federal government in response to a lengthy general strike held in Winnipeg earlier in the year – in the hopes of developing plans for restructuring general societal relations to avoid further such disturbances (Cf., for example, David Camfield, “Reflections on the Winnipeg General Strike and the future of workers’ struggles,” *Studies in Political Economy* 101 (2020): 59–76.

12 Gerald Nason, “The Canadian Teachers’ Federation”(Ed.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1964).

13 Harry John Smaller, “An Elusive Search for Peace: The Rise and Fall of the World Federation of Education Associations (WFEA), 1923–1941,” *Historical Studies in Education* 27, no. 2 (2015): 96–119.

broaden, its activities. In particular, the BCTF devoted itself to actions related to social equality, human rights and global peace. Women’s issues became a major concern for the Federation, and in 1970 the Task Force on the Status of Women was established. Within three years, a major Status of Women Program was established within the organization, supported by a standing committee and a staff person. Encouraged by these events at the centre, local teacher chapters across the province enhanced their activities in promoting women’s issues in schools across the province.¹⁴

Concerns for other social issues were also soon taken up formally by the union. In 1975 a Task Force on Racism was established, followed by the founding of a province-wide “Program Against Racism” supported by a BCTF staff person. In 1980, these activities were supported by the establishment of a standing Anti-Racism Committee, along with a Committee on the Rights of Children. In the 1980s, support was provided to address increasing concerns about the environment and global peace. An “Environmental Educators” association was established in 1981, followed in 1985 by the “Teachers for Peace and Global Education,” and in 1989 by the hiring of a Global Education coordinator. In 1994, these efforts were augmented by the initiation of the “Ed May Social Responsibility Education Fund” which provided project grants to teachers.¹⁵

14 In a personal reflection on working in the national office of the BCTF, staffer Donna Coulombe wrote movingly about how the strong anti-sexist culture within that workplace had been achieved, and how in turn it provided much motivation for effecting changes across the province: ‘In my prior jobs the “bosses” had all been male and I had witnessed capable women passed over for promotion in favour of younger men strictly because of their gender. The BCTF was quite different. I saw that women held positions of authority, women’s issues were discussed, women made decisions that affected the direction of the organization, women supported, trained, and nurtured one another not only in the BCTF workplace but in their activist roles. I thought it had always been this way at the BCTF. I was not aware of the battle that was being waged by the brave BCTF women activists who were fighting to be heard in their organization. The Status of Women staff position and the Status of Women Committee were still fairly new to the Federation. The work these women were doing astounded me and informed my own developing sense of what was right and how society should be. *Teacher Magazine* 29’, no. 2 (January/February 2017): 17.

15 For an official detailed chronology of these activities, see: “Social Justice Unionism,” accessed September 3, 2021,

<https://wayback.archive-it.org/16900/20210707191539/https://bctf.ca/history/rooms/socialjustice.aspx>.

International Activities of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation

There is no question that all of its earlier national and international activities held the BCTF in good stead as it expanded and deepened its international commitment in the decades following the Second World War, particularly in supporting teachers and schools located in the (so-called) Third World. In 1961 the International Assistance Fund was created, based on a contribution of \$1 per member per year. In 1963, five BC teachers joined the Canadian Teachers' Federation delegation to Project Overseas, an international outreach initiative which had been founded the previous year. BCTF quickly became the strongest provincial supporter of this initiative, both in numbers of teachers participating and in financial contribution.¹⁶ By 2008, 314 BC teachers had taken part in summer Project Overseas assignments in the Global South.

However, in the context of engaging in these official programs, criticism began to mount about the nature of these officially-organized interactions. For a number of BCTF activists, these programs were increasingly seen as verging on neo-colonialism – top-down “experts” from the West going to instruct seeming neophytes on how best to teach from a Western perspective. These criticisms also evolved from the reflections of a number of BC teachers who had become active in community organizations working in solidarity with grass-roots organizations in a number of nations, particularly Latin America and Southern Africa, as they struggled for liberation from colonial oppression as a result of continuing control by Western empires, or by oppressive, comprador oligarchies which had taken over after “liberation” from former colonial status.¹⁷

As a result, BCTF began shifting the direction of its international efforts significantly. Rather than relying mainly on supporting the traditional approaches undertaken by other provincial teacher unions, the BCTF turned to exploring ways in which it could more directly interact with classroom teachers in developing nations, supporting their interests and needs. In keeping with this new approach, the Federation's International Assistance Fund was restructured, and in 1982 renamed the W.R. Long Memorial International Solidarity Fund, marking the start of solidarity outreach with teachers in South Africa and Latin America. The following year a formal Committee was established to supervise the operation of the fund. Two years later, a province-wide “BC Teachers for Peace and Global

¹⁶ Larry Kuehn, “*Intercambio – Social Justice Union Internationalism in the B.C. Teachers' Federation*” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2006): 45.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Education” group was established, and through the work of this group, solidarity efforts focused on working directly in South Africa and Latin America. To this end, in 1989, solidarity work in Namibia was initiated. In the same year, a Global Education coordinator was installed at BCTF, enhancing the establishment of direct contacts with grass-roots teacher and community organizations. As former BCTF president Larry Kuehn explained,

[These activities would be] respectful of the opinions and needs of teacher unions in the South. By intention, if not always in practice, these have not been just soft versions of trade union imperialism. Development solidarity is a significant step on the road to relationships that are really built on the exchange and interchange of *intercambio* internationalism, rather than union imperialism, and reflects values of social justice.¹⁸

The concept *intercambio* was developed by the BCTF to describe the ways in which they hoped to interact with their partners in the Global South. It was established partly as a critique of, and counter to, what a number of critics have described as “trade union imperialism” – unions in the West dominating relations with unions in the South, and imposing Western values and practices on their “partners.”¹⁹

Public Outreach of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation – Publications

Much of BCTF’s provincial, national and international activities rested on the need for public outreach and involvement, and again, the organization was an early innovator in this regard. Prominent undertakings included the publication of a monthly journal, beginning in 1919 soon after the association’s founding, and, perhaps not coincidentally, following a meeting of association leaders of the four western provinces – a prelude to the founding of a national teachers’ association. Originally titled “The Educator of Canada, and listed as “the official organ of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation,” it touted support not only from teachers but also such organizations as the “Federation of Parent-Teachers’ Associations,” “Women’s Music Club,” Daughters of the Empire,” “Art, Historical

¹⁸ Ibid, 50.

¹⁹ Often, unions in the USA are identified, not only as the dominant force in these relations, but also working in conjunction with the foreign policies and engagements of various department of the government of the USA (See, for example, “Reverse Solidarity,” accessed September 3, 2021, <https://zcomm.org/znetarticle/reverse-solidarity-by-jeb-sprague/>).

and Scientific Society,” and the “Natural History Society.” In addition, as the editors stated in an early issue, the scope of this publication was not limited to British Columbia:

Our circulation is growing to large proportions and we feel confident that within a very short time the magazine will be in the hands, not only of the teachers of British Columbia, but in those of the four western provinces, every month during the school terms.²⁰

Much of the content of the early issues dealt with matters of curriculum and pedagogy at the elementary and secondary school levels across a number of disciplines –language, mathematics, science, music, arts, and so on. A number of prescriptive articles focused on what was seen as the need for improvements in various aspects of a growing state schooling system, including technical and vocational schooling, rural schools and so forth. In addition, most issues included reports on teacher association activities, both across British Columbia, as well as in other provinces and in other countries.²¹ In this regard, an early issue provided lengthy coverage of teacher conventions in Alberta and Manitoba, as well as reporting that the Alberta Teachers’ Alliance was contemplating joining the larger labour network.

It is interesting to note that coverage of teacher association interests in joining in with labour groups was not presented in opposition to a simultaneous and pronounced interest in the promotion of professionalization (ideologically and materially). In this regard, also predominant were articles with titles such as a title page article “Teachers Demand Public Recognition.”²² In fact, during the later 1930s there was much debate within the Federation over whether to make it a “professional organization” or to affiliate with labour.

In the fall of 1921, as a result of Federation annual convention decisions, significant changes were made in the journal. From that point, it was officially structured as “the official organ of the B.C. Teachers’ Federation [. . .] entirely under the control” of the Federation. Its new editorial board included two prominent university officials and the City of Victoria librarian, along with two BCTF teacher/officials. While its initial masthead was entitled the “B.C. Teachers’ Federation Magazine,” the lead editorial made clear that this was just a placeholder, that “[a]t present it is without a name, and the task of finding a suitable one it to be left to its readers.” To that end, the issue included information about a

²⁰ *The Educator of Canada* 1, no. 4 (June 1919): 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²² *The Educator of Canada*, no. 8 (January 1920), 1.

“competition” to determine the new title.²³ The lead editorial in this new first issue made clear what its overall purpose was to be:

While the main purpose of the organ will be to keep all members fully in touch with the activities of the Federation, yet it is hoped to give each month articles containing information, and inspiration for those engaged in the work of education, whether as teachers, administrators, trustees, or parents. The education of the child is suffering, in this present day, largely because our adult population is not sufficiently enlightened to correctly appreciate the extreme importance of our schools in the life of a people. We intend to devote some of our energies to missionary enterprise in this regard.²⁴

Regardless of the structural changes, typical issues seem to continue to reflect closely what had previously been featured across a number of themes. Curriculum and pedagogy-related articles for classroom teachers appeared regularly – for example, new ways of teaching a science or literature units at various levels of the elementary and secondary school. Often, Department of Education notices would be reprinted – ranging from new legislation relating to school courses of study, to changes in legislation pertaining to teachers’ employment, pensions, etc. Local and provincial BCTF conventions garnered much coverage – both in being promoted ahead of time, and then, following their occurrence, entire proceedings would be reported on in detail – including business conducted, motions/resolutions passed, and full texts of (often lengthy) speeches by education experts, and Federation and Department of Education officials. Underlying much of the content of each issue was the promotion of professionalism – both ideological and material aspects – both to teachers and the larger community, as well as emphasizing what was seen as the important role which teachers played in the promotion of education across society.

Instalments of the journal continued to include one or more articles looking more broadly across a national and international scope. Descriptions of schooling structures/methods in other jurisdictions, activities of related teacher organizations including reports of teacher activism, strikes, etc. appeared regularly. In addition, articles relating to larger labour issues, such as coverage of the annual conferences of the national Trades and Labour Congress²⁵ and reports on the International Labour Organization²⁶ were included. At times, even opinion about social/labour/political issues would be published, such as a 1949 commentary

²³ *B.C. Teachers’ Federation Magazine* 1, no. 1–2 (Sept–Oct 1921): 2.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ *B.C. Teachers’ Federation Magazine* 29, no. 4 (January 1950), 171.

²⁶ *B.C. Teachers’ Federation Magazine* 28, no. 4 (January 1949), 139, 149.

entitled “Truth about Communism”.²⁷ However, it is certainly the case that an ideology of “professionalism” pertained in a majority of the journal’s contents.

Public Outreach of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation – Other Activities

In addition to the publication of the journal, the BCTF has been very active over the years in engaging with the larger community in a number of ways. From the outset of its founding, Federation officials were often featured as speakers at meetings and conventions of other education-related organizations, such as those of schooling officials, school board trustees and parents. More recently, the union has developed a widespread program of public presentations for parent groups on a range of educational issues --themes include “Aboriginal Content in the Curriculum,” “Advocating for your child,” and “Antibullying.”²⁸ These presentations, involving volunteer teacher presenters, are available for free across the province.

By the turn of the 21st century, the BCTF – like most other Canadian teacher unions – became well-versed in new media approaches, starting with much updated web sites. By 2012 a “social media coordinator” position was established in the union headquarters, to supplement the existing communication and campaigns division. From then on, social media became an integral aspect of all Federation communications, both internal and public. Some of the new content was directly mainly at teacher members themselves. For example, in 2014 TeachBC was launched, an online site with teaching resources and materials developed for teachers by teachers. Designed as a “creative commons,” the site was set up to facilitate teachers uploading materials to share and downloading materials to use. In the same year, “Starling Minds” was launched. Developed in partnership with psychologist Dr. Andrew Miki, the site provided support for members dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression.

Perhaps just as important was the use of social media to reach out beyond teachers, to the community at large. For example, in 2014–15 the BCTF created

²⁷ *B.C. Teachers’ Federation Magazine* 28, no. 5 (February 1949), 195). Not surprisingly, a very critical perspective.

²⁸ For a complete list of topics, and a description of the overall program, see: “Book Workshops for Parent Advisory Committees,” accessed September 4, 2021.

<https://www.bctf.ca/services-guidance/workshop-requests/book-workshops-for-parent-advisory-committees>.

a comprehensive resource package entitled “Project of Heart: Illuminating the Hidden History of the Indian Residential Schools of BC.” While intending on the one hand to support members in learning and teaching about the legacy of the residential schools, this resource has been shared widely, and in other provinces, with other unions, community groups, and so on.

Public History of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation – the “Online Museum”

In 2017, in part to help celebrate the 100th anniversary of the BCTF, President Glen Hansman announced the launching of the Federation’s Online Museum. As he explained,

Within the virtual walls of our museum, you’ll find stories of strikes and solidarity to be sure, but also stories of people and places that played important roles in the history of public schooling in our province. We’ve tried to capture diverse voices in ways that visitors will find engaging, and we hope you enjoy browsing through our collections of political cartoons, protest songs, publications, photos, and more.

The exhibits depict our collective struggles in building BC’s public school system, which today stands among the finest in the world. And the lessons learned in a century of teaching and learning offer much food for thought as we go into our second century as a union of professionals.

Have fun exploring our museum!²⁹

Even the briefest view of the “museum” online suggests a cornucopia of information about the history of the BCTF – not only the conceptualization and development of its structures, policies, programs and practices, but also coverage a broad array of themes relating to bargaining, professional development, international solidarity and social justice unionism.

²⁹ “Welcome to the BC Teachers’ Federation online museum!”, accessed September 4, 2021, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/16900/20210707182757/https://bctf.ca/history/welcome.aspx>.

Developing the British Columbia Teachers' Federation's "Online Museum"

In researching for this chapter, I was very fortunate to be able to conduct lengthy interviews with two of the original proponents/researchers/developers (still ongoing) of the museum³⁰ – Nancy Knickerbocker and Larry Kuehn. Nancy has been an activist, elected official and staffer at BCTF for many years; she is presently (2021) Director of Communications and Campaigns for the provincial organization. Larry, recently retired, was a former elected president of BCTF, and subsequently served on its secretariat for many years.³¹

As they both explained, the motivation for the museum was twofold – first, as part of plans for celebrating, in a number of ways, the 2017 centennial of the founding of the BCTF. However, it was also the ultimate outcome of long-standing aspirations, held by a number of union activists, to collaboratively research and write the history of the union. Writing a book together was one obvious route. However, as Nancy put it, it was generally felt that a book would end up being the perspectives of just the authors. What they desired was “something with a broader perspective and more points of view, something more accessible than a print production.” She quickly added that “the concept [of a virtual museum] came from Larry.” They both saw the primary audience as teachers themselves. Nancy noted that they were particularly “hoping to recruit and engage new members in union activities – learning more about the history of where the federation came from.”³² At the same time, both reflected the hopes that the museum would also reach a much larger audience – labour movement generally, as well as the broader education/schooling community.

Nancy and Larry emphasized how supportive the federation was overall to the project. A staff team was struck, a budget was established, and a staffer from the information tech department was appointed as project manager. Other staff members included librarians, the archivist, the webmaster and a graphic designer. In addition to the staffers, a number of other individuals – retired BCTF members for the most part – were enlisted to assist with the researching

30 Interviews were undertaken by telephone, on September 10 and 11, 2020.

31 Among other national and international activities, Knickerbocker was on leave from BCTF for four years (2006–2010) to serve on the staff at Education International in Brussels. Kuehn was president of the BCTF from 1981 to 1984, and Director of Research and Technology from 1988 until retiring in 2019. He had responsibility for the International Solidarity Program and was one of the founders of the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education and the IDEA Network of union and education community activists throughout the Americas.

32 Knickerbocker, September 10, 2020.

and writing of material and collecting of images relating to specific themes of the history. Monthly committee meetings were held – although, as Nancy pointed out, given that this activity was being supported “from the side of their desks”³³ (that is, in addition to all of their ongoing work responsibilities), members would attend whenever they could.

When asked about the possibility of differences of opinion among the committee members in relation to the historical content of the museum, both respondents were adamant that, as Larry noted, it was certainly “possible to imagine differences, but those issues didn’t come up in our process.” As he explained, the project was “not an interpretive history, it really was an archiving in a sense – never an issue of, can we include this [historical item]? [. . .] The interpretative aspects would have to be done by those looking into our [collection], or the articles we have cited, [where] the authors were responsible for the interpretations.”³⁴ As Nancy put it, there were “no controversies over what to include or not – no issues about how to frame things politically – just get something basic on the record.”

Both noted that, where there was discussion, it lay in determining the overall design and layout of the museum. Nancy felt that they “floundered around for a while – how does the content determine the form?” “We felt we were inventing a wheel – looked a few models [but with] positive attitudes, supportive of each other’s’ ideas, suggestions.”³⁵ Both took pains to acknowledge the work of those staffers responsible for the design and layout, digitizing and posting the material as it was developed.

Visiting the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation’s “Online Museum”

A visit the museum is a treat indeed. The home page³⁶ offers a very moving picture of a teacher demonstration over pension issues which took place in 1980. The visitor is next “welcomed” by Glen Hansman (president of union when the museum was inaugurated) with a brief history and overview of the museum (full text above). Then, in keeping with an image of an actual museum, the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kuehn, September 11, 2020.

³⁵ Knickerbocker, September 10, 2020.

³⁶ “BC Teachers’ Federation Online Museum,” accessed September 4, 2021, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/16900/20210707181403/https://bctf.ca/history/>.

viewer is presented with ten “doors,” (as shown in Figure 1) each opening up to a particular thematic “room” of the museum, and the history of the BCTF” activities (“Bargaining,” “Building Our Profession,” “International Solidarity,” etc.).³⁷



Figure 1: Image of the “doors” webpage.

Opening a “door” to any of the “rooms” allows the visitor to explore a wide variety of material relating to the room’s theme. In the “Social Justice” “room,” for example, its home page opens with a welcoming invitation, and a very appropriate quotation from Eduardo Galeano. “I don’t believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people.”³⁸ In addition, the home page provides an extensive “Social Justice Timeline” of the union’s activities over the past half-century, as well as links to the five major themes comprising social justice – Antiracism, Status of Women, Antipoverty, LGBTQ, and Peace and

³⁷ The other “doors” are: “Pensions,” “Social Justice Unionism,” “Building Our Democratic Union,” “Political Action,” “National and International Leadership,” “Aboriginal Education,” and “BCTF in the House of Labour.” As of September 2021, the latter four “doors” are as yet unopenable – these “rooms” have yet to be “filled” with historical data.

³⁸ “Social Justice Unionism,” accessed September 4, 2021, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/16900/20210707191539/https://bctf.ca/history/rooms/socialjustice.aspx>.

Global Ed, along with a link to all of the archived copies of their Social Justice newsletter, dating back to 2005.

The Antiracism webpage provides a timeline of a number of antiracist programs and activities undertaken by the federation since 1941, each linked to sites for further descriptions. For example, one link leads to a first-hand report by a classroom teacher, describing the union’s “Program Against Racism” and how she was able to draw on its support during the 1980s to deal with racist incidents in her school.³⁹

In addition to the ten “Rooms” pages, the “Online Museum” also includes two other major sites. The first, entitled “Collections,” provides a wide variety of material relating to the history of the BCTF – ranging from reproductions of ads and cartoons which appeared in the union’s publications over the years, to a collection of (U-Tube playable) union-focused songs often performed by teachers themselves, and collections of photos, teacher stories and “milestones” of the union’s history.

The final major site, entitled “Resources,” provides a very extensive list of more formal documents pertaining to the history of the union. In addition to collections of “governance documents” (AGM minutes and resolutions), “historical briefs, reports and submissions” to governments, and a compendium of the union’s legal cases, a very useful (for the aspiring historian) is an extensive bibliography of secondary material pertaining to the BCTF – over 65 notations of books, theses, and published articles in both academic and more popular journals.

Finally, like many similar websites, there is a “Search” function.⁴⁰ In every way, this “Virtual Museum” has much to offer, in displaying the history of BCTF.

Conclusions

For teacher unionists interested in augmenting their historical “presence,” the BCTF Virtual Museum has much to offer in the way of ideas – and potential solutions to historiographic challenges. However, it is clear that the founders of this virtual museum also had a much larger audience in mind – not only classroom

³⁹ “BCTF Program Against Racism,” accessed September 4, 2021, <https://wayback.archive-it.org/16900/20210708085225/https://bctf.ca/history/rooms/antiracism.aspx?id=45327>.

⁴⁰ Seemingly very efficient – on entering the name “Charlesworth,” 183 citations embedded within the overall website were listed.

teachers but also students, parents, educators, education and government officials and the public in general. Many of the “exhibits” offer important historical information – for example, about how teacher-school board relations and contract negotiations developed and changed over time, or how teachers and their union assisted in the larger struggles towards social equity in the workplace, and in larger society.

To be sure, visiting a virtual museum is not the same as viewing exhibits and artifacts in “real life” – or being able to interact with knowledgeable guides and mentor in the original places. However, it does offer the possibility of visiting at a moment’s notice, anytime day or night – quickly searching for and viewing material, some which may have been updated and augmented just an hour before.

Additionally, perhaps the founders also had in mind the possibility of enticing other unions or organizations generally to consider developing virtual museums of their own. (Already, a sister union in British Columbia, the Federation of Post-Secondary Educators has sought out the BCTF for ideas and assistance in developing their own virtual museum.⁴¹) When asked about her experience in working on the project, Nancy emphasized that it was “so much fun to learn about how people worked in the federation in the past!” Her advice to unionists pondering whether to take on such a project? “Go for it!”⁴²

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⁴¹ To date, they have developed and mounted a preliminary “resource archive” <https://www.fpse.ca/members/resource-archive>.

⁴² Knickerbocker, September 10, 2020.

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