

Tommy Douglas, the Man and the Myth
Part 4: If Saskatchewan is a Worker's Paradise,
Where are the Workers?

After his election in 1944, Tommy Douglas planned and implemented the most progressive labor legislation in North America. Now that he had law-making ability, there was no way the capitalists were going to get away with exploiting workers in his province.

During Tommy's 17-year tenure as Premier, Saskatchewan passed legislation with:

- the highest minimum wage in Canada
- the most number of weeks of annual vacation
- overtime pay at time-and-a-half
- full pay for statutory holidays
- work on statutory holidays at two-and-a-half times pay
- rights to organize and bargain collectively
- union certification with signed union cards rather than a secret vote

Just in case industry didn't get the message that Saskatchewan was to become the Promised Land, Tommy made sure he had the big stick of enforcement. Labor legislation included such clauses as:

- "there shall be no appeal from an order or decision of the [Labor Relations] Board"
- "orders and decisions shall not be reviewable by any court of law or by any Certiorari, Mandamus, prohibition, injunction or other proceedings whatsoever"
- "if an employer ... discharges an employee ... and it is alleged by a trade union that such employer ... has committed an unfair labor practice ... it shall be presumed unless the contrary is proved, that such employer ... has discriminated against such employee"
- "the Lieutenant-Governor in Council ... upon being satisfied that any employer has willfully disregarded or disobeyed any order filled by the Board, may appoint a controller to take possession of any business"
- "any person authorized in writing by the minister may require any employer to make within a stated period full disclosure, production or delivery of all records, documents, statements, writings, books, papers, extracts therefrom or copies thereof in his possession or control"

An outside observer, reviewing Tommy's legislation in this area, could be forgiven for presuming that trains had to put on extra coaches and highways were clogged with workers streaming into Saskatchewan.

But Saskatchewan's workers showed their gratitude for Tommy's efforts in very peculiar fashion. Between 1944 and 1961, 234,000 workers left the province. What ingrates. Didn't they know they were leaving the best labor legislation in the country? Didn't they know how much their government cared? Didn't they know all the rights they had?

Even with the benefit of the post-war economy and baby boom, Douglas's Saskatchewan had the most dismal job creation record of any province. From 1941 to 1961, Saskatchewan's population grew by only 3 per cent. Neighboring Alberta, in spite of its 19th century labor laws, grew by 67 per cent.

Young people in Saskatchewan learned upon graduation that rights, labor legislation, unions and governments don't create jobs. They voluntarily left for jurisdictions where they had fewer rights than at home. Can you imagine? They valued opportunity more than all the trees Tommy cut down creating his hallowed legislation.

In the forties and fifties, other provinces had labor laws much closer to what existed when Tommy's family came to Canada. The family certainly didn't come because of Canada's advanced labor legislation. There wasn't any in 1911. As biographer Tom McLeod points out, the Douglasses emigrated because "Canada offered higher pay and better working conditions." This was a time when immigrants could come to Canada and immediately get a job.

When Tommy's family came from Scotland, father Tom paid the first week's rent at their Winnipeg boarding house with a British sovereign. The next week, he paid in Canadian money because he had already secured a job in town as an iron worker.

Tommy himself had little trouble finding employment at will. He was quite happy to reap the benefits of the capitalist economy of the time. He worked in a cork factory, a print shop, as a newspaper editor, and, of course, as a preacher. It's a good thing Canada didn't have available hours legislation when Tommy was growing up, otherwise he never would have had the opportunity to become our greatest Canadian.

Next week: state medicine. Where were you when the doctors went on strike?

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Fred Smith is an Investment Advisor in Saskatoon and a regular contributor to the policy debate on creating wealth in Saskatchewan. This is the fourth of a six-part series prepared for the Prairie Centre Policy Institute entitled "Tommy Douglas: the Man and the Myth", which explores the economic legacy of Tommy Douglas. "Where Do We Go From Here?" is a feature service of the Prairie Centre.