

# CHAPTER 2

1896-1939

*Nationalisms and  
Canadian Autonomy*

# **PART 8**

## ***Labour movement***

# Why did the first labour unions emerge in Québec and Canada?

- At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a major increase (↑) in the working-class population was caused by:
  1. rapid industrialization
  2. urbanization.
- The creation of unions helped workers to stand up for their rights.



# Working conditions (early 20<sup>th</sup> c.)

## Difficult working conditions:

- Low salaries (working 10h/day, 6 days/week)
- Abuse by foremen
- Lack of job security (no retirement plan, no insurance)
- Child labour
- Unsanitary and unsafe work sites.

## **Unions tried to find solutions to these problems.**

For example, by pushing the Government of Québec to create a free and compulsory education system.



# Unionization

## 1. American unions

- ran affiliate unions throughout Canada
- the **language barrier** stopped them from establishing a presence in Québec.



# Unionization

## 2. Catholic unions

- tried to:
  - improve conditions for workers
  - limit American influence
  - prevent union dues from being used by non-Catholics
- *Canadian Catholic Confederation of Labour (CCCL)* created in 1921
- represented  $\frac{1}{4}$  of unionized workers in Canada.





# Strikes

- Definition: *a refusal to work organized by a body of employees as a form of protest, typically in an attempt to gain concessions from their employer.*
- **High tensions between employers and workers** resulted in a large number of workers' strikes.





# Strikes

- **Employers had the upper hand:**
  - They could lock out or fire their employees at will
  - They could call in *strikebreakers* or *scabs* (people paid to replace striking workers), rendering the strike action ineffective
  - They could call in the police or the army to intervene.
  - Sometimes, the government would take their side.
- Strikes often ended in **violence**.



# Strikes

## Winnipeg General Strike and “Bloody Saturday”

- On May 15, 1919
- About 30,000 Winnipeg workers went on general strike for better wages and working conditions (display of solidarity)
- The federal government supported the employers. It arrested union leaders (Fred Dixon, J.S. Woodsworth)
- One month later, soldiers occupied the streets, injuring several and killing two people
- Following this violent repression, workers ended the strike.



# Labour legislation

- In 1900, the Canadian government:
  - created the Department of Labour to legislate labour relations
  - passed a law that gave workers the right to strike following an unsatisfactory conciliation process.
- In 1944, the Québec government passed the *Labour Relations Act*:
  - to force employers to negotiate in good faith if 60% or more of their workers were in favour of unionizing
  - to avoid delays in wartime weapons production (WW2).