

DARSHAN SINGH CANADIAN: TEN YEARS IN CANADA

Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal



The Early Years

In 1937, at the age of 19, Darshan Singh immigrated to Canada from India. Although he arrived here as a student, his reasons to immigrate were similar to those of other Punjabis. He recalls that "My reasons to come here were no different than others. There was hunger in my family. I had to go somewhere. My father was a very poor farmer. We had a total of four acres of land in our village called Langeri, which was in the district of Hoshiarpur and even those four acres were spread around the village in 15 different pieces."¹

At that time, the population of Punjabis in Canada was very small and the majority of them belonged to the Sikh community. They lived on the coast of Canada's western province, British Columbia, and worked mainly in the sawmills. Darshan, like these other Punjabi immigrants, also came from a Sikh family and a village background, which made adjusting to his life in Canada much easier.

The first job Darshan had in Canada was in a sawmill. This provided him with first hand experience as to the low grade working conditions in the saw mills and logging camps as well as the racial discrimination faced by non-white workers. Kapoor Singh, the owner of a Victoria sawmill, gave Darshan his first job. It was Darshan's own uncle that helped him get the job and his uncle was fired. Darshan when looking back at this bitter experience, explains that "When Kapoor Singh gave me the job, he told my uncle to go

¹ Darshan Singh Canadian Interview by Sadhu Binning, Dr. Hari Sharma, Sukhwant Hundal and Makhan Tut, March 1985, Vancouver, B.C.

home. For Kapoor Singh, my uncle was an old horse. He was 60 and he got a new 20 year old horse in his place.”²

In the mills, non-white workers were paid less than their white counterparts, they were the last ones to be hired and first ones to be fired and were given only the unskilled labor jobs. They were not allowed to operate any machinery or hold any jobs with responsibility. Even where the mill owners were Punjabi, all the high paying jobs and management positions were given only to the whites.

After working for awhile in the mills and logging camps, Darshan Singh became a student at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver. It was here that he came into contact with progressive thinking students and became a member of the Young Communist League (YCL). According to Emil Bjornson, Darshan's comrade from that earlier period, “Darshan's first contact was with my older brother Bill Bjornson, who was a student at UBC and also the leader of YCL”.³ During this time, Darshan spent more time studying Marxist literature than his university course books. According to his own recollection, he found his university course material very difficult to understand, however, he had no problem understanding political theories, especially Marxist writings.

While his relationships with the progressive students at UBC strengthened, he also began to take a very active part in his own community's activities. In the historic gurdwara, located on 2nd Ave. in Vancouver, he would often speak on issues relating to India's independent movement. Through his actions and viewpoints, he was becoming very well known in his community and as a result, he attracted the attention of authorities including the immigration department, which had started to collect information about his movements. The immigration authorities refused to give him permission to work, which he desperately needed to earn money to continue his studies at UBC. He tried to work illegally on Vancouver Island but the mill owners were also informed about his activities and as a result, he was unable to find any work. He went back to UBC, but was unable to continue due to his lack of finances.

Acting on the advice of some friends, Darshan with another Indian friend left BC to go to Alberta in search of work. His friend's name was Sohan Singh but since he had no legal papers which would qualify him to work, he had changed his name to Labh Singh and Darshan, to hide his real identity, called himself Ram Chandar. They started working in a sawmill called Macdoogal in the bush situated near Winfield about three hundred miles north of Edmonton. Another Punjabi immigrant by the name of Hazara Singh Garcha worked there as well. He had come to Canada in 1926 and had since earned a MSC degree but, due to racial discrimination, was unable to find any substantial or relevant work. Life at the MacDoogal mill was hard, the working conditions were harsh and they were far enough north that it was constantly cold, day and night. Darshan worked the night shift on the green chain with his other Indian friends and remembering those tough days, Darshan still thought that, “compared to other places in Canada, that place can rightly be called the hell of Canada.”⁴

² Same as above.

³ Interview with Emil B.

⁴ same

After that, he worked in a number of other mills in northern BC. During this time, while working near Prince George in a small town called Bend, he found out that in Vancouver, an Indian lawyer named Dr. Pandia had been delegated to handle the immigration cases of some of the illegal Indians. Even though the number of Punjabis living in Canada at that time was very small, more than three hundred among them had entered the country illegally. After learning about Dr. Pandia's activities, Darshan and a few other Indians returned to Vancouver and contacted other illegal Indians in the city. Together, they formed a committee to raise funds to help illegal immigrants fight the legal battle. According to Darshan, "We collected four hundred dollars from the immigrant community on Vancouver Island and gave it to Dr. Pandia."⁵ The collective efforts of the community bore fruit and in 1939, more than three hundred illegal Indians were given legal status to stay in Canada permanently.

Draft Letter to join the Canadian Army

After Darshan's immigration case was settled, he began to work in Kapoor's mill again. But by this time 2nd World War had begun and the impact it had on Darshan's life and the Indian community was considerable and significant. He and another Indian man named Griboo, were among the first Indians to receive conscription letters from the military. There was heated discussion in the community about the conscription of Indians because the Indians felt that if Canada was not willing to give them equal rights, how did they expect them to fight for Canada. It must be remembered that Indians did not have the right to vote and consequently, had no other rights enjoyed by the rest of Canada's citizens. The Indian community of Vancouver passed a resolution in their gurdwara that if Canada expected them to join the army, then they must be granted equal rights. However, for Darshan, the immediate concern was whether to join the army or go into hiding and live like a criminal. He consulted with a large number of people and eventually decided to join the army. According to Kuldip Bains, a co-worker and a friend of Darshan, when "I asked him what was he hoping to get out of the army? His answer was, 'you never know when this kind of training can be useful in life.' Darshan figured that army training would be helpful in his own work in the revolution."⁶ It indicates that Darshan was preparing himself for a long-term commitment to bringing social change and working towards a revolution in India.

The military training was held in the Okanagan region of BC, in a town called Vernon. Darshan stayed there for four months and was the sole Indian among the white military trainees. Remembering his training days, he recalls that "I was only Indian and the rest were all whites. You know how things are in a place like that. You hear the bugle. You get up, wash your face and run. You march here, march there, you creep on your belly, move on your knees. Learn to handle the rifle ... and so on. I learned all the swear words used by the whites there."⁷

⁵ same

⁶ Interview with Kuldip S. Bains

⁷ Darshan Singh Interview

Back to India: A Failed Attempt

The military training was for four months and the letter for permanent appointment was to follow later so Darshan Singh came back from the training and returned to work in the mill again. This period in his life was complicated and one of intense internal struggle. All Indians understood that the war was among the whites and that they had nothing to do with it. Darshan Singh also knew what imperialism and slavery were and the current world events had awakened his patriotic feelings and he realized that the real work to be done was to get the British out of India. At that time he decided that instead of dying in someone else's war, he would rather go back and join the fight to free India. With this purpose in mind, he boarded a ship to go to India in June of 1940. On his way, he stopped for a few days in Tokyo, Japan where he stayed with a Sindhi Indian by the name of Abhi Chandani. There he learned that some Punjabi and Sindhi Indians who tried to go back to India were arrested and jailed in Hong Kong. Darshan Singh boarded a ship from Tokyo back to Vancouver, Canada.

Back in Vancouver, he tried, unsuccessfully, to find some work and eventually found a job in Victoria with the Silkurk Lumber Company, which was owned by a Punjabi and worked there for the following five to six years. During this job, he continued to experience the hard conditions of work in the lumber industry and the harsh racial discrimination of non-white workers.

Work in the Communist Party and Trade Union

As mentioned earlier, Darshan Singh had become associated with the Young Communist League (YCL) and other progressive students while at UBC. After that he was always connected with the Communist Party (CP) while in Canada. One main reason for his attachment to the CP was that the party strongly supported the struggles of Indians in Canada to gain equal rights. Because of his intellect and commitment, Darshan got himself a respectable position in the Party. His excellent oratory skills and exceptional clarity in thinking were just two of the many attributes that helped Darshan advance his career within the CP. Craig Prichett, a life long trade union activist and Darshan's comrade in the CP explains that "Darshan Singh played a very important role in the union and the Party, mainly because he was an excellent speaker. He had remarkable control on the English language. Because he was university educated, he was intensely clear in his writings and was always able to effectively communicate what he wanted to say."⁸ Darshan Singh went on lecture tours across Canada on behalf of the Party. In these lectures, in addition to focusing on the Party agenda, he also tried to shed light on misconceptions held by Canadian workers about workers from other communities.

At that time, along with Darshan Singh, Kuldip Singh Bains and Ratan Singh were also members of the CP. According to Darshan, the leftist politics didn't have much influence in the Indian community and, instead, people were divided along the lines of Indian politics. But the people on the left had a very clear stand on issues such as racial discrimination, equality, sympathy for the Indian independent movement, exploitation of the working classes, especially where minority workers were concerned. The efforts of

⁸ Craig Prichett Interview

Darshan Singh and his comrades' to organize the Trade Union in the sawmills slowly changed the views of the community.

During this time (1940), the workers in the lumber industry were becoming aware of the need to improve the wages and working conditions. The International Woodworkers of America (IWA) had begun to successfully organize in and around Vancouver sawmills. But it had no success on Vancouver Island. The IWA was created and controlled in the United States by the communists. Similarly, in Canada, it was the communists who were in the forefront of the organizing efforts. Communists also had a lot of influence in other unions of the time, in areas such as mining, the metal industry, the ship yard, and longshoring. The famous communist leaders of the period included Nigel Morgan and Harold Prichett, who were working hard to establish the IWA in BC.

Darshan, being a party member, was always part of its activities and often went from Victoria to Vancouver to attend meetings and rallies. On one such occasion when he was in Vancouver, staying in a cheap hotel on Pender St., the party head, Nigel Morgan had a special meeting with him. He informed Darshan about the movement to organize the lumber industry into IWA. He said one of the major difficulties that they were facing was that they could not reach the workers from the Japanese, Chinese and Indian communities. Morgan explained that even if they succeeded in organizing the white workers, the efforts would fail without the support of minority workers. For this task, they needed Darshan's help. It was because of these circumstances that Darshan became involved with the trade union movement and he remained an active worker in the CP and in the trade union movement for the rest of his time spent in Canada.

Work in the Union

In 1941, Darshan tried to organize the Indian workers but at that time the union had very little sway among Indian workers for several different reasons. Because the Indian community was so tight knit, the workers had both direct relations and regional connections with many of the mill owners. Secondly, these workers had either come directly from villages or the military and the idea of trade union was an entirely new concept for them. As well, there were many stories and misconceptions about the unions that filled the workers with fear. Like in other parts of North America, union organizing in BC during the early years of the twentieth century was a tough struggle and organizers were often the targets of state repression. It was common for mill owners or the police to hire thugs to beat or threaten the organizers and they often had the organizers punished by the law by creating false charges against them. They were also known to have often murdered more effective organizers. These sorts of experiences created fear about unions among the Indian workers. But, according to Darshan, during and after the WW2, the situation was not as bad as it was before the war. A major factor was the shortage of labor created by military recruitment. Still, realizing it was necessary for Indians workers to shed their fears concerning the union, Darshan started to educate the workers about the benefits of joining the union and the need to fight against racial discrimination.

He first started organizing at the mills on the Vancouver Island where a large number of Indians worked. He began by contacting the workers at a mill owned by a Punjabi man named Mayo. This mill employed about two hundred and fifty workers. The skilled jobs,

such as running the saws were run by about forty to fifty white workers while unskilled jobs, such as yard work, were held by the Indian and Chinese workers. Initially, Darshan would only talk to old acquaintances that shared his progressive views but slowly, by late 1942, he was able to hold open meetings with workers.

It was difficult for Darshan to talk to workers about the union. The biggest problem was that he had nowhere to hold the talks. The workers lived in bunkhouses, which were usually next to the mills, located on the mill owner's property and it was simply not possible to talk openly there. The meeting places for the Indian communities were the religious centres, the gurdwaras, and the talks couldn't be held there because the mill owners had a lot of power in the community so the workers had to be contacted secretly. However, as Darshan's influence spread among workers, he was eventually able to hold large meetings openly.



(Darshan Singh Canadian with mill workers on Vancouver Island)

The difficulties Darshan had often had a way of sorting themselves out with such as the incident that occurred at a mill in Yubou in 1945. Darshan was holding a meeting with workers in their bunkhouse and someone had informed the mill superintendent who tried to stop the meeting. He drove Darshan to his office at the nearby mill and argued with

Darshan before asking him to leave immediately. When they were leaving the office, they found more than eighty workers standing outside in the pouring rain. The workers told the superintendent that if Darshan were forced to leave, they would all leave with him. The superintendent was afraid to lose such a large number of workers, especially since he would not be able to run his next shift so the superintendent drove Darshan back to the bunkhouse to continue his meeting. This had a very positive effect on the Indian workers because they felt that they had won an important victory. This news quickly spread to

other mills and Indian workers everywhere in BC felt a special self-confidence that they had not known before.⁹



(Darshan Singh Canadian in Union meetings in Canada)

⁹ Darshan Interview

Darshan's work in the IWA was not just limited to organizing the Indian workers. He was a valued member being not only an excellent speaker in Punjabi but in English as well, and, in addition, he was the recording secretary for the Victoria local and a Trustee in the district council. Darshan impressed all the workers in the lumber industry with his clear and sharp thinking and inspired them to work for a common goal beyond all color and race differences. According to Craig Prichett, "the IWA, with its knowledge gained from the leftist mode of thinking, was able to defeat the rulers' tactics of dividing workers on racial and color lines. And one of its most effective contributors was Darshan Singh Sangha."¹⁰

In the history of BC's IWA, the strike of 1946 is considered its most decisive event. The strike began on May 15, 1946 and ended in a big victory for the lumber workers after 37 days. The right to an eight-hour workday, a raise in pay, the end of inequality based on race and many other significant victories were won. The IWA established solid footing in BC with this strike. Darshan, with other leading individuals like Nigel Morgan, Harold Prichett and Earnie Dalskog, helped prepare workers for the strike. At the end of the strike, there was a huge victory rally held in New Westminster where more than four thousand union members attended and saw Darshan, who was one of the main speakers, address the crowd and present a report about the various victories achieved during the strike.

In the beginning of the same year (1946), the Canadian Labour Council (CLC) held its annual convention in Toronto and Darshan attended the meeting as a delegate from BC. He put forward a resolution for the unity of the Trade Union Movement in Canada, which was an important resolution and passed by the CLC at the convention. The resolution that Darshan helped pass is significant because with it, Darshan's contribution to the labour movement was at the federal level and not limited to BC.

Darshan then went on a tour of BC's neighbouring province, Alberta to educate people about IWA. After returning from this trip, Darshan published his experiences in the Lumber Worker on November 4, 1946 in an article titled "Alberta Workers Welcome IWA".¹¹ Darshan, at the time, was an International trustee in the IWA. In his article, he wrote about the low pay, and horrible working and living conditions of Alberta's lumber industry. While discussing the conditions of workers in Alberta, Darshan expressed confidence that the IWA would be successful in organizing workers there as well. He wrote, "It is only a matter of time before thousands of Alberta's workers will join the IWA and be successful in gaining better pay, fewer working hours, better working and living conditions and job security."¹²

Nigel Morgan, who was the editor of the Lumber Worker, wrote an introduction to Darshan's article. This note illuminates the significance of Darshan's work in Alberta for the IWA. Morgan wrote, "Brother Darshan Singh has just returned from a tour of the Eastern Provinces where he has been doing a splendid job in building unity between the

¹⁰ Craig Prichett Interview

¹¹ Lumber Workers, Nov. 4, 1946

¹² same

IWA and the Alberta woodworkers. The following article is Darshan's own first-hand account of what is happening in Alberta at the present time."¹³

Because of his ability to reach a wider section of lumber workers, Darshan was able to carve an important place for himself in the IWA and statements given by his co-workers attest to this fact. For example, Roy Mah from the Chinese community who had worked with IWA as an organizer at the time said that, in comparison, Darshan's contribution was much bigger than his own. He said, "I was only an organizer but Darshan was, for many years, a Trustee in the district council and part of the upper layers of the leadership".¹⁴

Similarly Mona Morgan and Emil Bjornson feel that with his deep political knowledge, Darshan made noteworthy contributions to the labour movement. The regional director of the present day IWA, Mr. Clay Perry states, "Darshan was a jewel of my union, he was a jewel of the human race."¹⁵

A number of group pictures published in the Lumber Worker periodically give proof to the validity of the statements made by Darshan's friends. For example, a picture that was published on the front page of the March 8, 1943 issue of the Lumber Worker can be mentioned. It is a picture of the ten officials of the IWA who were elected on March 3 1943 and they include Harold Prichett, Ernie Dalskog, Hialmer Bergern, Nigel Morgan and Darshan Singh Sangha. In addition to these pictures, one can look at the numerous articles that Darshan wrote in the communist party paper, the Pacific Tribune and the Lumber Worker. In these articles, along with the issues of the labour movement, he also discussed international issues and India's Independent movement.

India's Independence Struggle

Darshan continuously worked to educate the Canadian labour force as well as the general public about the struggle being waged in India to gain freedom from British Imperialism. For example, at the Communist party convention held in Toronto in 1942 where more than 400 delegates from across Canada were present, Darshan presented a resolution in support of India's Independence. The entire convention stood up and overwhelmingly supported the resolution. Similarly, in November of 1944 at the Eighth International Convention of the IWA held in Vancouver, Darshan presented another resolution in support of India's struggle, which was passed by consent. The November 6th, 1944 issue of the Lumber Worker carried a news item about this resolution with Darshan's picture on the front page. The headline read: "Darshan Singh Supports Unity." Speaking to the resolution Darshan said, "No permanent peace would be possible without her (India's) deliverance. Fascism and Imperialism are inseparable twins. With one fifth of mankind in bondage under tyranny, must we keep quiet? ... We are not fighting to make world safe for imperialism, whether it be imperialism of the Dutch, French, Americans, British or what have you."¹⁶

¹³ same

¹⁴ Telephone Interview with Roy Mah by Sadhu Binning

¹⁵ Clay Perry speech at the Darshan Singh Canadian Memorial function in Vancouver

¹⁶ BC Lumber Worker, Nov. 6, 1944.p.1

Contributions to the Struggle to Gain the Right to Vote in Canada

When the Punjabis first arrived and made BC their home, they had the right to vote but that right was taken away from them in 1907. Relying on their own courage without any outside help, Punjabis living here continuously struggled to regain this right. During his stay in Canada, Darshan Singh made important contributions to this struggle, including being a member of many delegations that met with the government agencies on behalf of the Indian community. His biggest contribution to the struggle to regain the right to vote was by garnering support for this cause from the trade union movement, and many other progressive sections of the larger community. This was one of the major factors that contributed to the increased drive of the campaign to gain the right to vote during the mid-1940's. Many other community leaders and organizations made valuable contributions to this struggle for a long time. Secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society, Naginder Singh Gill helped to bring the larger community behind this demand. Similarly, Dr. Pandia also made significant contributions. However, the extent to which Darshan Singh was able to influence political quarters and the general public was exceptional.

There was a major difference in the struggle to regain the vote in the 1940's as compared to the community's previous efforts. Organized labour groups in BC were strongly supporting the community's demand for the right to vote. It needs to be kept in mind that there was a time when the organized labour force was against the entry of Indian workers into BC, as illustrated by the infamous Komagata Maru incident in Vancouver. Since then, the situation had changed and now the labour unions, socialist organizations, the CCF Party, the Labour Progressive Party, churches, and teacher's organizations were standing with the Indians.¹⁷ For example, a delegation from the Indian community met with BC's premier John Hart on March 2, 1943. The president of the IWA, Harold Prichett, was also part of this delegation and the inclusion of such a high-ranking leader in the delegation attracted a lot of attention and gave considerable strength to the cause of the Indian community.

During the struggle to gain the right to vote, Labour minister of the Liberal government, George Pearson, gave a statement full of hatred against the Indians in BC's legislature on March 9, 1944. The entire Indian community was angry at his speech and to express the anger felt by them, a delegation met with Labour minister Pearson on March 14. Darshan Singh was part of this delegation along with other community leaders such as Naginder Singh Gill, Jerry Hundal and Mohinder Singh.¹⁸

To oppose the racist views of the labour minister and to involve the larger community in this struggle, with Darshan's efforts, a public demonstration was organized by the IWA. Harold Prichett, the union head, denounced the labour minister's views in an executive session of the IWA.¹⁹ And in April 1945, when BC's Attorney General RL Maitland spoke against the right to vote for the Indians, Darshan Singh denounced Maitland's views in a letter in Victoria's Daily Times, where he wrote, "

¹⁷ See, "How Indians Gain the Right to Vote in Canada", (Punjabi) by Sukhwant Hundal and Sadhu Binning, Vancouver Sath Publications, 1997, pp. 33-34.

¹⁸ Same. p. 29.

¹⁹ Same. p. 48

The long struggle waged by the Indian community in Canada to regain the right to vote ended in a victory on April 2, 1947. The BC government passed the law that gave the right back to the Indian, Chinese and Japanese communities living here. The credit for this victory goes to Darshan Singh along with other leaders in the community, especially for getting the support of the organized labour force.

Rise of New Asia: A book by Darshan Singh Sangha

Darshan Singh's solid commitment and sincerity played a huge role in his contribution made to the labour movement and progressive politics in Canada. However, continuous studying and education was needed in order for him to understand what was happening around him at various levels. While he worked actively with the communist party and the IWA, he continuously read. He also took special interest in international politics and as a result of this, he wrote numerous articles not only about India but about other international issues. In 1943, he wrote a book titled 'The Rise of New Asia'.²⁰ Unfortunately, the book was published after Darshan Singh had returned to India in 1948. According to Emil Bjornson, Darshan never saw his book until 1960, when he came to Canada on a visit. In this book, he included his many essays about India, China, Japan as well as about Korea, Philippine, Indo-China, Indonesian, Iran and Turkey. We also get a clear indication of Darshan's humanistic thinking from his dedication of the book to two such people who had worked for the betterment of humanity: Dr. Norman Bethune of Canada and Dr. Dwarka Nath Kotnis of India. Both doctors had given their lives to support the struggle of China and its people.

Darshan's Contribution Ignored by the Canadian Historians of Labour Movement

It is clear from the discussion above that during 1940s, Darshan Singh played an important role in the struggles of the Indian community in Canada, as well as in the labour movement, especially in organizing the IWA in BC. But it is a sad and discouraging reality that the history written about the labour movement largely ignores the contributions made by Darshan Singh. For example, Stephen Gray, a SFU student of history, wrote a thesis in 1989 on the IWA in BC. In a 550 page thesis, he fails to even mention the name of Darshan Singh Sangha. A number of other similar documents contain no information about Darshan Singh Sangha. A historical document by L. Parkin, which was published under Labour and Timber in 1946-47, and which appeared in the Lumber Worker, also makes no mention of the contributions made by Darshan Singh Sangha.²¹

²⁰ Darshan Singh Sangha, *The Rise of New Asia*, Progressive Publishing, Toronto, 1948

²¹ As mentioned earlier, we relied heavily on the long interview (18 hours) with Darshan Singh Canadian in 1985. At the same time we have made every effort possible to gather information from other sources as well. We have looked at the historical IWA documents as well as other media of the time. In addition, we spoke to a number of people who had known Darshan and had worked with him. Included in this list were: Morice Rush, a long term Communist Party official and now reside in Vancouver (at the time of this research 1997); Emil Bjornson, who had known Darshan since his university days and had worked with him in Young Communist League; Mona Morgan, who organized the women in the IWA and worked on the news paper Lumber Worker for a long time. She is the life partner of famous leader Nigel Morgan;

This is surprising considering all of the evidence and documentation that shows that Darshan's contribution to both the Communist Party and the IWA was considerable. All of the leaders of the IWA in the 1940's were also active in the Communist Party, so it is not possible to isolate their activities to just one of the two organizations. Darshan's friend and well known Vancouver lawyer, Harry Rankin states that, "Darshan was active in left politics but the center of his activity was the trade union movement so it is quite difficult to determine whether his contribution was more in the left politics or in the trade union movement."²²

Decision to go back to India

Even with all of his activities and achievements in Canada, it seems that Darshan was not satisfied with his work because his heart was still with the masses in India and the problems faced by the millions of his countrymen tormented him. Darshan could have lived a very comfortable life in Canada but that was not what he wanted. Darshan's friends Emil Bjornson, Harry Rankin, Mona Morgan and Craig Prichett all felt that it was a huge personal sacrifice for Darshan to leave Canada when he did. It is possible that Darshan himself didn't see his decision as a sacrifice because in his mind he was probably thinking about hundreds of Gadarites who had already left their comfortable lives in Canada to go back and work for the freedom of India. Following in the footsteps of Gadarites like Kartar Singh Sarabha, Darshan also decided to go back, and, there, he spent his entire life fighting for the poor while living a hard and difficult life himself.

It is important to understand what was behind Darshan's decision to leave Canada. Was it an emotional decision by an Indian to go back? Or was there some bigger logic that Darshan was following? A letter that he wrote to resign from his position as a Trustee of the union on his departure from Canada answers many of these questions. Parts of this letter were published in the Lumber Worker of December 15, 1947. In it, Darshan talked about his work with the trade union movement and thanked his co-workers in the movement. He said, "On leaving, I feel quite satisfied to certain extent of my work here and at the same time, I feel a deep sorrow on leaving Canada. The reason for the sorrow is separation from my dear friends in Canada. At the same time I am satisfied with the thought that in India I will actively work in the trade union movement and I will always feel that we are all working for the same goal – the wellbeing and freedom of the working class." (This letter as it appeared in the Lumber Worker is reproduced at the end of this article.)

Harry Rankin, who became quite friendly with Darshan during his last couple years in Canada; Roy Mah, the union Organizer from the Chinese community who edited a news paper in the Chinese community for a long time; Craig Prichett, son of Harold Prichett and who have been a part of progressive activities from his childhood days; Kuldip Singh Bains, who was a member of the Communist Party with Darshan Singh and also active in organizing for the union; Margaret Andrusiak, who knew Darshan from his early days in BC. Similarly we discussed with Clay Perry, the official from IWA who had gone to India to interview Darshan. After talking to all these people about contribution made by Darshan Singh we have concluded that intentionally or unintentionally, Darshan's contribution to the labour movement is ignored by historian so far.

²² Harry Rankin Interview, by Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal, April 2, 1997. Vancouver

Summary

While Darshan's decision to work for the poor and downtrodden in India is a source of pride for our community, at the same time, it can also be seen as a great loss. Had Darshan stayed in Canada, it is conceivable that with his knowledge and experience, he could have continuously helped to further improve the image of our community and future generations could have directly benefited even more than they have from his life and experience. However, the contributions made by him during the ten years he spent here are by no means any less significant for the Indian community.

Darshan's work in Canada was essential and needs to be appreciated from a number of different perspectives. After arriving in Canada, he joined the progressive movement and, understanding the conditions of the labour industry, used that knowledge to educate the people in his community. In many ways, he helped to raise the intellectual level of the Indian workers, especially those who worked in the lumber industry. Consequently, they saw themselves as equal to other workers and were filled with a new sense of self-confidence and pride. At the same time, he educated the white workers and the general public by destroying many of the misconceptions they held about Indians. This resulted in qualitative changes in the way the larger community viewed the Indian workers. The strong support received for the right to vote campaign from the trade union movement in BC, especially between 1942 and 1947, was the direct result of Darshan's work. He acted like a bridge by bringing both communities closer to each other. Through his hard work and dedication, he can be seen as a Canadian trying to improve the quality of life for everyone in Canada. This makes Darshan important for all Canadians, not just for the Indian community.

Darshan's very active life was suddenly cut short by Khalistani separatist extremists on September 25, 1986, near his ancestral village in Punjab. His many friends in Vancouver gathered in large numbers in IWA's hall on Commercial Street in Vancouver on October 12, 1986 to pay tribute to the man they admired and loved. His friends Emil Bjornson, Morice Rush, Harry Rankin, Clay Perry, as well as many others, remembered Darshan Singh Sangha, who was known as Canadian to millions in India, in their speeches and memories. It is important to give meaning to the words spoken by Clay Perry at that time: "Darshan Singh was known in Punjab as Canadian and here in Canada we know him as a Punjabi. We should do whatever is needed to remove this difference and make him Canadian forever here and there. He always struggled to remove differences and inequalities from the society and he represented a sentiment that go beyond any differences."²³ In order for this idea to be reality, it is important to know who Darshan was and his work is so important and to make sure that he becomes a part of our proud Canadian history.

Darshan Singh Returns Home

Darshan Singh, trustee BC District IWA-CIO, last week tendered his resignation to the Union on the occasion of his departure from Canada for his native India, where he intends to continue his work in the trade union movement.

²³ Clay Perry Speech, Oct. 12, 1986, Vancouver.

His letter of resignation, in which he extends thanks and bids farewell to his numerous friends and co-workers in Canada, was mailed just before Brother Singh boarded ship in Montreal en-route to the land of his birth. Addressed to District Secretary B. J. Melsness, the letter read in part (A note by Nigel Morgan, the editor of Lumber Worker)

It is with some degree of satisfaction and also with deep regret that I have left Canada. The regret arises from my leaving behind and parting from many valued friends and comrades in the Canadian labour movement. However, I am compensated by the fact that in India I intend to work actively with the trade union and labour movement and will always know that we are working toward the same end – the freedom of the working class.

Ten years ago I came to Canada in my early youth. It was here in Canada that I was baptized into the labour movement and learned the ABC's of the working class struggle. Everything I have learned about the labour movement and life itself was pounded into me by my fellow workers in the mills and camps where I worked, and later on by my brothers of the International Woodworkers of America.

It is only correct to say that you, the working people of Canada were my teachers and guides. It was through you that I came to know Canada and its great people. In thanking you all, it would be hard indeed for me to mention all the names, but I do want to take this opportunity to thank the entire membership and all the local and district officers of the IWA for their generous assistance, cooperation and guidance which you all very kindly extended to me in my work.

The struggle to organize was a tough uphill battle, but through united efforts the workers triumphed and created one of the greatest and most militant organization in Canada.

One of the greatest achievements of the IWA was the uniting of all woodworkers – white, Indian, Chinese, Japanese – irrespective of race and color. Thanks to the far sighted and, militant leaders of the...

Only through constant vigil and struggle will the IWA and the labor movement survive and grow. This must be our watchdog.

On the economic front we have made big strides, but much remains to be done, and it is my firm view that the IWA must participate in politics more actively. For we can clearly see how all economic gains may be nullified by political legislation of the Bill 39 type. In this field, the IWA must work to elect a people's coalition government of labor and farmers in BC and in Canada.

Today, American Imperialism is riding roughshod over the freedom of other peoples. The American imperialists are trying to pocket Europe. They are aiding the despot, Chiang Kai-Shek, against the people of China. In Southeast Asia, Britain, France and Holland (with American Aid) are trying to crush the republics of Indonesia and Viet Nam and Indo-China.

In India, while our people have gained very important concessions from the British and have won a national government after two hundred years of alien rule, still the British are

endeavoring to retain indirect control through economic domination, partition and alliances with princes and big business in India.

In all these cases, the Canadian government is aiding the imperialists against native people fighting for their freedom. In short, the same monopolistic forces that are cutting down the living standards of the Canadian people are trying desperately to keep colonial people enslaved. Consequently, the Canadian labor movement and the people of my country face a common foe in world imperialism. If our two people are to survive against this vicious enemy then we must forge a greater unity between them. This solidarity is the key to victory over imperialism.

I pledge to you that in the ranks of the Indian labor movement, I will do my utmost to work for a greater unity between the two people. And I am fully convinced that you, brothers of the Canadian labor movement, will leave no stone unturned in aiding the colonial liberation movement of my people and other nations. For the Canadian workers will never be able to establish full freedom and social security so long as nearly half of the world, in the colonies, remains directly or indirectly enslaved by monopoly capitalism.

May I again extend my sincerest thanks and good wishes to the entire membership and officials of the IWA. Please consider this letter as my resignation from the post of district trustee, which I have held for several years.

Wishing you, brothers, every success in the struggles that lie ahead. Good-bye, IWA – and Goodbye Canada.

Fraternally

Darshan Singh