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Stories

Sikh Heritage Month

April is Sikh Heritage Month — a great time to recognize the profound contributions of Sikh workers to our country, our province, and our movement.

In British Columbia, Sikh workers helped build the foundations of key industries like forestry and sawmilling. Their gurdwaras became vital community hubs — places not only of worship, but of organizing and mutual support, even as Sikh and other South Asian workers faced exclusion from many parts of society, including, at times, from unions themselves.

That history includes hard truths. Most early unions were dominated by white workers and some participated in shameful violence like the anti-Asian riots in 1907. But Sikh workers persisted — organizing, advocating, and steadily reshaping our movement from within.

Over time, through courage and struggle, Sikh labour activists became central to BC's union movement. The principles of Sikhi align strongly with the values of solidarity: Seva (selfless service), Sarbat da Bhala (the well-being of all), and Nirbhau Nirvair (justice without fear or hatred).

The International Woodworkers of America was one of the first major unions that came to respect the organizing skills and tenacity of its Sikh members. Courageous organizing efforts among farmworkers in the 1960s and later (including by founding Canadian Farmworkers Union President Raj Chouhan,

now the Speaker of the BC Legislature) further cemented that tradition of solidarity, and launched the organizing and political work of some of BC's most noted political and labour figures.

Today, Sikh and Punjabi British Columbians are leaders across our movement and our communities. They include BCFED Secretary-Treasurer Hermender Singh Kailley, who serves on the BC government's Provincial Committee on Anti-Racism and is helping to advance the development of a Museum/Centre for Canadians of South Asian Heritage.

You can learn more about this history in Union Zindabad!, a book from the BC Labour Heritage Centre tracing South Asian Canadian labour activism from the early 20th century to today: https://saclp.southasiancanadianheritage.ca/union-zindabad-labour-history/