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Review of *Working People in Alberta: A History* Edited by Alvin Finkel.

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Working People in Alberta: A History. Edited by Alvin Finkel. Edmonton: AU Press, 2012. xii + 345 pp. Photographs, illustrations, notes, tables, bibliography, index. \$45.95 paper.

Working People in Alberta can be divided into three main parts. Two relatively short chapters comprise the first part, summarizing what is known about the working lives of Aboriginals in what we now call Alberta prior to contact with Europeans, and the experiences of workers during the period of the fur trade and early European settlement. The second part is the bulk of the book: six chapters presenting a detailed chronological history from 1885 to 2010 that melds labor history, social history, and political economy. Two additional chapters, comprising the third part, highlight important themes (namely “Women and Labour” and “Racialization and Work”) that are sometimes lost in the shuffle of the preceding chronological chapters.

Alberta has the lowest trade union coverage rate among Canadian provinces (only 12.2 percent of the private sector in 2010) and is the most conservative Canadian polity by a long shot, politically dominated since the mid-twentieth century by the investors, managers, professionals, and working people who have benefited (to differing degrees) from the intensive capitalist development of Alberta’s fossil fuel riches. On three occasions since the mid-1980s there have been serious proposals to make Alberta a right-to-work jurisdiction. In terms of political culture,

labor law, and public-sector labor relations, Alberta is an interesting case in the Great Plains context since it is the “most American” of the Canadian provinces and indeed sometimes seems to be Canada’s only “red” (in the Republican sense) jurisdiction. However, *Working People in Alberta* demonstrates that there is also a persistent social-democratic current in the province, as best evidenced in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the labor-backed advocacy group Friends of Medicare forced a neoliberal provincial government with a strong electoral mandate to dilute its plans to privatize parts of the health care system.

Working People will help readers understand the political ambiguities and contradictions that define Alberta, as well as the ups and downs of organized labor. It is particularly effective in bringing to life the struggles of workers from the 1930s to the present; this is accomplished through the presentation of excerpts from the wide range of oral histories conducted across the province since 1998 by the Alberta Labour History Institute. The chapters in *Working People* are of a uniform high quality, a tribute to historian Alvin Finkel, who in addition to being the editor is the author or coauthor of four of the ten chapters as well as the introduction and conclusion.

For those with an intrinsic interest in Alberta or in working-class history, *Working People in Alberta* is an essential read. For those who simply want to better understand Alberta’s internal dynamics during the neoliberal era when tar sands production has come to dominate its economy, I strongly recommend Jason Foster’s excellent chapter on the 1990–2010 period.

This beautifully designed book includes numerous captivating photographs. With its high-quality paper and oversized format (it opens up to a width of twenty-one inches), it is truly a work of art.

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