

The Alberta Federation of Labour's Centennial Website: A Fantastic Resource (if you can find it)

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Alberta Federation of Labour. *Project 2012*. Available online, various locations. <http://www.afl.org/> and <http://www.project2012.ca>. Accessed August 2012.

The Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), for its 2012 centennial, has launched an insightful website filled with historical tidbits, promotional materials, and other resources that community members, activists, and educators will find useful - if they can find it. The site is buried: difficult to find from the main AFL site, and viewers may find themselves misled by two other more institutional centennial websites. The hunt, however, is worth it. Oral historians should especially be taken by the voices of workers, who receive prominent billing in the educational material.

The issues of actually finding the website are so critical that they deserve elaboration. To raise awareness about the project, press releases direct visitors to the Alberta Federation of Labour's website (<http://www.afl.org>), inviting them to find out more about centennial activities. Upon arriving at the site, there is nothing on the body of the main page (as of July/August 2012) to indicate that there is an ongoing historical project of remembrance. Exploring the menus reveals promising leads, for there are *two* different Project 2012 tabs available from the menu. Hovering over 'About AFL' brings up a drop-down menu, and the first option is 'Project 2012.' Yet in this site, all you will find is a logo, a song (through an embedded audio player), and a list of documents for a 'picnic in the park' (the date is not apparent until you look at registration forms): how to volunteer, register, request a display, transportation and accommodation, checklist, day at a glance, and so forth. This information seems overly institutional, designed for an internal audience rather than a community one.

Frustrated, and perhaps a little confused, a visitor may then stumble across a *second* centennial page. Under the 'Campaigns' menu, a drop-down appears with the option for the 'AFL 100th Anniversary.' Upon visiting this site, one finds almost identical information to the previous page, albeit laid out far more accessibly. The date of the park is clear, the song is also available in video form through an embedded YouTube player, and the information is far more easy to read and understand.

But where is the history?

Only through foresight, or serendipity, would a viewer stumble upon the most interesting part of this project: the Project 2012 website launched by the AFL and the Alberta Labour History Institute (for reader convenience, this site can be found at <http://www.project2012.ca>). Making it to that specific website, however, is worth the journey; and here is where my review becomes positive. I would emphatically recommend this website to community activists, those interested in labour history, human rights, or even just powerful stories of union members. Oral historians will particularly find the emphasis on the actual voices of workers engaging.

The Project 2012 historical website is fantastic. There are four major clusters of information: the centennial history book (edited by Alvin Finkel and available for purchase), a poster series, a booklet series, and a DVD area. Two poster series, one on “Alberta’s Radical Past” and another on “The Making of a Movement,” are each downloadable in PDF, impeccably laid out, and very useful for teaching. Each series link contains a bit of textual information, and then a link to the three different posters. For example, the first poster series has a beautiful poster on the Crowsnest Pass and the significance of miners there to the provincial labour movement. Subsequent posters address the workers’ revolt of 1919 and the 1932 Hunger March. Archival photographs are melded with supporting text and selected quotations from oral interviews or primary documents. The second series discusses the Gainers strike of 1986 and the Bill 11 struggles for medicare. These posters would not be out of place in a movie theatre advertising the next summer blockbuster, an interesting way to capture public attention.

Similarly, the series of short booklets provide information on four major themes: “Spirit of the Crowsnest: The Story of Union in the Coal Towns of Crowsnest Pass,” “On the Line: The Struggles of Alberta’s Packing Plant Workers,” “Fighting Back - the 1995 Calgary Laundry Workers strike,” “Uniting to Change the World: The Alberta Federation of Labour, 1912-2012.” They are all accessibly written and well laid out, integrating text, quotations, archival photographs, and timelines. As well polished as any Parks Canada or governmental publication (if only the new *Citizenship Guide* were so engaging!), these booklets have the potential to become a mainstay for activists, teachers, and the general public.

Even the DVD section, which I had feared might simply be ‘purchase now’ links, is replete with fantastic streaming video. There are entire sections on a tour of the Alberta Coal Branch (several towns shut down in the 1950s), an expose of Alberta’s Temporary Foreign Worker program, a documentation on a 2005 packers’ strike, a legal struggle for maternity-leave benefits, and a 1997 wildcat over asbestos removal at a pulp mill. Indeed, it becomes clear that they will all be combined into a DVD for distribution at the AFL’s centennial; a better

title for the tab might simply have been ‘videos.’ Educators looking for ways to show powerful oral history interviews and the power of memory will find this section very useful.

Not all is perfect, of course, as with many web-based projects. An over-reliance on PDFs, which unfortunately characterizes many institutional and educational websites, detracts from a seamless web experience. PDFs are wonderful tools for controlling layout, reading on a tablet, or providing classroom-ready posters for printing. They are less accessible, however, to a casual web reader – they take you out of the browsing experience, forcing you to then zoom in on pictures and text to see the product. It is a bit more work, but creating distinct print and web versions of content could make it more accessible. The website also uses Adobe Flash technology, which as an unfortunate side effect of some infighting between Adobe and Apple, is inaccessible to viewers on iPhones, iPads, and un-updated Macs.

Some of the web pages were a bit stale, admittedly a characteristic of many websites. Constant updating encourages repeat visitors, and can integrate better into coordinated social media campaigns (the AFL, for example, does have a twitter feed). While updating requires time, the use of a Content Management System (or CMS) such as Wordpress or Drupal would allow more distributed access to members, AFL staff, and perhaps even community activists. They could create their own content or stories, and it could then be vetted by the web team, as opposed to the somewhat cumbersome process of updating material through a web developer (who could, of course, still maintain the website and hold primary responsibility). The web is a platform that offers considerable opportunity for engagement and involvement, and this opportunity was missed to some degree with this more traditional website.

Online historical campaigns such as this should become increasingly *de rigueur*. They represent cost-effective and efficient means of reaching broad community audiences, and greatly facilitate traditional print-material heritage campaigns. A bit more dynamism would help, perhaps, as would a more easily findable resource. While I make some pointed suggestions for making the site more accessible, this is in a spirit of wanting the transformative potential of new digital media to reach its full potential in this project. Ultimately, however, what we have here is gold: insightful, beautiful, and compelling material that draws visitors into the lives of Alberta workers, past and present. A congratulations to the AFL on their 100th birthday, and also to them for taking this early step out into the public history world wide web.