

WAS THE ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK SUCCESSFUL?



The On-to-Ottawa Trek

By 1935, many of the men in the relief camps were fed up with the conditions. They wanted real jobs that paid real wages. They protested in many parts of Canada, but the largest protest started in British Columbia, when about 1800 **protestors** gathered in Vancouver. Under the leadership of the communist-led Relief Camp Workers Union, the protestors prepared a list of demands.

On June 3, 1935, about 1000 protestors climbed on top of a train headed for Ottawa, so they could speak to Prime Minister Richard B. Bennett. The On-to-Ottawa Trek was born. Within weeks, the trekkers were famous, thanks to the newspapers. On their journey, crowds met them with food and well wishes. More unemployed people also joined the protest.

◀ **Figure 17** Men climbed onto Canadian Pacific Railway trains in Vancouver to head east. They stopped in Calgary, Medicine Hat, Swift Current, Moose Jaw, and Regina.

Demands of the Workers

1. Workers are paid at least 50 cents an hour for unskilled labour and union rates for skilled labour. Workers work five days per week, six hours per day, and a minimum of 20 workdays per month.
2. Workers are covered by the *Compensation Act*, and proper first aid is always available.
3. Authorities allow for an elected committee of relief workers.
4. The Department of Defence no longer controls relief camps.
5. Workers get social and unemployment insurance according to the *Unemployment and Social Insurance Act*.
6. Workers are allowed to vote.

▲ **Figure 18** At first, the Canadian government ignored these demands of the protesting workers. Why do you think the government did that?

protestors
people who publicly object to government actions



▲ **Figure 19** If you were the editor of a newspaper in Regina, how might you use this photo and a newspaper headline to help tell the story of what happened during the Regina Riot?

Stopped in Regina

The Bennett government stopped the now 2000 trekkers in Regina on June 14, 1935. A small group was allowed to continue to Ottawa to meet with Bennett. The rest were housed in the Regina Exhibition Grounds. At the meeting with Bennett, on June 22, Bennett called Arthur Evans (the leader of the trekkers) a “revolutionary criminal.” Evans called the prime minister a “liar.” The meeting was unsuccessful. The delegates returned to Regina, determined to continue the trek. The government was determined that it would not.

The Regina Riot

On July 1, Dominion Day (Canada Day), the trekkers met in Regina’s market square. Government troops, RCMP officers, and Regina city police were inside large trucks at each corner of the square. At the sound of a whistle, the officers came out of the trucks waving large wooden batons. They wanted to arrest the protest leaders, but a riot broke out. During the riot, which became known as the Regina Riot, many people were injured, arrested, and jailed. One police officer was killed. By July 2, because of the Regina Riot, the On-to-Ottawa Trek was over. The government shut down the relief camps within one year.

CITIZENSHIP

What rights do Canadians have today that the protestors did not have during the Great Depression? How would these rights have protected the protestors at the time?

CHECK IN

1. Historical Perspective

According to the evidence on these pages, what do the trekkers’ efforts tell us about this time period and how people were reacting to what was happening?

2. Communicate

Write a blog entry from the perspective of a protestor on the On-to-Ottawa Trek. In your blog entry, explain the trek’s purpose, what has happened, and the protest’s effect on Canadians. How would you try to rally more protestors?