

**Illustrate! Educate! Organize! The Graphic History Project**



Over the past decade comics with historical content have become increasingly popular resources for people to learn critically about the past. In particular, comics are fast becoming an important tool of activist pedagogy. Inspired by political comics such as Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography* (2003) and Howard Zinn's *A People's History of American Empire: A Graphic Adaptation* (2008), a number of educators, activists, academics, and students in Vancouver formed the Graphic History Collective (GHC) in 2008 to produce progressive history comics.

The GHC's first project was to produce a historical account of May Day—International Workers' Day, or May 1<sup>st</sup>—in Canada using the format of a comic book. With SSHRC funding secured by Dr. Joan Sangster, Dr. Bryan Palmer, and Dr. Mark Leier, the GHC published *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest* in 2009 and the comic book was subsequently revised and re-published by Between the Lines Press in 2012. In addition to selling close to 4000 copies of *May Day*, the GHC was able to connect with different activists and educators across the country to promote literacy, historical awareness, and the importance of informed activism. For example, the GHC presented on the *May Day* comic book at events such as the Workers' Memorial Weekend in Cumberland, BC and the Canadian Historical Association, and we have spoken about comics and literacy on rabble.ca and at the May Day Festival in Toronto in 2011 and in Peterborough in 2012. The *May Day* comic book has been used as a teaching resource at academic conferences, at union conferences, and even at the Canadian Labour Congress' Labour School.

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**“THE MAY DAY ★  
GRAPHIC HISTORY**

**is a wonderful introduction to a major event IN LABOR HISTORY and its significance, far too little known in North America.”**

**- NOAM CHOMSKY**

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**Graphic  
History  
Collective ★**

[graphichistorycollective.com](http://graphichistorycollective.com)

Building on the success of *May Day*, the GHC made a call for proposals in 2012 to start a new endeavour called The Graphic History Project. Our vision was to collect, on a volunteer basis, a number of short—approximately 10 pages—graphic histories of resistance that illustrated the various ways peoples from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences have fought for economic and social justice around the world. These new comics would be made available together for free on the GHC website and then, depending on the final submissions, collected, edited, and published with a progressive press.

As a result of the call for proposals, the GHC is now working with American historian Paul Buhle as well as a number of incredibly inspiring activists, artists, academics, and designers to produce new politically relevant historical comics. Thus far, eight comics have been completed and posted for free on the [GHC website](#) and the few remaining comics are near completion and in queue to be posted online by the end of the summer of 2014. The first project, a comic book about early union organizing in Canada and the Knights of Labor called [\*Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada 1880-1900\*](#), was made available for free on the GHC website on 22 October 2013.

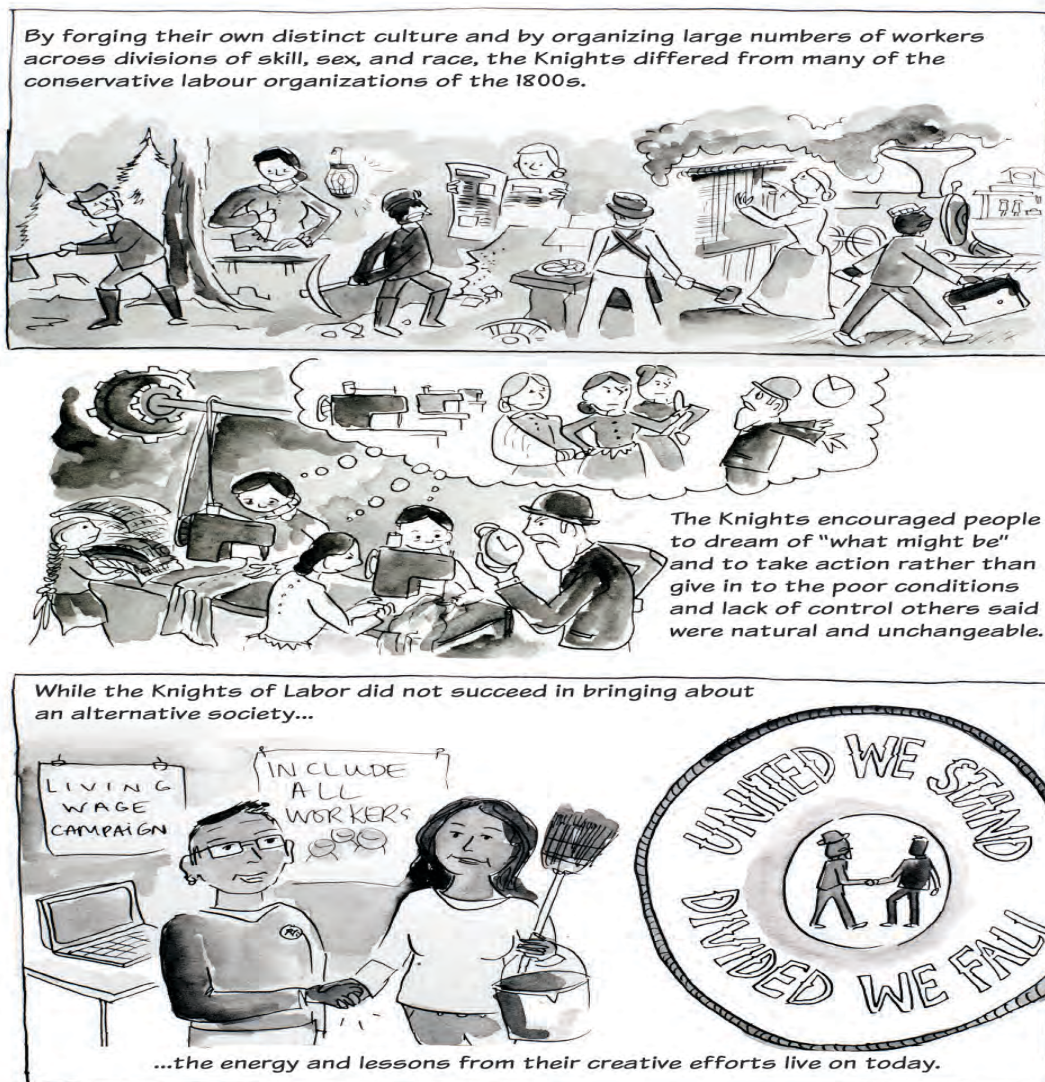


Image from *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labour in Canada, 1880-1900*, illustrated by Sam Bradd and co-authored by Sean Carleton, Julia Smith, and Robin Folvik.



Since that time, other projects have been published on everything from the history of [environmental activism](#) in Canada and the [Battle of Ballantyne Pier](#) in Vancouver in 1935, to [French feminism](#) at the time of French Revolution, the famous [Flint Sit-down Strike](#) in Michigan in the 1930s, and a history of [SORWUC](#), a socialist-feminist labour union in Canada organizing service workers. Forthcoming comics include stories of Indigenous dockworkers organizing in BC, and the Ontario Days of Action strikes and protests in the 1990s.



Here is Kara Sievewright, editor and illustrator of *Bill Williamson: Hobo, Wobbly, Communist, On to Ottawa Trekker, Spanish Civil War Veteran, Photographer*, making sketches for her contribution to the Graphic History Project.

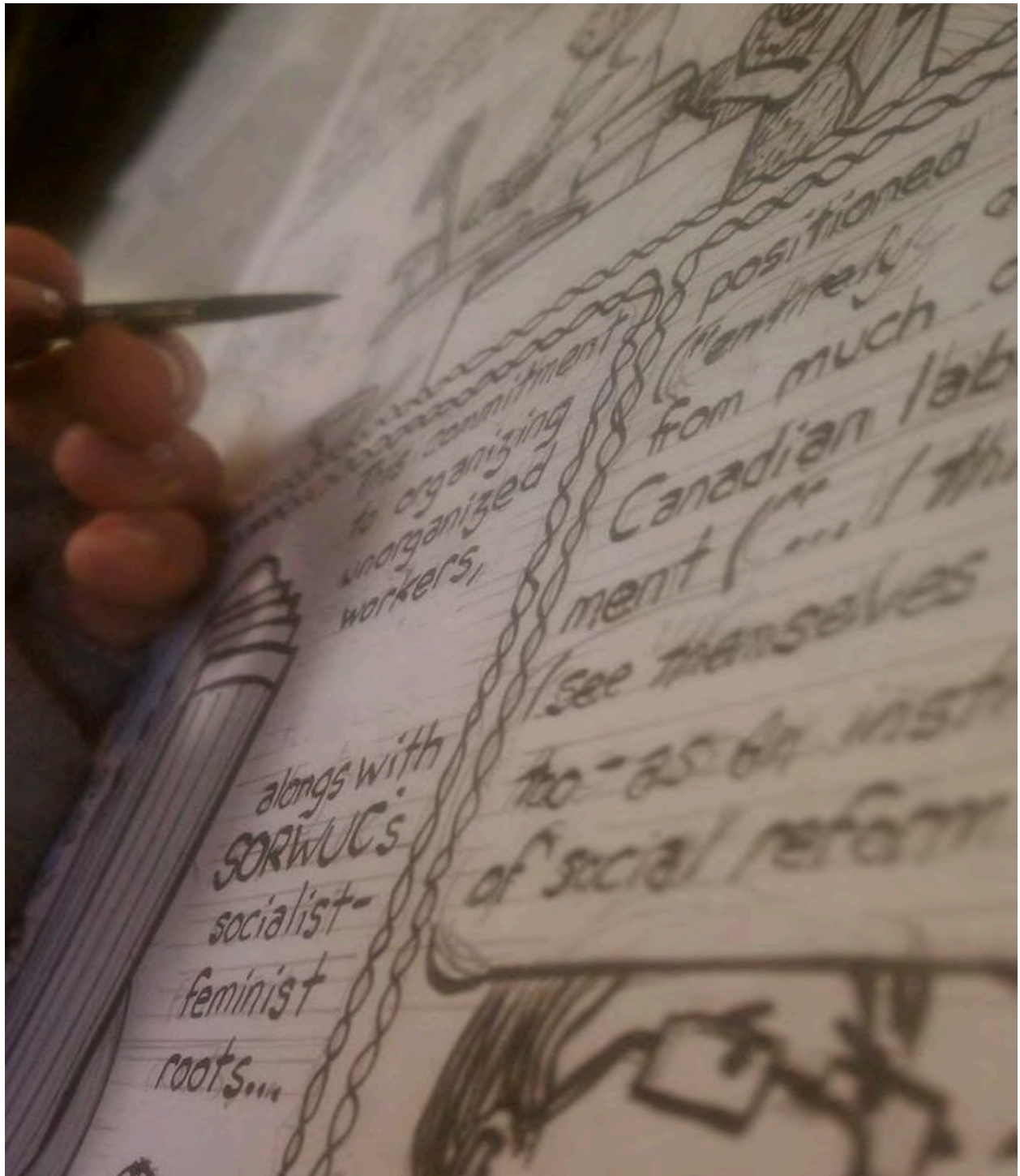


Image from *An 'Entirely Different' Labour Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Union of Canada*, illustrated by Ethan Heitner and co-authored by Julia Smith, Robin Folvik, and Sean Carleton.

While the aim of The Graphic History Project is to inspire people to get involved, on a volunteer basis, in the making of activist comics, the costs of managing this project continued to grow. Thanks to the generous support of a THEN/HiER Small Projects Grant, the GHC was able to do a number of important things that greatly aided the overall project. First, the GHC has been able to offer contributors a small honorarium, recognizing the countless hours of work that goes into crafting every comics page. There is a serious culture of underpaying comics writers and artists and the Small Projects Grant has allowed us to at least acknowledge financially the different teams' collective labour. Second, the GHC was able to upgrade our website to improve its overall readability and better feature the new comics. A smoother interface—including use on mobile devices—and more user-friendly site has increased the accessibility of the comics associated with the graphic history project. Lastly, the THEN/HiER Small Projects Grant enabled us to begin working on curriculum development for the Graphic History Project which will eventually accompany each completed comic in the planned edited collection. Developing this curriculum will help facilitate educators' greater engagement with the comics of the Graphic History Project and encourage a deeper connection to each project. In short, the GHC is deeply appreciative for the financial support that THEN/HiER has provided.

In completing the Graphic History Project our belief has been confirmed that comics can be used to tell important stories about the past in ways that can inspire new struggles and spark much-needed conversations about how to change the world.

Thank you!

In love and solidarity,  
The GHC