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## The Great Depression in Ottawa

The on to Ottawa trek started with the Great Depression in 1929. During this time many men were unemployed with little to no money. These people were considered “Drifters”. The Canadian government feared that these drifters would become angry and would start a revolution against them, therefore they created relief camps for these men in remote areas in northern Ontario and British Columbia. Relief camps were unemployment homes that were meant to keep the drifters out of cities and out of trouble. The workers at these camps worked 8 hours a day, 6 days a week and as pay they received clothes, a bed, food and 20 cents per day. Many men living in these camps were unhappy with their living conditions and described it as a prison.

In 1932, a Relief Camp Workers Union (RCWU) was formed by Arthur Evans who was socialist and trade union organizer who played the leading role in the on to Ottawa Trek. In April 1935, 1500 men from British Columbia’s relief camps went on strike and made their way to Vancouver to protest for better pay and better working conditions. Unfortunately, Vancouver did not help them because they had very little “relief money” which was a fund set up to provide aid for people in need. The underpaid workers ended up staying in Vancouver for 2 months, until their leader Arthur Evans suggested that they travel to Ottawa to seek help. The men set off to Ottawa only to be stopped by Prime Minister Bennett’s government who stopped the railways from allowing these men to travel any further. Only 8 leaders of the RCWU were able to make it to Ottawa to meet with the Prime Minister and negotiate the rights of the workers. The meeting was a failure and since Bennett feared this day would come, he did not want to listen to the workers and claimed that they were trying to start a revolution. The workers returned to Regina, determined that the trek would continue.

On July 1st it was dominion day and the workers and their supporters held a meeting in the Regina market square. They were trying to raise money to continue their trek, but the government was worried that the crowd would get out of control and started to arrest the leaders of the strike including Arthur Evans. The riot continued till late evening, a few men were killed and many were injured and by the end 130 people were arrested. This was the end of the on to Ottawa trek. Many of the workers returned to Vancouver, and the government decided to shut down all relief camps within a year but the problems of the unemployed men still remained.

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