



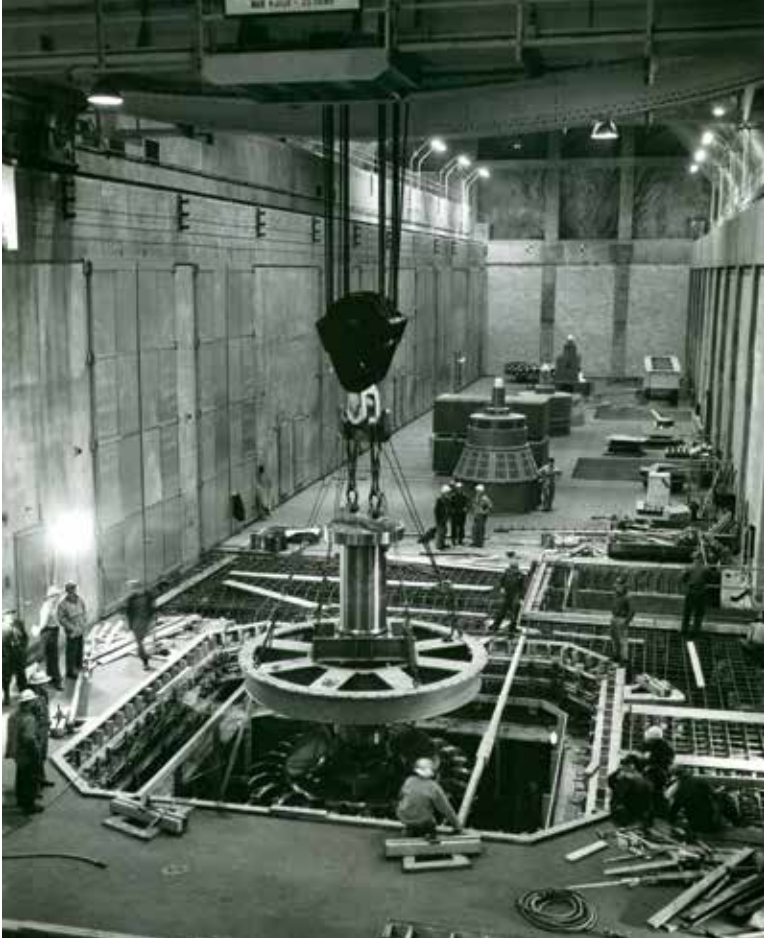
CHAPTER 2 – The First Mega-Project



IT IS HARD now, over sixty years later, to appreciate how British Columbians felt about their first mega-project, Alcan's Kitimat Smelter-Kemano Dam project. But in 1952 the network of paved highways between cities and towns which travellers take for granted today was non-existent and the Trans-Canada Highway was barely begun. It took two days to get from Vancouver to Lillooet, now a three-and-a-half-hour drive along BC Highway 99. Throughout the Interior such roads as there were tended to be gravelled and impassable in spring and fall. Running water and electricity were a rarity: the privately-owned BC Electric Company had ignored rural BC in favour of the more profitable urban areas. Barge and railway were the only practical means of shipping the ore and lumber which generated the wealth of the province's principal industries. And the railway system did not extend very far. BC was a commercial and financial backwater, but now a major international company was proposing to build one of the largest aluminum smelters in the world right here.

For most British Columbians, Alcan was a welcome promise of things to come. True, building the dam and powerhouse needed to supply the smelter with electricity would require flooding a pristine wilderness which lay within a provincial park boundary as well as reversing the flow of the Nechako River, thus virtually destroying a major run of sockeye salmon. It would also require evicting some homesteaders and the Cheslatta people from their traditional homes. But, unlike the displaced homesteaders, the Cheslatta received little compensation for their land and no relocation funding. Today, it would be almost impossible to build such a project, and certainly not without a protracted fight. But in 1952, with a whole vast province still all but undeveloped, most people, if they were even aware of the environmental and human cost, saw the damage to a sockeye run and the eviction of a First Nation as minor bumps on the road to progress. In fact, from 1948, when it first expressed interest in the project, it took only three years for Alcan to receive approval and begin construction: indeed, it was allowed to start construction before the bill authorizing it had even passed the legislature.

The pride British Columbians felt in this project is understandable. At the time it was unique in the history of industrial development and is still one of the world's great engineering feats. It was budgeted at \$500 million (\$3.3 billion in today's dollars), which, though scheduled to be spent over several years, was equal to two per cent of Canada's gross national product in 1952. Alcan was intending to build a smelter employing 6,000 workers at a remote site previously visited only by fishing boats and a Union Steamship freighter delivering supplies. A dam and powerhouse capable of supplying 1,250,000 kilowatts on a continuous basis would have to be constructed. Since the raw bauxite from which aluminum is made would arrive by ship and the finished product would then have to be delivered by ship, a dock for deep sea freighters would have to be built. Lastly, in order to keep a stable workforce at the smelter, a brand new town with schools, shops, libraries, parks, and utilities for 50,000 people would have to be constructed.



*Kemano generating station built in a 427 m (1400ft.) cavern created inside the base of Mt. Dubose.
Photo courtesy of Rio Tinto.*

The work on the town site and smelter contract was awarded to Kitimat Constructors, a consortium of BC's eight largest contractors (including current Local 1611 contractors Dawson Construction and Emil Anderson Construction). The work on the smelter's dam, twin penstocks, and powerhouse was awarded to an American company, Morrison Knudsen (MK), then the world's largest contractor. Formed in Boise, Idaho in 1912, it had done very well out of U.S. government contracts during the Second World War and so was one of the few companies in the world with the experience required for such a large, difficult, and remote project. Even so, MK would only accept the Kemano contract on a cost-plus basis, a condition which was to cause a good deal of friction between Alcan and MK as both project and costs grew. At least some of Alcan's engineers suspected MK of padding its accounts.

By land the dam project was some 75 miles from the nearest dirt road, and that little better than a logging road. The dam itself was to be 1,500 feet long, 325 feet high, 1,500 feet wide at the base, and 40 feet wide on top. Behind the dam, water from a 339 square mile reservoir would drop 2,600 feet in ten miles as it travelled through a tunnel "as big as a house" and with a paved concrete floor as wide as a two lane highway. This tunnel would have to be built from four separate headings, much of it through weak rock. The powerhouse—1,000 feet long, 85 feet wide, and 100 feet high—would require drilling and blasting and then hauling twenty thousand truckloads of rock to create a hole large enough to contain eight turbines capable of generating 2,400,000 horsepower.

KITIMAT – THE CRAFT

Altogether some 6,000 workers were employed on Alcan's Kitimat projects. Author Rolf Knight, in his autobiography *Voyage Through the Past Century* (New Star Books, Vancouver, 2013), describes working as a labourer on the smelter site in 1953, when he was still a teenager.

"It was a one hundred per cent unionized site. The housing, food and pay were tops. You could earn three times as much working Kitimat as you could working in the city, although your camp life consisted of working, eating and sleeping.



*Crucible of molten aluminum ready for casting.
Photo courtesy of Rio Tinto.*



I was going to say ‘and nobody ever killed themselves working’ but that’s not true. In fact there are always men killed and maimed in construction projects like that.”

The smelter site was on an old river delta bog and when Bro. Rolf Knight was working there, site preparation was underway; sand was being either trucked in from a nearby sand hill or dredged up from the sea floor, pumped through a pipeline, and then sprayed out in a slurry of sand and seawater over the site. He worked on a labour gang clearing drainage channels and debris from the sluice gates which allowed the water to run off.

“As each layer [of slurry] was drained and consolidated an endless string of trucks, ten-ton Macks and twenty-ton Euclids and even heavier belly dumps, humped and dumped through a perpetual haze of dust or a mist of mud to deposit their loads. Cats and graders shuffled about, drag lines whizzed their flying shuttles out into boggy sinks, scooping out muck. This went on for most of the day and night. The first crews of cement and ironworkers were at work and by the time I left a framework of steel girders for the smelter itself had begun to rise.”

KEMANO – WORKING CONDITIONS

Awe-inspiring as the sheer size and daring of Alcan’s Kitimat project may still appear, it is important to remember that it was built by human beings. And the Kemano tunnel and powerhouse in particular, the cornerstone and also the most difficult and dangerous part of the whole Kitimat project, were built for the most part with the sweat, skill, and too often the blood of members of the Labourers’ Union.

Kemano’s working conditions were described by the newly formed Tunnelmen’s Section of Local 602 at an arbitration hearing on May 26, 1952:

“The tempo of the work is high speed, the tunnel miner has to be a timber man, pipefitter, track man, blaster and sealer, all of these being normally separate classifications of work. He is required to work in water up to his knees under very dangerous conditions—**16 killed underground to date in less than a year** (*emphasis added*) out of a workforce that had ranged from 200 to 500. Continuous production means this, that during the whole shift 40 per cent—50 per cent of the crew are working. Even after blasting,





Photo courtesy Rio Tinto.

while blowing smoke, the motormen and brakemen are switching cars, running in the mucking machine, getting back-ties, bolts, and fish plates. This may be the only time for lunch, yet these men have to forego eating to get the work done—for whatever the operation, drilling, loading, mucking, timbering, laying track, each man is directed to a certain job which he must do. In effect, what we find here is a factory piece-work system, without the necessary incentive pay which necessarily goes with such a system.”

Remarks by individual members interviewed some years later help fill out this picture. Many of them commented on the problems with safety raised at the arbitration hearing, but their remarks on management’s approach to running the show are also revealing.

We had lots of ventilation problems and again, as far as workers and shifter and all, you try to keep it quite safe. But then sometimes these Americans would push you or bulldoze some people into going into unsafe areas and there were a lot of unsafe practices.

— *Pete Richley*

Pieces of loose fell on you, which it did on several people, one guy, I can’t remember his name, motorman, he was sitting on the step of the motor which hauls his muck out, waiting till



Photo courtesy Rio Tinto.

the guys finished off drilling, piece of loose came down, hit him on the head, and killed him. Hardy was his last name, Bud Hardy, killed him right there. — *Allan MacDonald*

Top management, people on salary, were pretty bad. They were most of them anti-union. A lot of them, if you mentioned union, they were sick for a day. If they couldn't fire a man at least once a week, they didn't figure they were doing their job. — *Ray DeCosse*



Plugger drilling crew preparing shot rock for dam construction.
Photo courtesy of Rio Tinto

We did have considerable problems with the Yankee supervision there because in my opinion most of them were not very good miners or tunnel men. ... They figured we were just a bunch of dumb Eskimos or something, that's the way they treated us. Most of them did anyway. — *Pete Richley*

I always said that in Kemano they hired the guy that could scream the loudest, the biggest voice, that's the one they put on the shift as the walking boss [foreman]. ... A lot of them didn't know much about it [mining], but they got by. — *Allan MacDonald*

KEMANO – CAMP LIFE

When I first went there, we lived in tents. We had a flash flood there one time and lost a couple of tents. We had to get out of them, evacuate them because the Kemano River came up so high. We had a couple of them burn down because we had one stove in the middle of about six, eight guys. We had a board floor and a board side for about four feet and then tent on top. We slept in army cots. — *Ray DeCosse*

Despite modern weather patterns changing for the worse, with “freak” storms becoming commonplace and “100 year” floods seeming to occur every other year, Ray Decosse's experiences with being flooded out and then burned out of his camp “home-away-from-home” would not happen today. The BC Building Trades' *BC Construction Camp Rules and Regulations* agreement's very first article states that: “Every camp shall be located at a distance far enough away from the construction job site to ensure that the best possible drainage can be provided to guard against year-round climatic and tide conditions.” This and a good many other things about camp life have changed for the better since Kemano was built.

Camp 5 we were in tents. We were about 14-16 people living with a wooden stove in it. That's what we had. When it got chilly in the night, you got up and put another log on it. You washed in the river.
— *Nick Raffin*

The *Construction Camp Rules and Regulations* (2008-2014) now require every worker be given their own room, properly insulated against cold and noise, and adequate washing facilities—a sink for every five workers, a shower for every ten (for every five on coal mine projects)—replacing the Kemano River. Rather than hanging wet work clothes to dry beside the stove (and perhaps burn the whole tent down in the middle of the night), a proper dry room and laundry facilities for work clothes are now mandatory in all camps. Rather than Kemano's army cots, all rooms must be provided with a hotel quality bed and bed clothing, which is changed regularly by the camp staff. While no one would ever mistake a modern construction camp for an upscale spa resort, because of the efforts of building trades and unions and their members, living conditions have improved beyond recognition since Kitimat-Kemano was first built.

You were isolated, but in those days you never really thought of it that much. You were in camp for so long, stayed there for so long, and then you were out. And there wasn't that much to do. In camp we had a rec hall and the guys used to go over there and shoot the breeze. We had a show twice a week. There was an old radio in camp, but it wasn't all the time you could get something on it. But it was mostly guys going into the rec hall and talk and tell stories and just sit around and talk. Hey, outside in the summer, it was nice. But as far as recreation was concerned, there was no recreation at all, other than the shows.

— *Allan MacDonald*

The bears used to come right up, almost right up, almost to the cookhouse door, and guys used to feed them at breakfast time. They'd take hotcakes and maybe put a little honey on them and throw them to the bears. Others would tease them a little bit, throw snowballs at them. One of the guys that worked in the kitchen, one of the flunkies, played a trick on this bear—I forget what it was he threw at him, but the bear got a little bit annoyed and took a swipe at him and took a chunk out of his leg. He was gone.

— *Bill Winsor*

Although the smaller tunnel and powerhouse camps such as Tahtsa and Camp 3 always remained quite isolated, conditions did improve somewhat in the main Kemano camp, especially once the senior management moved in. In those days, very few women worked in camps and those who did were mostly office and cook house workers. Kay Messenden, who worked for MK in Kemano starting in 1951 described it as “the duller place there is.” She wore “heavy boots, thick slacks, and wool sweaters to work” and was there for the same reason as the men: the money, which in her case was

\$1.40 per hour (\$225 a month) plus overtime and room and board. Engineering subcontractor Mannix Ltd paid its office staff \$1.09 per hour (\$175 a month) plus room and board. Newspaper reports of the time try to imply that being one of twenty young and single women in the midst of a thousand men was a gold-digger's paradise. Ms. Messenden made it clear she found little glamour in the job. She was housed with seven other women

in one windowless room over top of the company hospital. For recreation, she had nothing but bingo, the twice weekly shows, and, by 1953, a 3,000 volume library. Women did not go to the rec hall to shoot the breeze, though Mannix's office staff did have a sitting room where their bosses would sometimes visit them in the evening.

Modern construction camp recreation facilities provide considerably more choices than bingo, film shows, and shooting the breeze, with or without your boss. In addition to having a dining hall which can be configured to allow for “lectures, films and meetings”, they are required to have separate games and TV rooms whose equipment shall include: “upholstered chairs, pool tables, shuffleboards, dart boards, darts, games, etc. Beverages including hot tea, coffee, and hot chocolate shall be supplied daily.” The camp must be provided with a “satellite system or television source ... [including] at least one movie channel” and individual rooms must have a cable TV outlet. Where formerly workers could go days or even weeks with little news of the outside world and even longer without contact with their families, now “Internet connectivity services must be provided” and, if available, pay-per-use internet connectivity must be supplied in the living quarters.



Kemano Camp 5 mess hall.

Photo courtesy Paul Jacobs

In the early 1950s, while some men may have played bingo, others went to the film showings, and, at the rate of 150 books a night, borrowed from the library once it was established. Indeed, according to Ms. Onhasey, the librarian, many of the 1,500 men in Kemano Camp in September 1953, were regular bookworms. She was surprised that “the men who look most like they’d be illiterate are the ones who do the most reading.” Despite their apparently uncouth appearance, the inmates of Camp Kemano, like those of prisoner-of-war camps a few years earlier, even put on plays and musicals. But popular as these other activities may have been, they could not compete with the attractions of what have always tended to be camp workers’ most popular recreational activities—gambling and drinking.

Well, the recreation was a show on once in a while. They had the gym. But the biggest recreation was the poker tent and my bunkhouse was right next to the poker tent. My room partner was Jimmy Boyd, we called him Sherriff Boyd. All the guys down from various camps or wherever, they’d come from the poker tent into our room and then to the bootlegger, and so our room was filled all the time. There was somebody sleeping under the bed, over the bed, on the bed, all asleep. Then they’d wake up and go back to the poker tent and have another shot at it. — *Pete Richley*

Indeed, although MK was reluctant to spend anything but the bare minimum on their workers’ comfort, they soon realized the value of a separate tent for gambling. Productivity was being affected by the noise from all-night poker games disturbing the sleep of all the non-gamblers in the tent. But a separate tent did nothing to solve the problem of professional gamblers. Men might work for months then lose everything while waiting for the boat home. Of course, they could have done this just as easily to their fellow workers as to a card shark, but for a brief while, Kemano was as much a part of the professional gamblers’ circuit as Reno or Las Vegas. However, it seems the card shark problem soon passed as word spread that the tunnellers didn’t call the police when they caught someone cheating; instead they settled it their own way, usually with fists and feet.

Gambling there was a lot. As a matter of fact, they even had a couple of guys killed ... the police, they come in there and nobody wanted to question anybody. They didn’t take anybody away, just the body.
— *Nick Raffin*

Booze, at least from MK’s point of view, was a more serious problem. Workers were allowed to order it by mail. It arrived with the regular freight and was distributed by the company’s security force. But with the nearest liquor store being in Prince Rupert, bootlegging quickly became a small industry of its own. A bottle of whiskey would sell for \$25.00 or more, the equivalent of two days’ wages. According to John Kendrick, a senior Alcan official, quite a few management personnel were involved in the trade, some of them seeming to spend more time pushing booze than pushing pens. Given the principal source of bootlegged liquor, it is hardly surprising that when MK threatened “immediate dismissal” for “anyone receiving excessive amounts of liquor for himself or his friends, or anyone using liquor to excess”, no one paid any attention, the bootleggers least of all.

Booze orders were normally distributed on Friday so that workers could get drunk on Saturday and spend Sunday



Photo courtesy Rio Tinto

sobering up. On one occasion a bad storm delayed the booze run to Horetzky Creek until Sunday. On Monday, “miners in all stages of intoxication [were] crawling, staggering, and, like the blind leading the blind, trying to help each other up the hill from the camp to the tunnel adit.” They were all fired on the spot, but, good miners being hard to replace, they were soon back.

KEMANO – THE BIRTH OF TUNNEL & ROCK WORKERS’ LOCAL 168

The first strike breakout, the grievance was strictly over getting a new union in there. A lot of the grievances on the job were on account of conditions as a whole, safety wise, the grub in the kitchen, it was the whole ball of wax. — *Ray DeCosse*

In the early 1950s the spirit of unionism was in the air and it did not take long for the building trades unions to organize the Kitimat-Kemano project and negotiate agreements, including union hiring. However, from LiUNA’s point of view, it turned out to be somewhat unfortunate that this success occurred when there were fewer than 200 workers on the job, mostly working on site preparation. While the Labourers’ agreement signed by Local 602 was comparable to construction agreements elsewhere in the province, it was negotiated before one of the most important group of workers to the project’s success, the tunnellers or construction miners, had arrived on site.



Track completion at the Backup Tunnel supply access.

Even without LiUNA’s Vancouver Island and New Westminster membership, Local 602 had grown from some 400 members in 1946 to 1,600 members in 1951. Finding workers to supply Kemano was going to mean finding another 500 new members, and some 400 of them would have to be experienced tunnellers or miners. This was not a trade with which Local 602 itself had any previous experience, although it was within LiUNA’s jurisdiction. In fact well over 75 per cent of Kemano’s powerhouse and tunnel workers would turn out to be members of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers’

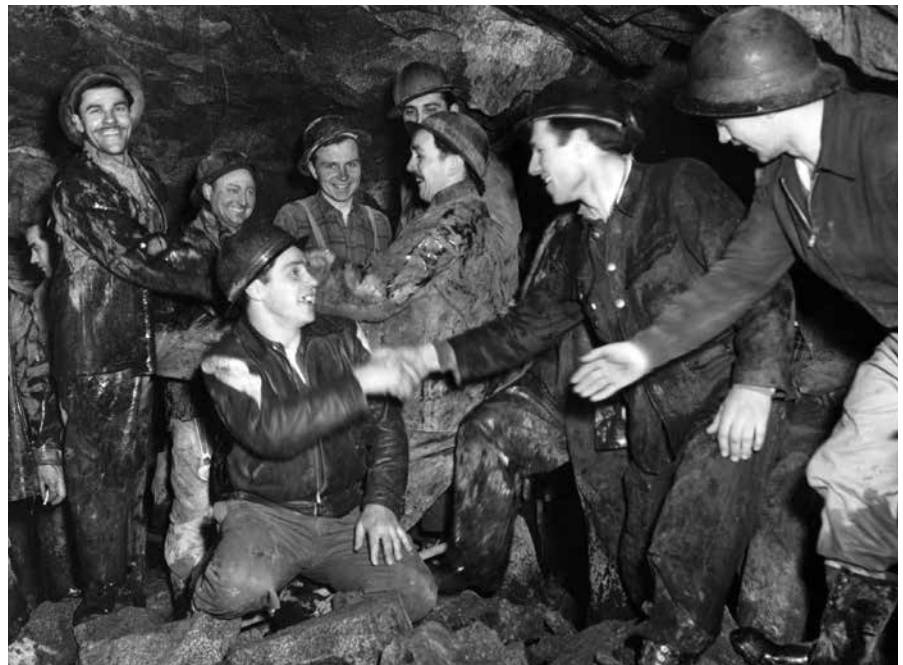
Union, an industrial union with a tradition of militancy in Kootenay towns such as Roseland and Trail stretching back to the 1890s. In 1905, Mine-Mill, or the Western Federation of Miners as it was known at the time, was one of the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World or Wobblies. Though virtually extinct today, the Wobblies’ reputation for unyielding militancy has been preserved in the expression “wobbling the job” to describe a wildcat strike, a tradition with which the Mine-Mill members at Kemano were soon to show themselves very familiar. In short, Local 602’s new tunnellers were workers with clear and definite ideas about how their interests should be taken care of, and what to do about it if they were not.

It didn’t take long for Kemano’s tunnellers to decide that the agreement signed by Local 602 with Morrison Knudsen did not measure up. Carpenters were getting \$2.00 an hour, boilermakers \$2.10, but the tunnellers’ and drillers’ rate was \$1.60 with \$1.75 for powdermen. Other trades were paid overtime after 40 hours, but tunnellers only after 48; the other trades even had to spend less time in camp in order to have their fares in and out paid. Meanwhile, Mine-Mill was negotiating agreements which guaranteed its miners a minimum day rate, four more

statutory holidays than at Kemano, and a welfare plan. Perhaps most galling of all for this group of experienced trade unionists, because it was negotiated before they were hired, they had never voted on or even had any input into the agreement under which they were working.

In response to the tunnellers' complaints, Local 602 unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate a 20 cent wage rise from Morrison Knudsen in late August, 1951. In late October and again in mid-November, business agents visited the camp but failed to defuse the tunnellers' growing anger. They began to look elsewhere for help. In fact, as early as August 31, tunneller Arthur Belt wrote to Harvey Murphy, Western District International Representative of Mine-Mill, asking for help in organizing the Kemano project. Bro. Belt told Bro. Murphy that Local 602 was not enforcing verbal commitments made by the company when hiring the men and had failed even to raise the crew's own demands for a wage rate of \$2.00 an hour plus free room and board. Bro. Belt reported that Local 602's business agents had said the company refused to consider their demands and "advised no action". According to Belt, "this didn't go over so good with the Tunnel men." By the end of December, Mine-Mill was receiving increasingly urgent appeals for help, not only from Bro. Belt, but from Bill Slewidge, also at Kemano, and from John Rooney and Nick Bird at West Tahtsa. On November 26, thirty-four workers at Camp 3 signed a petition requesting a Mine-Mill charter.

However, Mine-Mill had a jurisdiction agreement with the Building Trades. In a letter to Frank Carlyle, president of the Building Trades Council of BC, Harvey Murphy wrote that the BTC "will receive full support from us on all construction work and Mine-Mill will be recognized as having jurisdiction on any job having to do with production of ores and smelting." Furthermore, miners going to work on construction projects "will report to [Mine-Mill's]



BC District Union office and from there dispatch through the appropriate [Building Trades] Union on the job ... "When Local 602's Secretary Len Millman offered to pay 65 cents a month for each Mine-Mill member working construction, Bro. Murphy turned him down, saying the offer "could not properly be accepted by this Union." As a result of this jurisdictional agreement, Mine-Mill could not accept the Camp 3 workers' request for a charter. It could, however, support demands for a new BC Tunnellers' LiUNA Local.

This solution to their problems at Kemano seems to have first been raised at mass meetings held in the presence of Bill James, a Local 602 business agent, on November 12 and 13 when the miners demanded the right to form their own local. On December 11, tunneller Manus Wilson wrote to Robert Sheets, LiUNA's International Vice-President in Seattle, informing him of this demand. Bro. Sheets replied on December 13, turning down this and similar requests from other camps saying that it "could confuse the situation at Kemano by making it possible for the members of the new charter to make demands which would be embarrassing both to this International Union and the Company" He did, however, promise that that the workers at Kemano would be advised of any future negotiations and be allowed to sit in on them.

Coincidentally, Business Agent Bill James and Secretary Len Millman began holding private talks with MK on December 13. Although at no point were any of the tunnellers' representatives invited, these talks lasted through to the end of the month and produced an offer which was put to a vote with a recommendation to accept. The offer would have given miners another 15 cents an hour, but would have cut the helpers' rate by 10 cents. All five camps rejected it unanimously and an attempt by Bill James to get it passed at a meeting in Vancouver held during the first week of January failed for lack of a quorum. The tunnellers now believed that by negotiating with the company while refusing to consult with them, the local officers had left them no choice but to strike. At 8:00 a.m. on Tuesday, January 15, 1952 they wobbled the job. As Mine-Mill Organizer Barney McGuire put it, the men "just blew up because what is the justification for them having to work for about \$3.00 a day less than they'd already established several years before?"

Morrison Knudsen (MK), confident that it could easily replace them, threatened to fire anyone who didn't return to work. In reply, the tunnellers declared all camps, tunnels, and tunnel preparation work hot and requested that all shift bosses and walking bosses [foremen] quit if MK tried to bring in strike breakers. Unimpressed, MK fired all the strikers on January 18, ordering seventy-five of them to leave that morning on the *S.S. Chilcotin* at 8:00 am. Like the rest of the strikers, this first seventy-five had been up all night debating their next move and slept in. If the RCMP hadn't delivered their morning wake-up call and escorted them to the dock, they would have missed their boat. The next day, the remaining two hundred and five strikers were ordered to leave on the *S.S. Catala*. As he boarded, Hank Schieve, one of the strike leaders, called on the other trades to "Stick by us, brothers. Don't let any scabs in here."

Altogether MK managed to hire some two hundred and fifty skilled miners as "replacement workers", but unfortunately for the company, at that time the words "skilled miner" and "good union man" were virtually synonymous: the replacement workers enjoyed the boat ride to Kemano but once they arrived, they refused to

...requested that all shift bosses and walking bosses [foremen] quit if MK tried to bring in strike breakers.

scab. Meanwhile, other trades at the site not only sympathized with the strike, some members of the Operating Engineers were even reported to be leaving the project because they were not prepared to work with scabs. MK quickly got the point. The last of the strikers had been shipped out on a Saturday. By the following Monday, January 21,

MK announced that "Most strikers who were shipped out of Kemano will be rehired for the job if they want to go back ... only the ringleaders in the strike won't be rehired." To which the strikers replied with an uncompromising "We must go back as a body, as we came out, with no discrimination."

Attempts to settle the wildcat were complicated by the tunnellers' mistrust of Local 602's officers and fears among building trades officials that the strike was the first step towards a Mine-Mill raid on Kemano. In fact, the strikers' demands did now include some form of autonomy within LiUNA, but even though most were Mine-Mill members, both they and Mine-Mill rejected the idea of raiding. On January 30, Local 602's Len Millman, IBEW Local 213's D.M. Wilson, and Mine-Mill's Harvey Murphy brokered a resolution to the impasse. Its main points were:

- i. A Tunnelmen's Unit of Local 602 would be established funded by 65 cents of each tunneller's monthly dues,
- ii. A Tunnelman's classification would be established in the collective agreement,
- iii. A negotiating committee of seven, three from the Tunnelmen's Unit, would be established to negotiate the wage rate for this new classification, and
- iv. The men would go back to work under the old rate, but once negotiated, the new rate would be retroactive to January 15.

Unstated but implicit in this agreement was the condition that all the strikers, including their leaders, would be rehired.

Not all the problems at Kemano were resolved by the wildcat. Mostly, Ray DeCosse’s “whole ball of wax”—the working and living conditions which sparked the strike—remained much the same. Indeed, four months later the project was again shut down after four men were fired for refusing unsafe work. But by winning the right to their own Tunnelmen’s Unit, the strikers had won a key issue: the right to an effective voice in running their own affairs and in negotiating improvements to their collective agreement with the employer. In order to win this right, they had hiked for miles from one camp to another in snow ten feet deep, stayed up half the night after a twelve-hour shift writing long letters to keep each other abreast of developments, and organized countless meetings. By doing so, they helped establish the membership’s right to an effective voice not just in what would, on August 14, 1952, become LiUNA’s Rock and Tunnel Workers’ Local 168, but for LiUNA’s membership throughout British Columbia.

I went in February 7, 1953. My rate at the time, when I went in on the motor, my rate was \$2.14 an hour, and I think other than a shifter I was the highest paid on the job, even higher than electricians at the time.

At that time the miners were above everybody. — *Allan MacDonald*

KITIMAT-KEMANO – POSTSCRIPT

Some sixty years after Alcan began work on its Kitimat smelter project, giant industrial projects were now being undertaken on a regular basis throughout the world, many in sites as remote and difficult as Kitimat had once been. Much else had also changed about the economics and the logistics of such projects, not least in the greater experience and expertise both contractors and owners had developed in undertaking them.

As early as 2008, Rio Tinto, Alcan’s new owner and the world’s second largest mining company (at the time of writing), began considering a major expansion of the Kitimat smelter. The estimated cost was then some \$2.5 billion. In December 2011, despite earlier misgivings about the project’s cost and the stability of the market for aluminum, Rio Tinto made a favourable Final Investment Decision (FID) on what it called the Kitimat Modernization Project (KMP). The estimated cost was now \$3.3 billion. The project was designed to “*increase the smelter’s production capacity by 48 per cent to approximately 420,000 tonnes of aluminum ingot per year using the most cost effective, energy efficient and environmentally friendly technology available.*” When finished, the new smelter would provide employment for some 1,000 workers—5,000 fewer than when the old smelter opened its doors in 1954. A separate but related project, the \$500 million Kemano Backup Tunnel, was also planned to provide a second or backup water supply for the Kemano station powering the smelter. When completed the new smelter’s actual capacity came to 425,000 metric tons a year, making it the most productive and efficient in the world. It had



Labourer crew at the Kemano Backup Tunnel.



Completed Rio Tinto Modernization Project: Aluminum Smelter.
Photo courtesy Rio Tinto

required the use of 3.6 million bricks, 162,000 metres of concrete, 40,000 tons of steel, 2.4 million metres of cable, and 62,000 metres of pipe.

Once again, a major U.S. contractor, Bechtel, was awarded the project and once again the project was union-built, with Labourers' Union members carrying out all work within LiUNA's jurisdiction. And as before, not everything went entirely as planned. Unexpected construction problems leading to cost overruns had been a feature of the first smelter project. On KMP, overruns totalled some \$1.5 billion, but they were the result of unanticipated problems in world

markets, not of unexpected construction difficulties. Aluminum prices peaked in 2011, just as KMP construction began: they fell by 15 per cent in 2012 and by another 10 per cent in 2013 and 2014. Faced with an alarming drop in revenue, Rio Tinto decided to slow down construction, thus reducing annual expenses. Unfortunately, this had the effect of increasing KMP's overall costs.

One example of why this slowdown actually increased costs is the new smelter's pot motors. These were delivered by their manufacturer to the project on time—based on KMP's original schedule. However, because the project had now been delayed, the motors actually arrived nearly two years before they could be installed. They spent over a year sitting in their packing crates on the Kitimat dock, exposed to the damp and salt air. As a result, their wiring became corroded and before they could be installed, they had to be completely rewired, at no small cost to KMP in materials, time, and labour, by the union electricians onsite.



By the time KMP was completed in June, 2015 the \$4.8 billion dollar project had employed a peak workforce of some 4,000, whereas the earlier project had employed some 6,000. And where the original Kemano tunnel project had once employed some 275 LiUNA members and the Kitimat smelter site a peak of over 900, the KMP back-up tunnel employed a peak of around 100 members while its smelter employed a peak of 458.

If technological change had greatly reduced the workforce required for such massive projects, the make-up of that workforce had also changed. Because of the Project Labour Agreement (PLA) between Bechtel and the Building Trades Unions, equity issues were an important component in the project's hiring decisions. In 1952, hiring had been pretty well catch-as-catch-can, the essential requirements being ability to perform the work and a union card. In 2012, the PLA still required both a union card and the right skills, but priority was also given to First Nations, local hiring, and training. According to figures collected by the BC Building Trades Council, 38 per cent of KMP's workforce lived in the Kitimat-Terrace region with the Haisla First Nation, within whose territory the project was being built, achieving 100 per cent employment. Of the non-local workforce, 44 per cent came from elsewhere in BC and 17 per cent from the rest of Canada. Only one per cent of the KMP workforce were Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs), brought in from the United States for certain highly specialized tasks for which no Canadians were available. These TFWs were U.S. Building Trades Union members employed at full union rates with full union benefits—an important point at a time when the Temporary Foreign Worker program was being used to displace Canadian workers by importing workers into Canada on short-term work permits, often at rates below the minimum wage and with no benefits whatsoever. In addition, at a time when government-funded construction projects had no apprenticeship requirements—despite numerous expensive advertising blitzes declaring senior governments' commitment to training Canadian workers to fill Canadian jobs—the KMP PLA required some 25 per cent of KMP's workforce to be apprentices. Indeed, many of KMP's workers were able to both start and finish their apprenticeships working on the project.

THERE IS POWER IN A UNION – ONE

Unlike the original Kitimat-Kemano project, there were no deaths nor even any serious injuries among the LiUNA members working on the KMP. Furthermore, while the accident rate had plummeted, the membership's wage rates and benefits had risen equally dramatically. As an example, the powderman's 1952 wage rate of \$1.75 had risen to \$35.80 in 2014—a twentyfold increase. By comparison, inflation only increased some tenfold in the same period, a basket of goods worth \$100 in 1950 cost \$1,009.60 in 2015. And not only had wage rates risen, LiUNA members at KMP also received 12 per cent holiday pay and a total of \$5.75 in medical, dental, and pension benefits plus free room and board—benefits few of which were even contemplated in 1952. Clearly, for workers at Rio Tinto Alcan's Kitimat Modernization Project, there has been power in a union.



Kemano spillway.
Photo courtesy of Rio Tinto



Esquimalt graving drydock.
Photo credit Heath Moffatt Photography