As the Great Depression dragged on in the 1930s, the situation became desperate for thousands of unemployed men across Canada. There was a growing fear arising out of the large numbers of young men travelling across Canada looking for work. There was also a fear of a Communist revolution within the country. Many feared that these young men might be attracted to communist beliefs and start revolts.

In 1931, the government in British Columbia began to set up sponsored relief camps in remote parts of the province to keep these young men away from the general population. The purpose of these camps was to give young, single men over the age of 18 a place to go. These camps promised a place to stay, regular meals, clothing, some spending money and security, in return for full time work doing such things as cutting brush, moving rocks, and building roads. By 1933, these camps were taken over by the federal government under the auspices of the Department of National Defence. The men at the camps were promised room and board, clothing, and 20 cents per day (plus 1.3 cents for tobacco) in return for 44 hours of work over six days.

These camps, originally designed for 2,000 men, soon mushroomed to over 11,000. These overcrowded conditions further exacerbated living conditions in the camps. The camps were in isolated regions of the western provinces and they offered little in terms of recreation or amusement. The quality of food, clothing, and living quarters left much to be desired and the low rate of pay left many young men angry at their state. To most, the work seemed pointless. The camps soon became hotbeds of discontent at the same time that many Canadians thought these men should be grateful for being given a place to live and work. By late 1934, these men were looking for solutions.

The men in the relief camps became more frustrated with their plight. They called upon organized labour to help them organize to try and improve their conditions. In July 1933, the Relief Camp Workers Union (RCWU) was formed in British Columbia. The newly formed union had several important demands. The main ones were: minimum daily pay rates of 40 cents, a thirty-five hour work week, workman’s compensation, democratically elected committees to represent the workers, social and unemployment insurance, the right to vote, and control of the camps taken out of the hands of the Department of National Defence. All attempts to get the government to listen fell upon deaf ears.

In April 1935, the RCWU went on strike. Vancouver was filled with upwards of 2,000 strikers who paraded through the streets, held public meetings, and conducted tag days to raise money for the strikers. By the end of April, the strikers were gaining the support of thousands of British Columbian residents.

By the end of May, the strikers realized that their resources were running out and that the early momentum was being lost. The leadership decided, after a resounding vote in favour, to continue the strike by taking the strikers to Ottawa by rail. Led by Arthur Evans, over 1,600 strikers would ride the rails to Ottawa to meet face to face with Prime Minister Bennett. The trekkers would stop
along the way for breaks and food, and pick up any other supporters to add to their numbers.

(7) On June 3, the first contingent of trekkers left Vancouver buoyed by over 2,000 supporters. The leaders of the trek sent an advance party ahead to plan for the stops along the way and prepare places to stay and food to eat. Discipline among the trekkers was strictly enforced. The organizers knew that if there was any trouble, public support would melt away.

(8) As the trekkers made their way through British Columbia, they were greeted by much support along the way. In Kamloops and Golden, the orderly trekkers were shown support, allowed to collect food, and were given designated areas to spend the night.

(9) By the time the trekkers reached Calgary on June 7, it was becoming a national story. The citizens came out in a great show of support, although the city showed a reluctance to allow the trekkers meal tickets or to hold a tag day. After pressure from the trekkers, the government became more cooperative.

(10) The trek continued with stops in Swift Current and Medicine Hat before crossing into Saskatchewan and stopping at Moose Jaw. In all cases, the trekkers were met with support and each town and city provided the group with food and accommodations. As the trains entered Regina on June 14, the trekkers were joined by 500 men from the Dundurn relief camp. The trekkers marched proudly through the streets, lined with people to see them. They were given a place to stay at the Exhibition Grounds.

(11) By the time the trekkers reached Regina, the government in Ottawa had had enough of the strikers. To the Bennett government, the trek represented a threat to law and order in the country. Reports were coming back to Ottawa that more men were ready to join the trek in Winnipeg, Thunder Bay and Toronto. The government was afraid that the trek, led by communist sympathizers, could lead to insurrection. The government took immediate action. It ordered the RCMP to prevent any of the trekkers from leaving Regina. RCMP officers from other provinces were brought in as reinforcements. The local police forces were armed and told to use force if necessary. The leaders of the trek met and decided that the trek would continue. They planned to leave Regina on June 17.

(12) A confrontation was brewing. The federal government sent two cabinet ministers to meet the trekkers in Regina. It was decided that the trekkers would send an eight man delegation to Ottawa to meet with the Prime Minister. Led by Arthur Evans, the two sides met on June 22. Forced to stand for the entire hour long meeting, the delegation was met with denial. The government believed that the camps were adequate and that it was simply the work of communist agitators that spurred on the strikers. Both Bennett and Evans got into a war of words and the meeting ended with nothing being resolved.

(13) Upon the delegation’s return to the west, the leaders learned that the trekkers were not being fed properly. The RCMP had built a camp outside the city to house any trekkers who were to be arrested. The federal government also stated that any citizen helping the trekkers leave Regina or giving food and supplies could be subject to arrest. With the trek stalled, the trekkers agreed to disband and be sent back to Vancouver and return to their respective camps. While this was agreeable to the Saskatchewan government, the federal government wanted the trekkers to go to a special camp in nearby Dundurn.
On the evening of July 1, the trekkers held a meeting at Market Square. The crowd, estimated at upwards of 3,000, consisted of about 300 trekkers along with supporters and interested onlookers. As their meeting began, the RCMP and local police arrived on the scene and went to the stage and began arresting the leaders. The police fired off their guns above the crowd and used tear gas. The RCMP poured out of vans with bats. The square was vacated, but the trekkers fought back with rocks and other hand held weapons. In the melee, over 100 trekkers and law enforcement officers were wounded, and one plainclothes police officer was killed trying to keep the trekkers from getting tools from a tool box that could be used as weapons. Approximately 130 trekkers had been arrested. Hospitals were overwhelmed. Damage in the vicinity of Market Square was in the thousands of dollars due to the fighting. As the rioting subsided, both sides placed blame on each other. A royal commission was set up to investigate the Regina Riot.

On July 5, the trekkers were sent back to the west coast on two passenger cars. Some were let off in Calgary and Edmonton. The others travelled on to Vancouver. Some of the trekkers went east to Toronto. In Vancouver, over 3,500 showed up to a meeting held by the trekkers.

Many of those who had been arrested were released due to a public outcry. The leaders were eventually let go because they had been arrested before the riot had actually begun and therefore could not have taken part. In the end, nine men were sentenced to 14 months in prison for rioting.

In July 1935, the Saskatchewan government set up a royal commission to investigate the trek and the riot. From the start, both the provincial and federal governments wanted the blame placed squarely on the trekkers. The two governments did not want the police or RCMP blamed for starting the riot. To no one’s surprise, the commission’s findings released in April 1936, excused the police and RCMP and blamed the trekker’s communist leaders. The government was simply doing its job of maintaining the peace, order and good government of Canada.

The consequences of the trek were many. The camps were returned to the provinces and conditions did show improvement. The trek also focused the country on the conditions being faced by young men. It was a movement where the underdog trekkers took on the government and forced action. The trek also portrayed the Bennett government as being insensitive and out of touch with its citizens. Bennett went down to electoral defeat in October 1935. The trek also promoted the socialist and communist movements in Canada. A number of the trekkers joined Canadian volunteer forces that fought in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939 on the side of the governing communists against the Nazi backed forces of Francisco Franco. The trek became a proud moment in the fledgling labour movement in Canada as workers confronted the government over what they felt were intolerable working conditions.