

## Socialists and Workers The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21

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## ARTICLES

### Socialists and Workers:

#### The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21

Allen Seager

"... the race is to him that endures to the end" — Ralph Smith, MP, address to the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, 1905 (*Proceedings*, 4).

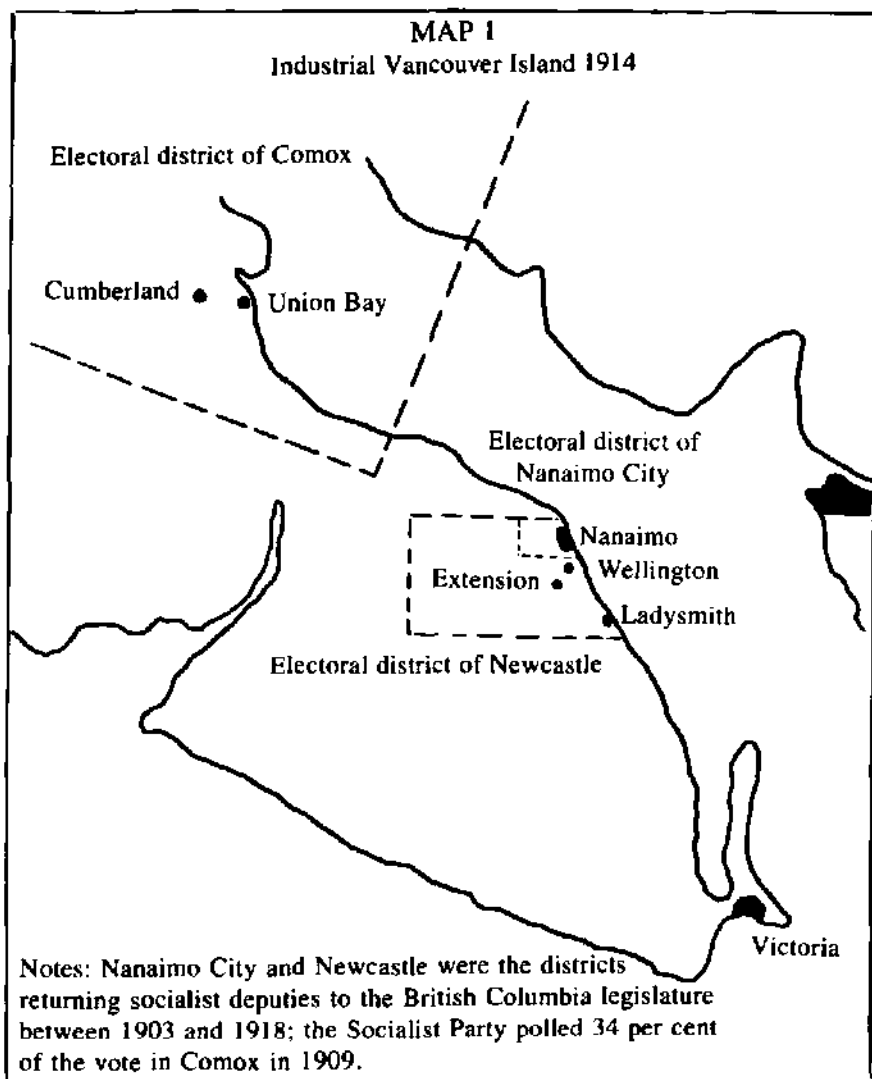
#### 1

"DO THEY THEN FORGET that America will be the workers' continent *par excellence*, that a half million workers emigrate there yearly, and that on such soil the *International* is bound to strike strong roots?" Marx objected in 1871. The origins, nature, and extent of early Canadian socialism have been debated, and often dismissed, but have not been the subject of systematic inquiry. The movement's contours were local and regional; Canadian socialists did not build a viable national organization before the 1930s. It is wholly inaccurate, however, to describe the early socialist movement as "an agglomeration of doctrinaire sects," or to claim that its *Marxism* was a bar to political success between the 1890s and the 1920s.<sup>1</sup>

The socialist movement is the context in which much of the labour activism of the period, or what historians have viewed as a "desperate but unfocused radicalism," must be placed. This essay traces a critical aspect of the history of early Canadian socialism by focusing on one of Canadian socialism's earliest constituencies, industrial workers in the coalfields of British Columbia and Alberta. In these industrial areas radicalism was, by contrast, deep-rooted, organized, and purposeful. In 1930 a small contingent of independent labour politicians who held seats in provincial legislatures in the West included coal

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Saul K. Padover, *Karl Marx: An Intimate Biography* (New York 1980), 248, and Gad Horowitz, "Notes on 'Conservatism, Liberalism, and Socialism in Canada,'" *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 11 (1981), 386; Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough 1977), 40-76.

Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 23-59.



miners Sam Guthrie and Tom Uphill in British Columbia, and Chris Pattinson and P.M. Christophers in Alberta. All were veterans of the miners' struggle and of the most salient chapters of the miners' political past: the socialist movement of the first two decades of the century. Here we examine the varied backdrop of the coal miners' movement between 1900 and 1921, the nature of the political movement to which the miners became attached, and the strength of that attachment.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Morton with Terry Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (second edition, Ottawa 1982), 99-100. Aspects of miners' politics after

## II

THE WESTERN CANADIAN COAL industry was above all the offspring of the national policy and railway-building after 1880. It was also an unlovely child, a model of unplanned development. Operators faced uncertain markets and formidable technological difficulties which helped make the western Canadian mines "the most dangerous in the world." Between 1879 and 1917, fifteen major mine disasters claimed the lives of 862 B.C. and Alberta colliers; ruinous business practices and problems "of labour and with labour" were endemic. The coal industry in B.C. was completely dominated by two or three large firms who held extraordinary concessions, in the words of one middle-class critic in the coalfields, "a class of crooks who prefer to mine the public instead of the ground." Competitive capitalism had freer rein in the Alberta fields, subject to the dictates of the all-powerful CPR. By 1918 Alberta was the largest producer in the Dominion, but its surplus capacity led to disaster during the interwar years. After the 1920s the main thrust of the mining unions in the region was a search for order; before the 1920s they were among the most militant on the continent. Between 1900 and 1921 there were, at a minimum, 125 strikes or lockouts in the industry. The ten largest industrial disputes between 1903 and 1919 accounted for a loss of 10.6 million striker-days.<sup>3</sup>

In 1891 there were roughly 3,000 mine workers, the great majority in British Columbia, employed in the region's coal industry. Twenty years later British Columbia's, though not Alberta's, collieries had reached their peak of productivity. In 1911, employment stood at 11,000 according to the census, roughly equally divided between the two jurisdictions. The oldest and most economically stable of the coalfields was located on Vancouver Island and it experienced two decades of major expansion, during the 1880s and again between 1900 and 1910. At the end of the 1880s, there were 2,200 miners on the island; between 1910 and 1920, about 4,000. Employment in B.C.'s East Kootenay coalfield — the fiefdom of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company (1898) — reached 3,000 in 1910 but declined steadily thereafter. Freight rates, tariffs, and other vagaries of the marketplace had destroyed the dream of Fernie, B.C., the "Pittsburgh of Canada" which, in its heyday, entertained

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1921 are discussed in Allen Seager, "A History of the Mine Workers' Union of Canada, 1925-1935," (M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in B.C.* (Vancouver 1967), 2-9, 38-41, 55-61; Wm. Carroll, Angus, Morrison, *et al.*, Report of the Royal Commission on Coal (Ottawa 1946); Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto 1972), 69-72, *passim*; A.A. den Otter, *Civilizing the West: The Galts and the Development of Western Canada* (Edmonton 1982), 73-199; David J. Bercuson, ed., *The Alberta Coal Industry 1919* (Calgary 1978): "class of crooks" from R.T. Lowery in the *Fernie Ledge*, 4 January 1905; strike data from the *Labour Gazette*, 1901-20.

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such luminaries of the workers' movement as Keir Hardie and William D. Haywood.<sup>4</sup>

While the East Kootenay mines specialized in coking coal and the Vancouver Island mines serviced urban markets (first San Francisco; by 1900, Vancouver), Alberta miners depended on two factors for their prosperity. The state of the grain trade meant economic life or death to the bituminous coal industry, wholly dependent on sales of locomotive fuel. The lignite coal industry, which accounted for about half the province's output, was a seasonal enterprise that relied on the severity of the prairie winters and hardship on the homestead for its profits. World War I produced a vast expansion of plant and investment in the Alberta mines, especially in the central and northern fields. In 1920 provincial output reached a record seven million tons, compared with three million in British Columbia. The 1921 census (see Appendix 1) counted over 9,000 miners in Alberta; counting seasonal workers, the numbers in the early 1920s went as high as 13,000. Most useful for our purposes is an estimation of the volatile labour force on the eve of the war. Averaging the provincial mining returns by month for 1913 yields a figure of 8,636 non-salaried employees. Over one-quarter (26.5 per cent) were non-seasonal miners who worked the bituminous seams in Alberta's largest single mining area, the Crow's Nest Pass.<sup>5</sup>

Despite a greater degree of transiency and other factors, Alberta's coal industry was much more highly unionized than its British Columbian counterpart. District 18 of the United Mine Workers (UMW) was born in the East Kootenay district — its militance inspired by the anti-labour policies of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company — in 1903. Between 1905 and 1907 the union pressed its jurisdictional claims in the West with great success in southern Alberta, aided by cold winters and a "thaw" in federal labour policies in 1906-7 inspired by the politics of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (1907). With the formation of the Alberta-based Western Canadian Coal Operators' Association (WCCOA) a collective bargaining framework was established in Alberta and southeastern British Columbia that had no counterpart elsewhere in Canadian mining. Many operators, especially in northern Alberta, however, remained outside of this framework. Wage rates advanced in relation to eastern Canadian fields, but they lagged behind those of unionized miners in the United States. Partly to forestall attempts at unionization — a tactic that never,

<sup>4</sup> Canada, *Census*, 1891, vol. II, 140; 1901, vol. II, 383-5, 401-2; 1911, vol. V, 66-7, 88-9; British Columbia, *Reports of the Minister of Mines*, 1889-1920; Daniel Thomas Gallacher, "Men, Money and Machines: Studies Comparing Factors of Production in British Columbia's Coal Industry to 1891," (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1979); J. Young Byers, "[Fernie] The Hub of the Coal Industry," *Calgary Herald*, 4 April 1906; visit of Keir Hardie reported in the [Fernie] *District Ledger*, 24 August 1907, of Bill Haywood, in the *Ledger*, 2 October 1909.

<sup>5</sup> Alberta, *Mines Branch Reports*, 1906-25. For a very comprehensive survey of the Alberta coal industry, see Frank Wheatley *et al.*, *The Report of the Alberta Coal Commission* (Edmonton 1926), Glenbow-Alberta Archives.

in fact, succeeded — the large bituminous operators on Vancouver Island conformed in basic outline to the district scale hammered out in repeated confrontations between the WCCOA and the UMWA, or, between 1917 and 1921, between the WCCOA, the UMWA, and the wartime federal coal authorities. Working conditions, by any standard, were unenviable in all western Canadian collieries, with the possible exception of the most tightly-organized union mines during World War I.<sup>6</sup>

A helpful survey of union strength at the end of the period under discussion comes from a unique source. In April 1919 the provisional officers of the One Big Union (OBU) conducted referenda among the UMW locals of B.C. and Alberta on the double-barrelled question of support for affiliation to the OBU, and a general strike for specified demands. Most UMW officers in the region supported "yes" votes, which weighed the responses heavily in favour of the militant options. The membership-in-good-standing of the locals which participated stood at 7,300; there were 5,519 "yes" votes on affiliation and 256 "no" votes. This translated easily into support in principle for a general strike in the coalfields in 1919.

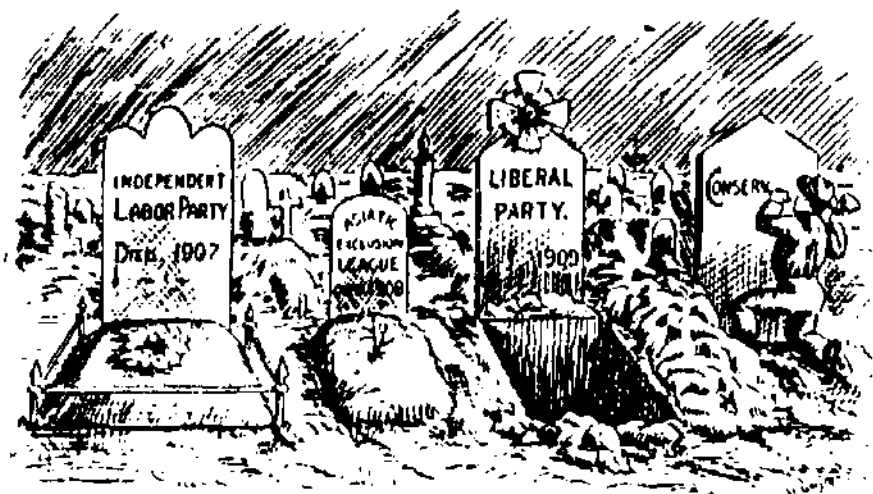
Union membership among 27 locals of District 18 (see Appendix 2) located in points in Alberta north and west of the Crow's Nest Pass numbered 3,690. April, however, was slack time in the lignite coal industry and about a thousand potential OBU supporters had simply melted away with the coming of spring. Ivan Radocy, secretary of one of the smaller Alberta locals, sent in his sparse returns — 37-0 in favour of the militant options — with a note that read in part: "we had about 80 members [but] since the mine stopt there is more than half of them away . . . they left word with us whenever we vote for the One Big Union, to put in there vote in favour [sic]."<sup>7</sup> The OBU and the 1919 strike should have been organized some months earlier, perhaps before the Armistice. Certainly, the up-country locals of District 18, UMWA, would have supported it in 1917 or 1918; the IWW influence here was strong.

This cannot be said, however, of the other major bloc of organized labour strength: eight locals of the UMWA in two adjoining subdistricts of District 18, in the East Kootenays and southwestern Alberta, collectively known as "the Crow's Nest Pass." The Alberta Crow's Nest Pass had a membership of about 2,000, the shrinking B.C. subdistrict half that number. There had been a unionized labour force of 2,771 at the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company in 1911 — in 1919, 1,051. The whole area had been prostrated by the depression of 1913-5, and its miners were the most reluctant members of District 18 to

<sup>6</sup> Charles A. MacMillan, "Trade Unionism in District 18, 1900-1925," (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1972); Emile Bjamason, "Collective Bargaining in the Coal Industry, 1900-1940," (M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1965); John Norris, "The Vancouver Island Miners: A Study of an Organizational Strike," *B.C. Studies*, 45 (1980), 56-72.

<sup>7</sup> Public Archives of Manitoba, OBU Papers (one file), Ivan Radocy, Star-Aerial UMWA, to Victor Midgley, 28 April 1919.

## B. C. POLITICAL BONEYARD



### "UNWEPT, UNHONORED AND UNSUNG"

*British Columbia's powerful Socialist party took credit for the eclipse of the Labour and Liberal alternatives in provincial politics between 1900 and 1914, while casting itself — far too optimistically — in the role of grave-digger of B.C. Toryism and anti-Orientalism. From the Western Clarion, November 1909.*

endorse militant policies in 1915 and 1916. Lignite miners in Lethbridge seeking to maximize seasonal wage rates, not the Crow's Nest miners, touched off the bitter struggle for an acceptable wartime contract in 1916. The Crow's Nest mining communities exhibited a complex patriotism during the 1914-8 war, described in the words of a Michel, B.C. miners' resolution as "the great Fight for Democracy." War bonds were heavily subscribed, and every local had a check-off for the Patriotic Fund. It supported, among others, dependants of a regiment of miners, the 192nd, Crow's Nest Pass, raised and sent overseas during the winter of 1915-6. By 1918, anti-war sentiment was manifest in an agitation against the check-off, which succeeded only at the Fernie local. The claim that wartime strikes were fomented by German and Bolshevik sympathizers was patently absurd. Moreover, the most influential local ethnic groups, such as the Italians, Poles, and Czechoslovaks, publicly rallied behind the war effort, and celebrated the victory in 1918 with great enthusiasm.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Payroll of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company from the Public Archives of British Columbia. GR68. Provincial Police Records, vol. 3, Fernie Letter Book, 22 August

"Democracy" had radical implications for the miners' union and at the workplace. The vote for the OBU in the Crow's Nest Pass, Frank Karas correctly notes, was a vote in favour of home rule in the UMWA: in part, for a "Canadian" miners' union. The presence of the 142-member Firebosses' Association on the referendum tally in the Crow's Nest Pass suggests what the policies of such a union might have been. Firebosses were salaried workers; their loyalty was essential to the traditional governance of the mines. Miners in the Rocky Mountains worked steep pitching seams that made mechanization impossible, and gave the skilled worker and the union enough power already at the workplace. Companies opposed the organization of firebosses in any way, shape, or form; they were outside the legal jurisdiction of the UMWA. The Firebosses' Association, unlike the union exclusively British, voted 70-3 in favour of the OBU. When the district president, OBU supporter Phillip Martin Christophers of Blairmore, declared a "100" per cent strike on 24 May 1919 — the Queen's birthday — most of the firebosses walked out and stayed out for three tense weeks. Whatever the "real" motivations behind the strike call, local militants appear to have been aiming at workers' control in the mines. This "disease" was widespread. Brewery workers and civic employees in Fernie joined the strike, and when the Loggers' Union declared its support, the "One Big Union" seemed a tangible reality.<sup>9</sup>

Consistent with a longer tradition of local radicalism, a "revolutionary appeal" was circulated on Vancouver Island in the spring of 1919. The coal miners were in no condition to respond. The OBU referendum was duly conducted among four UMW locals on the island claiming a membership of about 600. Each sent delegates to the Western Labour Conference in March 1919 but they could deliver only sympathy for one big unionism. These locals were the remnant of a broken union, ostensibly organized as District 28 of the UMWA. The UMW, building on a basis of support among the former membership of the Miners and Mine Labourers' Protective Association, recognized by operators of the Nanaimo mines in 1889, proved spectacularly unsuccessful in bringing all island miners into a collective bargaining framework between 1905 and 1914.

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1911; for the miners and World War I, Allen Seager, "A Proletariat in Wild Rose Country: The Alberta Coal Miners, 1905-1945," (Ph.D. thesis, York University, 1982), 272-315; for a parallel case study, David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana, IL 1981), 176-94.

<sup>9</sup> Frank P. Karas, "Labour and Coal in the Crow's Nest Pass, 1925-1935," (M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 1972), 31; PAM, OBU Papers, Nat Turnbull, Fernie Firebosses' Association, to Victor Midgley, 23 March 1919; Glenbow-Alberta Archives, West Canadian Collieries Ltd. Papers, f. 83, "Grève 1919," 24 August 1919, and other memoranda; "Echoes of the Winnipeg General Strike," *Canadian Annual Review* 1919, 500-1; "Fernie Miners Are Out," *Nanaimo Free Press*, 28 May 1919; strike reports in the *British Columbia Federationist*, 30 May 1919, and other numbers.





*The legendary Mother Jones addressed a half-dozen solidarity meetings in the Vancouver Island mining community during the great strike of 1912-14. From the Public Archives of Ontario, Finnish-Canadian Historical Society Collection.*

The climax of the effort, the island strike of 1912-4, brought a militant district to the brink of armed struggle on the eve of World War I.<sup>10</sup>

The strike and its historic background are the stuff of legend in British Columbia. Villains in the piece are the firm of Robert Dunsmuir and Sons (1869-1910), the cutting edge of a native island bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century best remembered for their violent opposition to trade unionism. The Dunsmuirs controlled, at their peak, only a majority of the island mines, and were no longer a factor in the industry at the time of the great strike. Their legacy of the open shop lived on until 1938, as did the painful memory of their particular brand of paternalism. In 1946, retired socialist politician Parker Williams penned a memoir entitled "A Vancouver Island Crime" which recalled in vivid prose the day that Sir James Dunsmuir sold his late father's collieries to the Canadian Northern syndicate for a reputed \$10 million:

James Dunsmuir pocketed this enormous sum, and, like a gambler rising from a gaming table where every hand was turned against him, he swept up every last cent of it and neither then or at the time of his death did the men who made his millions — and lived

<sup>10</sup> "Revolutionary Appeal Circulated," *Nanaimo Free Press*, 22 May 1919; "Cumberland Apathetic on Strike Issue," *ibid.*, 2 June 1919; Paul Craven, "An Impartial Empire": *Industrial Relations and the Canadian State, 1900-1911* (Toronto 1980), 252-64; Lynn Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Lantzville, B.C. 1982), 96-7, 131-98.

through it — nor the widows or the orphans of the victims of his greed that fattened the graveyards, nor the Town of Ladysmith, profit to the extent of one red copper. The reapers in the fields of Boaz let fall head of grain so that the gleaner might but go empty-handed. This reaper grabbed it all, he licked the platter clean.<sup>11</sup>

The Dunsmuirs may have been, in fact, mild task-masters compared with their successors, *Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd.*: an otherwise faceless corporate capitalist enterprise. Its ruthless disciplines provoked the miners to rebellion, but — as is not so well known — turned an immensely profitable business into the “sick man” of the coal industry by the end of the war. In 1918-9 new brooms came to power in the mine offices. They set up pit committees and industrial councils, along the lines of the Colorado Plan, and wrote discourses on the new “moral” approach to management and efficiency in the *New York Coal Age*. Small concessions flowed from these initiatives, and the Western Fuel Company of Nanaimo and other smaller operators followed suit with similar neo-paternalist programmes. Company picnics and gallons of free ice cream helped distract the miners from the General Strike in 1919. Nonetheless, the union members on Vancouver Island voted in favour of the principle, and one group of non-union members at Nanaimo even got together to hold a ballot on the OBU (Appendix 2).<sup>12</sup>

A large percentage of the island miners and diehard unionists were members or descendants of the “charter” ethnic group in the coalfields: Scots and northern English who had sailed around the Horn as collier-emigrants to British Columbia before 1900. Many more British miners followed in their wake to the Canadian west, leaving a lasting imprint on the coal community and its industrial relations.<sup>13</sup> Their intense communal loyalties, knowledge of trade unionism, and conceptions of British “liberties” formed an essential part of the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; Daniel T. Gallacher, “Robert Dunsmuir,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XI, 290-3; Parker Williams’ manuscript found in the Glenbow-Alberta Archives, District 18 Papers, f. 10 (typescript, 4 pp.).

<sup>12</sup> Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 131-74; corporate report from the *London Times*, reprinted in the *Lethbridge Herald*, 27 January 1920; William Wesnedge, Ladysmith, “Efficiency of Mine Workers,” *Coal Age*, 4 September 1919; *ibid.*, “Labour and Democracy,” 25 September 1919; “Colliery Employees Picnic,” *Chronicle of Ladysmith and District* (Victoria 1981), 286-7, reference courtesy of Wendy Elsdon; “Miners’ Evidence at Labor [Royal Commission] Inquiry,” *Nanaimo Free Press*, 30 April 1919.

<sup>13</sup> H. Keith Ralston, “Miners and Managers: The Organization of Coal Production on Vancouver Island by the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1848-1862,” in E. Blanche Norcross, ed., *The Company on the Coast* (Nanaimo 1983), 42-55. The migration described here appears to have peaked around the turn of the century. Of 221 passengers who embarked on the *Buenos Ayrean* at Glasgow on 8 September 1900, 124 were Scottish miners who listed their destination as Nanaimo, PAC, RG 76 (Immigration Branch), microfilm reel 479, uncatalogued, reference courtesy of David Frank. Sifton’s agents recruited a large number of so-called “agricultural settlers” from industrial areas in Wales for the Crow’s Nest Pass collieries as well, *ibid.*, vol. 155, f. 3950, William Griffith-Clifford Sifton correspondence, 1897-8.

matrix of coalfield labour. Most labour leaders in the western coalfields were British-born, although the influence of migrants from the eastern coalfields is not to be understated. Tully Boyce, one of a group branded "Molly Maguires" by the Dunsmuirs' agents, was Pennsylvania Irish. Prominent in the Nanaimo miners' union in the 1890s, he was also on the first "slate" of coal-miner candidates to run for political office on Vancouver Island, in 1894. What little is known about the labour leadership suggests an experience of wide mobility shared by the miners. Peter Patterson, the Scottish-born first vice-president of District 18, had actually been educated to trade unionism by the Provincial Workmen's Association in Nova Scotia; he had worked in mines in Pictou County, Vancouver Island, and the Crow's Nest Pass. According to the census of 1911, nine out of every ten coal miners in the West was an immigrant.<sup>14</sup>

That coal mining was "undesirable" for the native-born is underscored by the fact that at one point in the early 1880s, the single largest group of workers in the industry were in fact Chinese immigrants. Conceivably, the industry could have evolved on a South African model, with an élite of white miners, skilled trades workers, and overseers, whose status rested on the super-exploitation of a mass of "coolie" mine workers enjoying no civil or political rights. A series of factors militated against the creation of a well-ordered ethnically-stratified labour force. Oriental workers were not always a "weapon" used to defeat white workers' demands, but they were deployed in this fashion often enough to lend credence to the charge that "white and yellow labour will not mix."<sup>15</sup>

White miners lent their voices to the growing chorus of "Chinese exclusion" in British Columbia and eastern Canada after 1885. By 1900, legislation prohibited the employment of Orientals in skilled jobs at the coal face — an attempt by the state to order the work force on ethnic lines that was honoured more in the breach than in daily practice. But the tide of Oriental immigration was successfully stemmed; in the coalfields the Crow's Nest Pass became the Thermopolae of the exclusion movement. Beyond its portals "they did not pass." Operators in the interior did not hire Oriental mine workers in significant numbers after 1898. The UMWA, as part of its closed-shop drive in the Crow's Nest Pass between 1903 and 1907, adopted a constitutional amendment barring Asian immigrants from the coal miners' union. Western Canadian

<sup>14</sup> Patterson biography published in the *United Mine Workers' Journal*, 7 October 1909, 6; British Columbia, *Legislative Journals*, 1891, "Select Committee on [the] Wellington Strike, 1890." Evidence of Tully Boyce, ccxlii-clxi, *passim*. For the "Mollies," see Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1904, 36a, "Report of the Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in the Province of British Columbia, 1903," testimony of John Bryden; Donald Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979), 30-3, 123, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> In 1881, 526 of B.C.'s colliery employees were Chinese; 451 were Europeans; 17 were native Indians. For the race issue see Jack Scott, *Sweat and Struggle: Working Class Struggles in Canada, 1789-1899* (Vancouver 1974), 149-84; Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver 1983), 139, *passim*.

delegates moved the appropriate resolution at the union's international convention in 1906.<sup>16</sup>

The anti-Asiatic policy was debated and partly modified — by a precious irony — at the district convention of the UMWA in Alberta in 1909. Already the self-defeating nature of Chinese exclusion had been recognized by labour "radicals." Radical labour's political spokespeople opposed racial discrimination. Western socialists argued, with historical exactitude, that the intrinsic threat to competitive wage rates came not from Asian immigrants in Canada, but from imperialist domination of Asian labour markets. Yet there is not much evidence to indicate that this new liberalism percolated down to the bedrock of white miners' attitudes. The 1909 resolution of District 18 had no effect on overall union policies; it was clearly a socialist political statement. When District 28 made its costly push in the Vancouver Island coalfield in 1912, where the vast majority of Chinese and Japanese workers were employed, unionists found themselves caught on the horns of a dilemma that was partly of their own making.<sup>17</sup>

The Oriental issue, with its contexts of racism and sectionalism, provides one example of the distinct limitations of trade unionism in the miners' fight for a better life. Trade unionism and the UMWA in particular, however, did play a crucial role in beating back the "coal operators' immigration scheme" on another front: in uniting the increasingly heterogeneous European labour force around a common platform of collective bargaining. The expansion of the coal industry after the 1890s could not have been accomplished without a huge influx of immigrants who were neither Chinese- nor English-speaking. Italian stonemasons built the hundreds of coke ovens in the Crow's Nest Pass; Italian labourers worked them. Fernie provides a glimpse of the Tower of Babel that was erected by industrial capital in the coalfields between 1900 and 1914. The payroll of the Crow's Nest Pass Coal Company in 1911 included 646 Italians, 448 Slavs, and 125 Belgians, Bohemians, Germans, or Finns, groups which were as likely as not to regard most of their foreign counterparts as mere "riff raff." Russians and Poles bloodied each other on the streets of Fernie in so-called "religious squabbles." Italians, resisting Anglo assimilation, agitated for the inclusion of their subjects in the public school curriculum. The very same group of workers fought shoulder-to-shoulder in occasionally vio-

<sup>16</sup> Convention report, District 18, UMWA, *Fernie Ledger*, 22 March 1905; United Mine Workers of America, international convention *Proceedings*, 1906, 106.

<sup>17</sup> For socialist views on the Oriental question, see, among many articles and commentaries, "Preparing an Issue," editorial, *Western Clarion*, 24 October 1908. District 18 extended an "invitation" to Chinese and Japanese miners to "unite with the union . . . to better the moral, material, and intellectual conditions of the toilers," convention report, *Coleman Miner*, 12 February 1909. However, "it was not until December 1946 that they in reality became members of our union," Edward Boyd, speech on the "Centennial of Mining" in Nanaimo, 21 May 1949, typescript in the Glenbow-Alberta Archives, District 18 Papers, f. 10.

lent strikers in 1903, 1906, 1907, and 1911, besting J.J. Hill and his strike-breakers every time.<sup>18</sup>

Based on its experience in the United States, the UMW was successful in building cross-ethnic solidarity in all regions in western Canada where "Slavs and Hungarians," not Chinese or Japanese, formed the lower rungs of the mining proletariat. Operators played the game of divide and rule, but they did not play it very well. At Coleman, Alberta, the employers organized a "Canadian" union composed exclusively of Slavic immigrants in 1909, during a contract dispute. The dissident movement soon collapsed, the exercise having succeeded only in embittering the operators' potential allies, sober British-born miners. No serious attempt was ever made systematically to segment the work force on ethnic lines. James Dunsmuir was only the most outspoken of the coal owners on the subject of trade unionism and industrial relations, and he expressed a basic credo when pressed by the Western Federation of Miners in 1903. He did not care if the union was composed of "niggers, Chinese, Japanese, or white men" — he would never negotiate with agitators.<sup>19</sup>

Among non-salaried workers, ethnic lines at the workplace became increasingly indistinct. The proportion of continental Europeans in various job classifications — miners, haulage workers, and so forth — was not significantly higher or lower than their presence in the general work force by 1921. There did exist important local and regional variations in the composition of the colliery labour force, as suggested by census and other data. Travelling from Vancouver Island to points east in 1911, for example (see Appendix 1, Table 2), the coal-mining population became more foreign in complexion. Nanaimo itself was an overwhelmingly English-speaking community, though other coal towns on the island were more cosmopolitan. A third of the population in the Ladysmith district were Poles, Finns, Italians, Swedes, and Belgians. In the East Kootenays, half the population was non-English-speaking. Across the great divide and on into Alberta, "foreigners" comprised a majority of the population. The census of 1921 offers the earliest reasonably detailed survey of the ethnic background of the mine workers themselves. The numbers of native-born workers had increased since 1911, but their presence was substantially unchanged at 12.5 per cent (Appendix 1, Table 1). One out of every twenty mine employees, excluding salaried workers, had been born in the United States, one in ten in China or Japan. Three-quarters were evenly divided among two large ethnic blocs: British immigrants and continental Europeans. These were the foundations of the house of labour in the coalfields.

<sup>18</sup> Above, n. 8; for "riff raff" see Alphonse Henryrot, letter to the editor, *UMW Journal*, 25 April 1907; "Religious Squabble," reported in the *Calgary Herald*, 12 April 1909, "Italian in School," signed "for Fairness and Progress," *District Ledger*, 8 July 1911; PAC, *Mackenzie King Diaries*, "Memorandum re Industrial Disputes in Crow's Nest Pass and Albertan Coal Fields," 19 April-6 May 1907.

<sup>19</sup> "New 'Canadian Miners' Union: Will Canadians Please Recognize the Names of their Countrymen?" *District Ledger*, 11 September 1909; Royal Commission testimony, 1903, 239.

## III

AMONG ANY NUMBER OF radical tendencies in the western coalfields, one was outstanding and came to outweigh, and practically embrace, all others: the "uncompromising Marxian orthodoxy," in the words of Laurier's biographer, of the Socialist Party of Canada. The SPC's revolutionary ideology begs, of course, as many questions as it answers. Its left-wing critics argued that "the outlook of the SPC was opportunist and reformist despite its revolutionary programme." The radical Marxism of the SPC coexisted with its practice of democratic socialism.<sup>20</sup>

The origins of the SPC lay in the response of labour reformers to central Canada's industrial revolution, and the failure of the eclectic radicalism of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s; it was not a regional nor an immigrant expression. But it is not a large exaggeration to say that a group of indigenous socialist intellectuals obeyed the famous injunction of Horace Greeley, packed up their printing press, and headed west for greener pastures at the end of the nineteenth century. They meandered through the rich garden of labour reform on the west coast, engaged in its fierce sectarian struggles, and emerged in positions of power in a rather loose political alignment known as the Socialist Party of British Columbia. In 1905, the SPBC became, "by general vote of the membership, 'The Socialist Party of Canada.'" Two years earlier, the socialist weekly *Clarion* had appeared in Vancouver, under the able editorship of expatriate Ontarian G. Weston Wrigley. Upon its masthead was emblazoned the slogan that defined the SPC: "Strike a Blow at the Ballot Box and a Tack-Hammer Will More Than Suffice on the Railway, Mine, or Workshop."<sup>21</sup>

Socialists did not define labour's political agenda in turn-of-the-century B.C. The miners did. Coal and hard rock miners made up nearly one-fifth of the provincial labour force in 1901, and formed, in 1900, the largest voting bloc in two of the province's half-dozen federal constituencies. The miners had already been well-apprenticed in politics. (The socialists, by contrast, botched even the nomination of their would-be candidate in the 1900 national elections, Will MacLaine in New Westminster.<sup>22</sup>)

<sup>20</sup> Quotations from O.D. Skelton, *Socialism: A Critical Analysis* (Boston and New York 1911), 309-10, and F.C., "The Socialist Movement in Canada," retrospective, *The Worker* (Toronto), 5 April 1926; see also Paul Fox, "Early Socialism in Canada," in J.H. Aitchison, ed., *The Political Process in Canada: Essays in Honour of R. MacGregor Dawson* (Toronto 1963), 79-98.

<sup>21</sup> Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (Cambridge 1982), 388-94; A. Ross McCormack, *Rebels, Reformers and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977), 18-34; Carlos A. Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Seattle 1979), 163-7; quotation from J.B. Alquist, "The Socialist Movement in Canada Before the War," *The Worker*, 17 February 1926.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Mouat, "The Western Federation of Miners in British Columbia,

With "an effrontery that would abash Lucifer himself" the coal miners on Vancouver Island had engaged in class politics of the most rudimentary but most important kind in the 1890s. Coal owners or mines managers held seats in the provincial legislature from industrial Vancouver Island from 1874 to 1902, dominating at times the non-partisan politics of the former British colony. The so-called "island" interests made sure their priorities were well-attended to in Victoria, and hence B.C. was the most skillfully gerrymandered jurisdiction in Canada. The small pocket boroughs of the mine owners, however, were being transformed by demographic and social change; the miners would soon hold the upper hand. In 1900 the contending forces were evenly matched. One American observer suggested in 1901 that when "the first socialist victory in North America" took place, it would happen here.<sup>23</sup>

It is tempting but misleading to view this context as essentially local. The Nanaimo coal miners initiated the earliest contacts between organized labour in eastern and western Canada. Partly to cement these ties, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada elected the Nanaimo miners' leader, Ralph Smith, to a vice-presidency, and then the presidency, of the TLC between 1894 and 1898. The coal- and metal-mining districts in the B.C. interior shared the same non-parochial outlook. Politically, it was moderate. The first coal miners' union in the interior, the Gladstone Miners' Union at Fernie (1899), took its name from William Ewart Gladstone. Miners had no intention, however, of being taken for granted by either of the Grit and Tory parties that emerged in British Columbia in the late 1890s. The national elections of 1900 saw an astonishing breakthrough by B.C. labour, or more properly, the miners' ticket. Ralph Smith was nominated on the island by the MMLPA. The Western Federation of Miners (to which the Gladstone miners were briefly affiliated) nominated its provincial leader, Christopher Foley, in the interior. Narrowly defeated, Foley polled 2,652 votes in the Kootenays. Smith was elected in his riding, with 1,256 votes. Apart from the obvious injustice suffered by Chris Foley, these results show that the socialists did not have to win the miners to a

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1895-1903," paper read at the annual meetings of the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association, Vancouver, 1984; Thomas Robert Loosemore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement and Political Action, 1879-1906," (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1954), 109-10.

<sup>23</sup> "The Member-Elect for Nanaimo [Thomas Keith, Miner-MLA, 1890-4]," *Victoria Colonist*, 8 June 1890; J.D. Curtis, Washington State SPA, 1901, cited in Alfred Ross Johnson, "No Compromise — No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia," (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975), 124. Thomas Keith was elected by acclamation in a political trade-off in Nanaimo City in 1890; in 1894 he was beaten in an election by a margin of 431-411. The same riding was captured by miner-candidate Ralph Smith in 1898. In Nanaimo South, where Tully Boyce was defeated by a margin of 146-120 in 1894, James Dunsmuir was victorious by an equally narrow margin of 249-225 over miner-candidate James Radcliffe in 1900.

political conception of themselves as workers — they only had to win the miners, or their leaders, to socialism.<sup>24</sup>

Smith and Foley were intellectual anachronisms. Foley ran on a one-plank anti-Asiatic platform, while Smith was animated by his desire to "enlighten Parliament on the subject of trades unionism" — a project that had been completed in 1872. Their respective backgrounds show that no one group had, in the miners' phrase, "a monopoly on brains" in the labour movement. Foley was another expatriate Ontarian; Smith was of sturdy British coal-mining stock, born at Newcastle-on-Tyne, and raised in the Liberal-Labour tradition which proved inappropriate in western Canada.<sup>25</sup>

Smith promptly joined the Liberal caucus in Ottawa, claiming to represent a "Liberal-Labour group" on industrial Vancouver Island. Betrayed supporters argued that no such group existed. Because of Smith's prominence in the national labour movement his decision merits some attention; three hypotheses present themselves. First, Smith wanted to create a Liberal-Labour party in Canada, in the company of two other loose fish from the trade union movement who sat as MPs between 1900 and 1911: Puttee from Winnipeg and Verville from Montreal. Second, Smith was following a directive of the Trades and Labour Congress, rarely noted for militant politics. Third, Smith was already deeply involved in Liberal politics in British Columbia, and aimed at provincial leadership in the party. Laurier is known to have supported Smith's claim in British Columbia, but he failed to deliver even a federal cabinet position. Ultimately, Smith's ideas were rejected by all sides. In significant contrast to his counterparts in Great Britain, Ralph Smith had no industrial power with which to buttress his eloquent speeches in parliament. His own union was weak, the national labour body even weaker.<sup>26</sup>

British Columbia was nonetheless rocked by industrial conflict in the spring of 1903, touched off by the railway workers. The strikes were a débâcle, but offered the Socialist Party its historic opportunity. At the end of the year, it had wooed another crop of proven "fighters" to its camp, and stood in possession of a political weapon that could not be gainsayed: three members in the legislature who held the balance of votes in a minority government situation — one coal miner, one hard rock miner, and one socialist intellectual, Nanaimo's James Hurst Hawthornthwaite. All but one of these individuals, coal digger Parker Williams, had entered the legislature on a labour, not socialist, ticket, and Williams had earlier cut his teeth in the Vancouver Island Labour Party campaigns. He was first elected in October 1903 on a "revolutionary

<sup>24</sup> Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto 1982), 170, 364-8; election returns in Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1901, 36, 6-15. Foley and Smith received 31.7 and 42.5 per cent of the votes in their respective ridings: Yale-Cariboo and Vancouver.

<sup>25</sup> Loosermore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement," 103-4, 170, 131-4.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, "No Compromise," 126-7; for Smith and the Liberal leadership, see the *CAR*, 1903; for Smith in debate, Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, April 3 1903, 946-8; quotation from *TLC Proceedings*, 1905, 4.



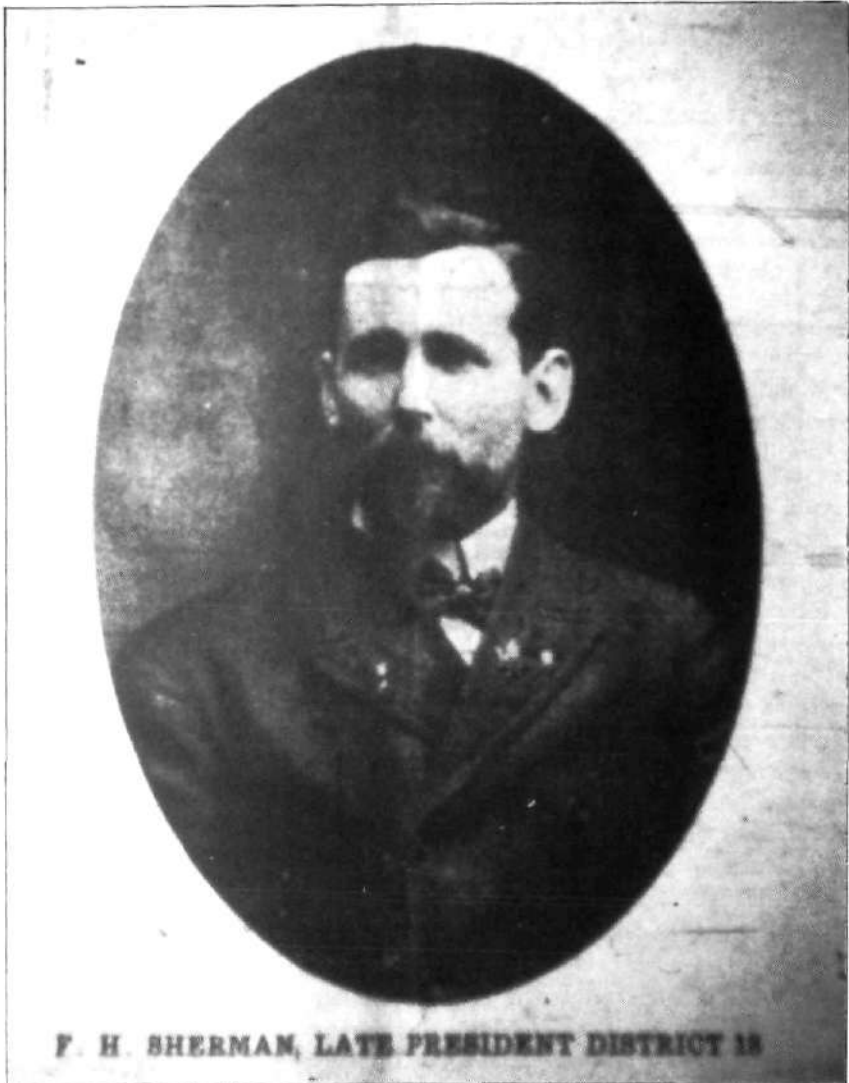
socialist" ticket with 288 votes in one of Canada's smallest electoral constituencies, the appropriately-named provincial district of Newcastle. Hawthornthwaite was the real key to the socialists' political project: a sometime journalist and entrepreneur, connected by marriage to a once-prominent family of mine operators (the Bates) in the small world of industrial Vancouver Island.<sup>27</sup>

While the independent Labour Party wizened on the vine of Liberal compromise, the Socialist Party raised the stakes even higher by nominating a near-full slate of candidates in British Columbia in the federal elections of 1904. Its five standard-bearers polled fewer votes than the two-person miners' ticket of 1900 — just under 3,000 — yet these were the first socialist votes ever cast in a Dominion election. Hitching themselves to the rising star in the far west, socialists east of the Rockies — in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Montreal, and the Maritimes — would join the "SP of C" as it was constituted in 1905. An Alberta contingent was noticeably absent at first. Alberta labour, led by the coal mines, was still tilling the fields of democracy on independent lines, armed with a platform written by Frank Henry Sherman, founding president of District 18 of the UMWA. Sherman's programme was scarcely distinguishable from any red-blooded Liberal platform, or for that matter, from the "radical" platform adopted by the Conservative Party in the Northwest Territories at the Moose Jaw convention of 1903. He opposed the trusts and "any political graft;" he supported home industries and public utilities. Sherman contested two constituencies in southern Alberta in provincial elections or by-elections held in 1905 and 1906; he polled over a third of the vote in each, for a total of 900 votes — as large a political presence, relatively speaking, as the Socialist Party's in British Columbia. Hence, an important part of the SPC coalition was stitched together when Sherman announced his latest enthusiasm in 1908; he would be standing for parliament on the socialist ticket. "Socialism, which is the cause of the people, is the only cause today which stirs the souls of men and women," he declared in a lengthy Edmonton speech.<sup>28</sup>

With his eclectic politics and independent power base, Frank Sherman represented something of a threat to the "high priests" of the SPC in British Columbia (most of whom would be defrocked by their comrades, one by one, with the passage of time and byzantine inner-party struggles.) Before his death at age 40 in late 1909 Sherman received the news of his expulsion from the SPC on grounds of trafficking with Liberalism. As a union leader, Sherman was in and

<sup>27</sup> McCormack, *Rebels, Reformers and Revolutionaries*, 35-52; Gallacher, "Dunsmuir," 121-2; Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement," 149, 176; biographical sketches of Hawthornthwaite in the *Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1920, 451, and Daisy Webster, *Growth of the NDP in B.C.: Eighty-One Political Biographies* (Vancouver 1970), 41-2.

<sup>28</sup> G. Weston Wrigley, "Recent Canadian Elections," *Western Clarion*, 4 February 1905; Frank Sherman's campaigns given press coverage in the *Lethbridge News*, 8 October 1905, and 3 April 1906; Edmonton speech reported in Sherman's own paper, the *District Ledger*, 18 July 1903.



*F.H. (Frank) Sherman. From the District Ledger, 16 October 1909.*

out of the councils of the politicians throughout his career, although he would not take tea with a coal operator. The specific charges were ironic. Sherman, then a dying man with a large family he left "almost penniless," could have opted for something more than a hopeless socialist candidacy in the federal elections of 1908. Mackenzie King personally urged him to seek a Liberal nomination for the House of Commons, while Alberta party boss Frank Oliver

had an even better idea for the "stormy petrel of the political scene in Southern Alberta:" a seat in the Senate.<sup>29</sup>

Sherman's embrace of socialism and the SPC arose, in part, from the Socialist Party's proselytizing activities among the rank-and-file membership of District 18, a grassroots movement led by socialist evangelist Charles McNamara O'Brien. O'Brien had gone west from his native Ontario as a labourer on the Crow's Nest Pass railway in 1899. Ten years later he was elected as a one-term legislator from the Alberta coal-mining constituency of Rocky Mountain. In defeat in 1913 he polled over 1,000 votes, the highest number of votes ever cast for a socialist candidate in a provincial election in western Canada. O'Brien's brilliant oratory, his extensive writings, and his organizing skills made him the Eugene Debs, the Jack London, and the Bill Haywood of Alberta socialism. His performance in the legislature earned him an unusual endorsement from the executive of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in 1913. "He would not lay claim to the charm of Laurier," one comrade wrote, "but he is a sagacious old dog at that." Under his leadership, the late-coming Albertans were forged into the least-factionalized provincial unit of the SPC. The party's fate, however, would be determined elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

Upon the rapidly evolving socialist movement in British Columbia is hinged the party's electoral fortunes, and thus, its claim to national leadership. Between 1903 and 1909, the Socialist Party increased its vote in B.C. provincial elections from 3,959 to 11,477. It is clear that a large number of SPC votes in British Columbia were cast in protest against graft and misrule at Victoria, not on party lines. The provincial elections of 1909, when nineteen SPC candidates garnered "one fifth of the provincial vote [in areas contested]", were remarkable in several respects. The virtual disappearance of the independent Labour Party showed that B.C.'s trade unionists were backing the Socialist Party. Financial interests and large employers took the threat of an enlarged socialist-labour bloc (still numbering three after the elections of 1907) very, very seriously. A weakened Liberal opposition was left twisting in the wind as all resources were channelled behind the Conservative premier, Richard McBride. Socialists crowed over the destruction of the Liberals, but capital's political science worked in practice. A large percentage of the SPC vote was wasted in the egregiously gerrymandered urban constituencies of Vancouver and Victoria. Its only potential power base lay in ten non-urban industrial

<sup>29</sup> "Expulsion of Sherman," *Winnipeg Voice*, 16 April 1909; "Tribute to the Life of Frank Sherman," *UMW Journal*, 28 October 1908; Craven, "An Impartial Umpire," 167-8; King *Diaries*, entry for 28 April 1907; patronage story broken by the *Camrose [Alberta] Mail*, cited in the *District Ledger*, 7 November 1908.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Grantham, "Some Aspects of the Socialist Movement in British Columbia, 1898-1933." (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1942), 125; *The Proletarian in Politics: The Socialist Position as Defined by C.M. O'Brien, M.L.A.* (pamphlet, n.d.), courtesy of Norman Penner; Cliff Butler in the *Western Clarion*, 22 April 1911; C.M. O'Brien, "History of Socialism and its Growth in Canada," *District Ledger*, 10 January 1912.

constituencies where the SPC garnered 20 per cent or more of the popular vote in pre-war elections. Two were socialist pocket boroughs on Vancouver Island, where the SPC claimed the allegiance of an absolute majority of the electors. In six others, defeated SPC candidates polled one-third or better of the popular vote; these candidates needed good three-cornered fights, not a "clear field" against the class enemy.<sup>31</sup>

The socialists were crushed in British Columbia in 1909, their legislative presence slashed to the bone. (Four coal-mining constituencies — Nanaimo, Newcastle, Comox, and Fernie — accounted for 17.6 per cent of the record SPC vote.) Parker Williams and J.H. Hawthornthwaite were the only socialist deputies returned to a legislature now owned by the Tories and their big-business friends.

This failure unleashed all the demons of ideological, regional, and purely factional discord within the SPC. Within two years, the party was dead as a national force. The SPC's determinist Marxism, embodied in its surprisingly lifeless platform (see Appendix 4), and derided by right-wing oppositionists as "impossibilism," became the symbolic focus of bitter schism between east and west, and within each regional camp. The rival Social Democratic Party was born in Vancouver in 1907. By 1911, the SDP (now Ontario-dominated) possessed the skeleton of a national organization itself. It was, despite the pretensions, another jar of mixed pickles, some sweeter than others. Significantly, none of the five SPC locals situated in Alberta's coalfields bolted to the SDP during the split. Among five in British Columbia, four supported the SPC loyalists (see Appendix 5). Nanaimo embraced the dissident party, whose west coast leaders were genuinely reformist social democrats who avowed their classically revisionist belief that "Socialism will come, if it comes at all, by an evolutionary — not revolutionary — process."<sup>32</sup>

The miners' contributions to the debate were minimal, and mainly confined to the ranks of two socialist ethnic associations. Ukrainian-Canadian socialists, organized in the Winnipeg-based Ukrainian Social Democratic Party, were the moving spirits behind the creation of the SDP, as were the leaders of the Toronto-based Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada. The "Viola" (Liberty) lodge of the Ukrainian socialists was established in Nanaimo in 1907; Finnish socialists had been organized much earlier on industrial Vancouver Island. Both had an influential presence in several Alberta coal-mining communities. Despite the ethnic dimensions of the split in Canadian socialism,

<sup>31</sup> "The Only Issue," *District Ledger*, 13 November 1909; "After the Battle," *Western Clarion*, 4 December 1909. The "socialist" districts in British Columbia were as follows (with highest SPC vote): Nanaimo City (62 per cent), Newcastle (52 per cent), Grand Forks (43 per cent), Fernie (42 per cent), Greenwood (35 per cent), Ymir (34 per cent), Comox (34 per cent), Slokan (30 per cent), Revelstoke (22 per cent), and Cranbrook (20 per cent).

<sup>32</sup> McCormack, *Rebels, Reformers and Revolutionaries*, 71-5; Arthur J. Wilkinson and J.L. Pratt, "Social Democratic Party: Statement of Reasons for Leaving the Socialist Party of Canada," *The Voice*, 30 April 1909.

"ethnic" socialists were themselves divided. Ukrainians and Finns were primarily responsible for the departure of the Nanaimo local of the SPC in 1911. The Canmore Alberta local — whose leadership, like the officers of the Canmore local of the United Mine Workers of America, alternated between Finnish and Ukrainian representatives — remained loyal to the SPC. Most coal miners were indifferent to the debate. Others had their own ideas. In a rare intervention from the rank and file in the coalfields, SPC militant L.E. Drake from Bellevue, Alberta proposed the theory of "revolutionary evolution" as a class-conscious, if conveniently imprecise, alternative to the warring dogmas of Canadian socialism.<sup>33</sup>

The differences between the SPC and SDP camps in British Columbia soon became supremely unimportant. The catalyst was, once more, the Tory coalition. McBride called another provincial election in early 1912. He levelled the opposition that remained in what was to that date the biggest electoral coup in Canadian history. The Liberals elected not a single deputy. The socialist vote dipped below 10,000, although it increased marginally in the four coal miners' constituencies, which accounted for a quarter of the socialist vote in 1912. Only two oppositionists were left standing on election night. Parker Williams was returned for a fourth term on the SPC slate, with 388 votes in Newcastle. Jack Place, spokesperson for the Nanaimo dissidents, was elected on the SDP ticket with 621 votes: 165 fewer than were cast for the SPC in 1909.<sup>34</sup>

In September 1912, the United Mine Workers organized a "holiday" to protest working conditions at Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd.; the miners, white and Chinese, all responded, despite the fact that only a small number of them were UMW members. CC(D) managers proclaimed a lockout on the day the miners returned to the pits, demanding a yellow dog contract from every miner. The two socialist deputies offered their good offices as honest brokers, but the McBride administration ignored all their entreaties. On May Day 1913, the situation escalated into a general work stoppage in the Vancouver Island coalfield. But by that time Canadian Collieries had re-opened its recently mechanized coal mines with the help of an army of imported strikebreakers of all nationalities, and had persuaded a majority of the Orientals to return to the pits. Violence flared, and when the state did intervene later that summer, it did

<sup>33</sup> "Revolutionary Evolution," *District Ledger*, 28 February 1919. On Ukrainian and Finnish socialist organizations on Vancouver Island see Michael H. Mamuchak, *The Ukrainian Canadians: A History* (Yorkton, Saskatchewan 1970), 178-9, and Joel Poikonen, "The Finnish Community," *Chronicle of Ladysmith*, 309-13. Dissident Finnish socialists in B.C. issued a pamphlet condemning the "unscrupulous lies and distortions" of the social democratic faction in 1913, cited in Arja Pilli, *The Finnish-Language Press in Canada, 1901-1939* (Migration Studies C 6, Turku 1982), 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Canadian Parliamentary Guide*, 1914, 499-501. There were 36 constituencies and 42 seats in the B.C. legislature. Liberals and Socialists fielded candidates in thirteen districts each — the outcome was literally predetermined and the socialist press was uncharacteristically silent on the campaign.



*Dressed in Sunday finery, men, women, and children march through the streets of Ladysmith, British Columbia in support of the striking United Mine Workers in 1913. Of a similar demonstration a provincial police spy was to report: "we . . . beheld a procession of about fifteen wagons and buggies filled with children . . . all waving red flags and singing some sort of revolutionary song . . . It was not an inspiring sight to a healthy-minded person but the Socialists took keen pride in the display." From the Public Archives of Ontario, Finnish Canadian Historical Society Collection.*

so with an iron heel. Attorney-General William Bowser met the press on 15 August with these boastful words:

When day broke this morning there were nearly 1,000 men in the strike zone wearing the Uniform of His Majesty and prepared to quell the disturbances. This is my answer to the proposition of the strikers that they will preserve the peace if they are left unmolested by the special Police . . . and now that we are in the field we intend to stay to the bitter end.<sup>35</sup>

With this announcement commenced a campaign of political repression directed against the working class in general, and socialists in particular, on industrial Vancouver Island. The collective-bargaining demands of the UMW were almost forgotten, in part because of the red herring of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) that was drawn across the coalfields. Robert Gosden, local organizer of the IWW, was almost certainly on someone else's payroll in 1913. He gave lessons to "certain persons" in and around strike-bound Ladysmith in the use of infernal machines; these were presumably the

<sup>35</sup> CAR, 1913, 688-9; B.C. *Federationist*, 15 August 1913 and other numbers; Major T.U. Scudamore, "Aid to the Civil Power," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, IX, 2, 1933, 253-60.

same persons who dynamited the Ladysmith (Extension) colliery in August 1913, never positively identified in spite of the police and military dragnet. The military itself made no effort to take a neutral, peace-keeping stance. Communications into the strike zone were cut off, and public meetings were banned and broken up at the point of a bayonet. Over 200 individuals were interned without being charged. Some were political figures with no direct connection to the strike, including Jack Place, MLA. The imposition of martial law stripped the civil power of its authority, and in one of the strike-bound communities, Cumberland, the reasons were obvious. Cumberland's mayor, a merchant named Alex Campbell, was a socialist sympathizer who argued that the troops had been sent because the miners carried "the red flag" — the government and the companies, he suggested, could stand "anything but that." Only the socialist press deemed his appeals worthy of publication.<sup>36</sup>

Provincial government spies had a holiday of their own during the strike, lounging around the beer halls of Cumberland, Nanaimo, and Ladysmith, soliciting rank-and-file views on the industrial crisis. The reports indicate that rank-and-file miners universally condemned sabotage and violence, but that even "apparently sane men" of good, Anglo-Saxon stock, held radical views. Their conversations "generally wound up by berating such proven labour leaders as [Samuel] Gompers, [John] Mitchell and others. . . . It would require years of training and a complete regeneration of most of them," theorized one labour spy. "The fact that these strikers are saturated with that [socialist] doctrine to the point that it resembles a religi[on] accounts for why they have not returned long ago to the mines." Socialist doctrine was explained in a report on then-Socialist Party organizer Chris Pattinson. A British immigrant miner with a degree from Ruskin Labour College, Pattinson "Dismissed [the strike] as a 'mere incident' in the battle of the masses against the masters, etc." With many of his comrades still in jail (one, Joseph Mairs, died in custody), the defeat of the union and a very strong blacklist in the offing, this worker could speak of nothing else but prospects for the "socialist city ticket" in Nanaimo!<sup>37</sup>

Socialism lost the Nanaimo elections, and its two city councillors. The socialist presence in the legislature also disappeared — by osmosis. The SPC and SDP deputies bolted to the Liberals, who, notwithstanding the polarization between the socialist David and the Tory Goliath that had been manufactured in 1909-12, represented the only electoral alternative. In the next provincial elections capital split its ticket, labour backed the opposition horse, and the Con-

<sup>36</sup> "Robert Gosden was Storm Centre," *Nanaimo Free Press*, 15 March 1919; Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 175-98; Johnson, "No Compromise," 314-5; "From the Mayor of Cumberland," *Western Clarion*, 27 September 1913; *ibid.*, "Miners' Strike in Brief," 1 March 1913.

<sup>37</sup> Public Archives of British Columbia, GR 68, Provincial Police Records, vol. 2, "Correspondence re Nanaimo Strike," Operative 295 reports, 28 January 1914; 13-14 January 1914; 18 December 1914, *passim*.

servatives were swept off the treasury benches in Victoria. Thus ended the remarkable odyssey of the Socialist Party of Canada in the mainstream of Canadian politics.<sup>38</sup>

The SPC continued to swim outside the mainstream. The United Mine Workers in District 18 voted, by referendum ballot, to endorse the Socialist Party as its political arm in 1914. This gesture was above all a rebuke to the opportunistic Clem Stubbs, Frank Sherman's socialist successor to the district presidency. Stubbs had cast off his "red tie" and stumped across Alberta in support of the re-election of the Sifton Liberals in the provincial elections of 1913. His divisive manoeuvre had as its main effect to return a Tory slate in the coal-mining constituencies. Charlie O'Brien was defeated in Rocky Mountain, John O. Jones, Liberal-Labour candidate, in Lethbridge. Like Frank Sherman, they all have disappeared without so much as a footnote in Alberta history.<sup>39</sup>

"Twenty-three men own the wealth of Canada," O'Brien was to tell an audience in Ottawa in November 1914: "the master class, in order to avert impending disaster . . . had to do something to divert the attention of the workers. They chose war." O'Brien soon chose exile to the United States; World War I was Canadian socialism's greatest political test, with passing grades awarded for simple survival. A corporal's guard of five SPC militants (and one lonely SDP-er) stood for election in British Columbia and Alberta in the provincial contests of 1916-7, polling 2,000 votes (77 for the SDP) for their effort. Two of the SPC candidates, W.A. Pritchard (Comox) and John Reid (Edson, Alberta) suffered painful prison sentences for political offences during or immediately after the war. A third SPC candidate, coal miner Albert (Ginger) Goodwin, paid with his life in the fight against conscription. Goodwin was born in England, raised in Cape Breton, cut his teeth in the union at Cumberland, and ran for election in Trail. Among the few possessions found after his murder by the Dominion Police on Vancouver Island in July 1918 was a prized soccer medal from the Crow's Nest Pass football league, circa 1914.<sup>40</sup>

The left's big turn towards "direct action" after 1917, which would culminate in the One Big Union movement of 1919, is a staple theme in the historiography of wartime radicalism. In this context, however, there was also

<sup>38</sup> Dorothy Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver 1960), 25-33.

<sup>39</sup> "Political Prostitutes Flaunting Their Degeneration Before the Alberta Electorate" *Western Clarion*, 26 April 1913; "Working Men Fell Down Hard," *Lethbridge Herald*, 18 April 1913; "Exit Stubbs," *Western Clarion*, 5 July 1913; *District Ledger*, 7 March 1914.

<sup>40</sup> O'Brien quoted in the *Western Clarion*, 21 November 1914; for Canadian socialists and the war see Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981), chap. 1; "The Election," *Clarion* monthly, October 1916; for the John Reid case see the *Clarion*, September 1915, and the *Lethbridge Herald*, 28 January 1916; for Goodwin, see Patricia Wejr and Howie Smith, *Fighting for Labour: Four Decades of Work in British Columbia* (Victoria 1978), 23-7, Ginger Goodwin papers, collected by Ruth Masters, Cumberland Museum.



a significant remobilization of political activism in the coalfields. In 1918, the district leadership of the UMW in the interior revived the *District Ledger*, a weekly newspaper founded by F.H. Sherman in 1907 that had suspended publication — together with its “Karl Marx Column” and red-tinged “News for our Foreign Brothers” features — in 1915. The new editor, P.F. Lawson, was a former Socialist Party organizer in Nova Scotia; despite a measure of self-imposed censorship on international questions, the new *Ledger* faithfully reflected the socialist politics of its predecessor. The revival of political activity in Alberta’s Crow’s Nest Pass, spearheaded by Coleman Local 93 of the SPC, represented the broader thrust that had been forecast during the darkest days of the war by the ever-sanguine Phillips Thompson, the dean of Canadian socialism. Thompson reminded his SPC comrades in 1915 that “it’s a long road that has no turn.” “Things are moving rapidly,” wrote Coleman’s secretary Thomas Beattie to the Vancouver office; the local recruited 33 new members at its inaugural meetings. Its civic campaign in February 1919 drew 216 votes, placing miner William Fraser on the town council; “We are boosting the OBU and everybody seems to be very enthusiastic about it.”<sup>41</sup>

Nowhere was the political side of labour’s “revolt” in the coalfields more in evidence than on industrially quiescent Vancouver Island, and as early as the winter of 1917-8; the most dangerous political moment in the history of World War I. Surveying the gruesome tragedy” of the destruction of parliamentary socialism in British Columbia, SPC theoretician E.T. Kingsley and the leaders of the B.C. Federation of Labour — a body which had endorsed the principle of “socialism as an issue” by referendum ballot in 1912 — called for new tactics and the creation of a broad-based socialist and labour unity movement: the short-lived Federated Labour Party of British Columbia. The FLP did not survive the maelstrom of 1919 on the west coast, but the platform of the party, chiefly authored by Kingsley, an early prophet of “impossibilism,” is well worth noting. Its long list of immediate demands, including the nationalization of the mines, probably represented what most workers meant by socialism during the age of the SPC-SDP debate. Appropriately, it fell to the coal miners of Newcastle to endorse the programme at a by-election held on 24 January 1918. Another ghost from the past, J.H. Hawthornthwaite, who had been exiled from the movement since 1911, was elected with a solid majority. The *Canadian Annual Review* paid close attention to this stirring of working-class protest in wartime Canada, not least because of Hawthornthwaite’s vocal dissent on foreign policy: “At a mining meeting on the Island he went so far as to

<sup>41</sup> Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1920* (Kingston 1968), 138-99; for Lawson, see David Frank and Nolan Reilly, “The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 111; Thompson quoted in the *Clarion* monthly, September 1915; documents of SPC Local 93 in the Public Archives of Manitoba, R.B. Russell Papers, Winnipeg Strike trial records, Box 3, Exhibit 1, Tom Beattie-Chris Stephenson correspondence, December 1918-March 1919.

argue that the Allies were crushing Russian liberties and that: 'We are forced to the conclusion that the Allies are liberating the Germans on the western front, and allowing them to devastate the Russian workers' republic.'<sup>42</sup>

The moment of radical upsurge in 1919 contained the seeds of the destruction, however, of socialist hopes for political consolidation. What remained of organized socialism in Canada would be dashed upon the rock of the Third International, the rising star of the East symbolized in the coalfields by the hammer and sickle that was carved upon the tombstone of socialist martyr Ginger Goodwin at Cumberland: "grotesque statuary" in the eyes of W.A. Pritchard of the SPC. The last of the SPC campaigns in the coalfields, during B.C.'s provincial elections in 1924, drew 1,083 votes in Nanaimo. This constituency re-emerged in the 1930s under the banner of the CCF, for generations after a powerful presence on Vancouver Island. It was the strength of the Communist Party — under its many political and trade-union labels — that prevented a region such as the Crow's Nest Pass from ever becoming a similar stronghold.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV

THE SOCIALIST MOVEMENT — as it was, not as it might have been — must in the last analysis be judged on its own chosen terrain. Just how successful were the socialists in persuading workers to "strike at the ballot box" for their own emancipation before the 1920s? The most reliable data are drawn from polling returns in national elections for 1904, 1908, 1911, 1917, or 1921.<sup>44</sup> Among other things, the very presence of a socialist candidate on the ballot in a national election provides a clue as to the organizational health and vigour of the movement at a given time or place. Most resources were channelled into provincial campaigns, where the electoral geography was relatively most favourable to socialist success and where, at least before the war, a proliferation of issues — like the provincial mines acts or workers' compensation issues — aided socialist candidates in coal-mining areas. This notwithstanding, a total of ten socialist candidates appeared on the ballot in federal constituencies that had a coal-mining population between 1904 and 1921, an impressive record of political combativeness that was rewarded, in turn, with a harvest of

<sup>42</sup> Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel*, 36-43; *CAR* 1918, 311-2, 341, 730-1; Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (1984), 11-44.

<sup>43</sup> W.A. Pritchard, untitled mss., Ginger Goodwin papers; *Canadian Parliamentary Guide* 1925, 503; William Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1937), 127-57, *passim*; Tim Buck, *Lenin and Canada* (Toronto 1970), 11-2; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 92, *passim*; "Workers Celebrate May Day in Pass Towns," *Coleman Journal*, 8 May 1930; David Lewis, *The Good Fight: Political Memoirs 1909-1958* (Toronto 1981), 296.

<sup>44</sup> Polling data from provincial elections in Alberta and British Columbia, 1900-1921, were never published and are available only in scattered sources.

votes and propaganda, if not seats in the House of Commons. At the zenith of the pre-war coalition around the SPC, in 1908, the party ran a four-person slate in the coalfields: two in each province. On Vancouver Island, miners were forced in 1904 and in 1908 to choose between a candidate "of their own class" — Ralph Smith, MP — and socialism. They chose socialism. The debilitating factionalism of 1909-12 would be equally evident on Vancouver Island in the 1911 elections. The SPC ran no candidates federally, and a group of Nanaimo socialists struck a deal for concessions that can only be imagined with the federal Conservative Association.<sup>45</sup>

One socialist was nominated in Alberta coalfields, however, in 1911, and another in 1917, at the absolute nadir of the movement's organizational strength. Two socialists appeared on the ballot in the coalfields in 1921: one in each province. All ten candidates were official SPC nominees with one exception, James Fairhurst in Alberta in 1921. Fairhurst was probably a member of the SPC; his brother Moses was a leader in Coleman Local 93 in 1919. He stood for parliament, however, under the flag — indubitably "red" — of the Rocky Mountain Labor Party, the political arm of the One Big Union in the Crow's Nest Pass. This "party" voted itself en bloc into the Workers' (Communist) Party of Canada in 1922. Its provincial spokesperson, Phil Christophers, elected to the Alberta legislature in July 1921, personally declared in favour of "the Red International" at the 1923 convention of the Alberta Federation of Labour.<sup>46</sup>

Easily the most promising of the five federal constituencies where socialists appeared on the ballot in a national election in the coalfields before the 1920s was Nanaimo. Created in 1904, the riding did encompass the socialist strongholds of Newcastle and Nanaimo City, but did not include the SPC's north-island bastions in the provincial electoral district of Comox: Cumberland/Union Bay. This accident prevented the Socialist Party of Canada from electing its challenger to the Liberal-backed incumbent miner-MP in Nanaimo in 1908. J.H. Hawthornthwaite had resigned his Nanaimo City seat to engage Ralph Smith in a battle of the political titans on industrial Vancouver Island. Given an almost even three-way split of the votes, Hawthornthwaite missed his historic opportunity by less than 200. Demographic change was already eroding the miners' own influence in Nanaimo, and the same was true in Kootenay, with its large Western Federation of Miners' vote. Chris Foley's successor at the head of the WFM in British Columbia, James Baker, contested Kootenay in 1904 on the Socialist Party ticket; the independent labour party in the interior

<sup>45</sup> A memorandum on the subject of political trading dated 15 August 1911, read in part: "It was resolved [by Nanaimo City socialists] that if Frank Shepherd were the [Conservative] candidate, the Socialists would not put up a man in this fight. There are, of course, other organizations of Socialists in other parts of the riding." PABC, GR 441, Premiers' Papers, vol. 145, f. 2, B.C. Conservative Association to Richard McBride.

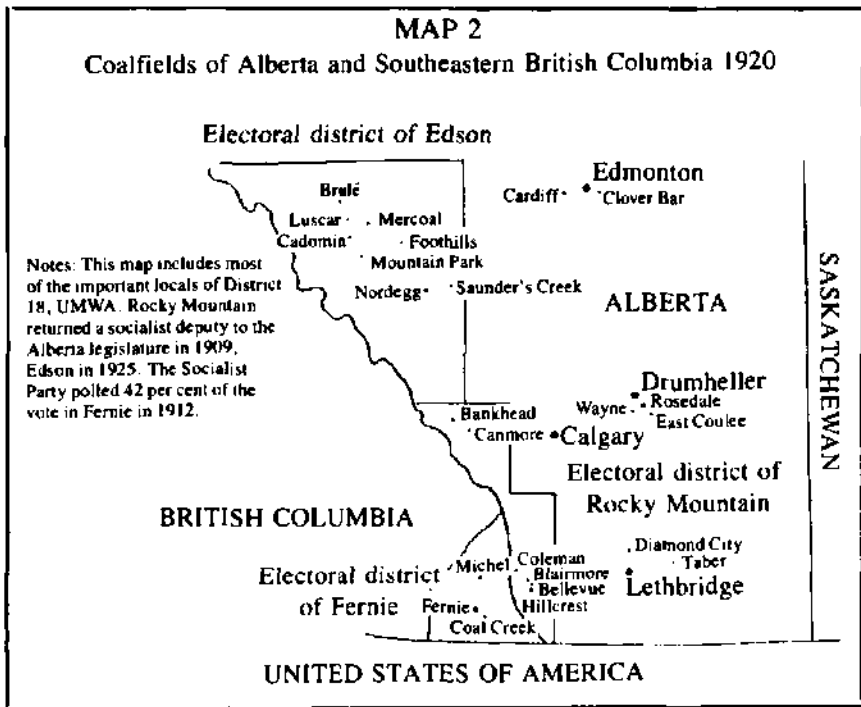
<sup>46</sup> See *The Worker*, 1 February 1923.

had been swallowed up by the socialists. The coal-mining polls at the eastern edge of Kootenay were not notably encouraging for the socialists in 1904, yet four years later the SPC was polling two-thirds of the votes in the mining towns of Coal Creek and Michel, near Fernie. The hard rock miners and their union were in decline; ironically, there had been no chance of a socialist upset in the district in 1908. The year 1912 actually represented the peak strength of the SPC's electoral muscle in the East Kootenays — and of the miners' numerical strength — which was never translated into votes in a national election.<sup>47</sup>

Alberta's coal-mining population was even more dispersed, thus vitiating the impact of its demographic growth after 1910 in the federal political arena. Only Herculean efforts could ever bind the Alberta miners into any effective political unit. In the provincial sphere, the SPC made a respectable showing in ridings such as Lethbridge, Taber, and Edson (11-13 per cent of the votes in 1913 or 1917), which had a coal-mining population, but were not included in any of the three federal constituencies contested by the party in the Alberta coalfields. Returns from one of these, Bow River, have not been included in Appendix 3 below. Bow River included the nascent, and notoriously militant, Drumheller Valley coal-mining community during World War I. Here, the lone SPC candidate in the coalfields during the "khaki election" of 1917, John Reid, chose to make a stand. The industrial polls in Bow River showed no socialist support, but strong majorities for the Laurier-Liberal candidate, a mine owner named Jesse Gouge who opposed the economic suicide of mass conscription! The Bow River returns would be skewed in any case, because the great majority of the Drumheller region miners were either unenfranchised or disenfranchised in 1917. According to a detailed police report, 80 per cent were non-English-speaking immigrants, and a majority of them were officially classed as enemy aliens. The Albertan communities listed in Appendix 3 were bituminous mining towns in the Rocky Mountains that had been settled before 1914. Six of the eight towns (excepting Bankhead and Canmore) were located in the Crow's Nest Pass, in the federal constituency of MacLeod. The others were situated in the federal constituency of Calgary/Calgary West, contested but once by the socialists, in 1908. Of 900 socialist voters in Calgary in 1908, 112 were mine-town residents who were voting for union leader F.H. Sherman. The much more significant miners' vote in MacLeod showed up in the tallies of three different socialist candidates in 1908, 1911, and 1921 — and in a disciplined working-class protest against conscription in 1917.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> The socialist voting bloc in the provincial electoral district of Fernie emerged as follows: in 1903 — 221 votes; in 1907 — 285; in 1909 — 649; in 1912 — 763.

<sup>48</sup> Candidates on the Union Government slate won less than 50 per cent of the votes cast in the following Alberta coal-mining communities: Drumheller City and Newcastle (in Bow River), Bellevue, Blairmore, Coleman, Frank and Hillcrest (in MacLeod). There was also a sizeable coal miners' vote in the federal district of Edmonton West, where the return of a Laurierite candidate was averted only by the military service vote. Persons of enemy-alien national origin were excluded from voting and there were many



The sixteen colliery towns listed in Appendix 3 provide only samplings of electoral behaviour, but a fairly comprehensive canvass of the two most important coal-mining regions of the West: industrial Vancouver Island and the Crow's Nest Pass. Their combined population in 1914 can be estimated at not less than 22,000, roughly equally divided between the two. Before the war, this comprised the bulk of the settled coal-mining population of the two westernmost provinces.

Socialist candidates polled anywhere between 10 and 92 per cent of the votes cast in any given election, but most importantly, the socialist electorate showed steady increases from one election to the next, between 1904 and 1908, between 1908 and 1911, and between 1911 and 1921. The only major exception was the city of Nanaimo, which cast a majority for the remarkably popular J.H. Hawthornthwaite in 1908, but had a "core" socialist vote of a little less than 40 per cent. Nanaimo was nonetheless a cornerstone of the socialists' electoral project throughout the period under review. For example, there were 2,074 potential voters in Nanaimo in 1908, as opposed to 148 in Canmore,

"irregularities" in Alberta in 1917; the anti-conscription vote, supported by virtually all socialists, was cast against all odds. On the nationality of the Drumheller miners, numbering 1,463, see the PAC, Robert Borden Papers, vol. 213, 12044-24, "Confidential Information re Drumheller Strike," n.d., 1918.

Alberta in 1911. It needs to be emphasized that Nanaimo's socialist voters were not "radical foreigners." Nor were they victimized, collectively, by the "crimes" of the Dunsmuir (for whom the Nanaimo miners did not toil): the "special circumstances" of industrial Vancouver Island.<sup>49</sup>

The smallest polls offer the closest scrutiny of actual mining sentiment. Tiny South Wellington, on Vancouver Island, helped elect Ralph Smith in 1900 and remained loyal to him in 1904, dismissing the claims of Socialist Party candidate Edward Fenton to represent the miners. In 1908, Hawthornthwaite polled 17 votes in South Wellington, Ralph Smith 2, and the Tories none. The numbers seem inconsequential, but the changing allegiance of the miners is worth noting, and by 1921, there were nearly 300 electors in close-knit South Wellington: 222 cast for W.A. Pritchard on the SPC ticket, 42 for the Liberals, and half that number for the Conservatives.<sup>50</sup>

The smallest of the Alberta polls (with 105 people on the voter's list in 1911) was the mining camp at Lille in the Crow's Nest Pass. The SPC garnered almost no votes in Lille in 1908. Lille was a Liberal camp and most importantly, a non-English-speaking Liberal camp. Local Tories complained bitterly against the mobilization of "illiterate Dagos and Slavs" by Liberal organizers; socialist organizers charged, specifically, that 45 kegs of beer was the "price paid" for the Liberal majority in 1908! In fact, a more portentous battle was joined in Lille and other communities in the early years of the century, between a Liberal-Catholic bloc on the one hand, and a socialist-union bloc on the other. Catholic leaders opposed the ideological drift of the miners' union under Sherman's leadership. O'Brien was called to Bellevue's Slovak hall to debate the question of socialism and Christianity. His argument that capital, not Marx, had "invented atheism" seems to have swayed working-class Catholic immigrants. At Lille, for example, the voters erased the earlier "blot on the slaves' manhood" during the "reciprocity election" of 1911. An obscure SPC candidate named Ed Fulcher, a carpetbagging Manitoban, received 67 votes to Sir Wilfrid Laurier's 19. The incoming prime minister, Robert Borden, had the confidence of less than a dozen voters in Lille, probably coal-company managers. The hierarchy of party loyalty among the miners is fairly clear from these and other returns. Class, not ethnicity, and the perceived relationship of the three political parties to the class struggle — as Liberals did their best to portray the Tories as gun thugs and strikebreakers — became the main determinants of voting habits.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Schwantes, *Radical Heritage*, 182.

<sup>50</sup> On South Wellington militancy, see Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, 55, 136.

<sup>51</sup> For Tory charges see the *Coleman Miner*, editorial 16 March 1909, which has been misquoted elsewhere as an attack on the socialists; for beer, John Harrington, "Breczy Message from the Crow's Nest Pass," *Western Clarion*, 21 November 1908; for the church and socialists see the *King Diaries*, entry for 25 April 1907; "Sherman Gets after Churches," 8 February 1909; O'Brien quoted in the *District Ledger*, 23 November 1913.

A stubborn mythology persists in the belief that the militant politics of the western miners arose out of a particular kind of working-class environment: the closed and polarized environments of work camps and company towns. While the frontier background of many mining communities may have contributed to political alienation or trade-union militancy, the relationship between these special circumstances and socialist organization is far less clear. In fact, the largest number of socialist voters in the coalfields demonstrably did not live in such environments. Socialist voters comprised between one- and two-thirds of the electorate in the five largest towns in Appendix 3: Nanaimo, Ladysmith, and Fernie in B.C., and Coleman and Blairmore in Alberta. With a combined population of about 16,000, these towns together with the city of Cumberland on Vancouver Island, were the keys to the socialist presence. All of these communities had populations of greater than 1,000 by 1911. All were incorporated municipalities which resembled, by 1914, the "labour towns" of industrial Cape Breton more than they did the archetypal western mining camp. The five largest towns in the sample had distinctive socio-economic characteristics which determined, in large measure, their relatively more divided political loyalties. Nanaimo and Ladysmith were sea-going towns with fairly diversified local service and resource economies; about one-eighth of the population of Nanaimo was coal miners. The independent voters who supported Hawthornthwaite but not the SPC in Nanaimo could well have been shopkeepers, independent artisans, or members of several craft unions in the community. Fernie and Blairmore were the commercial centres of their region; Fernie had a large lumber trade. Coleman best fits the accepted model of what a mining town was like. Two large collieries dominated its entire existence. However, it cannot be shown that Coleman had "no teachers, clerks, merchants, priests, artisans, doctors" or other moderate and so-called moderating social influences. A directory compiled by an ex-socialist journalist, listing only "leading citizens," showed that there were 170 individuals, or one-tenth of the population of Coleman, who fit into these social categories. Coleman's mayor, upwardly mobile coal miner and unsuccessful Liberal candidate Alex Morrison, straddled both worlds.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> David Frank, "Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926," *Social History/Histoire sociale*, 27 (May 1981), 177-96; David J. Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier, 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (1977), 168, *passim*; *Wrigley's Alberta Directory*, vol. 2 (1922), 251-3; for Morrison's biography see his obituary, *Blairmore Enterprise*, 26 January 1944. Fernie elected a labour mayor, Tom Uphill, in 1915 while UMW representatives Jean Legace and P.M. Christophers were placed on the Blairmore council in 1917-9 — all elected by small property owners. Community histories of the coal towns include E. Blanche Norcross, ed., *Nanaimo Retrospective* (Nanaimo 1979); William Jappel *et al.*, eds., *The Story of Blairmore Alberta 1911-1961* (Leithbridge 1961); for the Fernie district, F.J. Smith, *Tales of the Kootenays* (Cranbrooke 1942), and David Scott and Edna H. Hanic, *East Kootenay Saga* (n.p. 1974).

Mayor Morrison is said to have had a standing arrangement whereby he or the Liberals would sponsor the citizenship of union members for the fee of \$50. The problem of parliamentary strategy in a context where a very large proportion of the working class was excluded from the body politic was not often addressed by the socialists, although the changing of the "goal posts" of citizenship and voting rights by the union government in 1917 undoubtedly had its effect of strengthening the hands of advocates of "direct action." Workers who were transients, who were recent immigrants, or sojourners from outside the British Isles, and in British Columbia, members of ethnic minorities who were constitutionally disenfranchised by the anti-Oriental laws, did not vote. Demographic information and local voters' lists are too incomplete to allow for more than speculation as to the percentages. Presumably, they had diminished towards the end of the period under review. Female suffrage further enlarged the numbers of working-class voters, solved the "woman question," at least from the perspective of the socialist leaders, and complicated the calculations. Given the importance of family and kinship in mature industrial communities, however, it is not surprising that female suffrage had a completely predictable impact in the coalfields. The doubling of the socialist vote in Newcastle, B.C. between 1912 and 1918, without changing the balance of forces, provides an example.<sup>53</sup>

At the time of the December 1921 national elections, an era in the history of labour militancy and radicalism in western Canada was at an end. Labour in the coalfields was in full retreat. "Will Ottawa Surrender[?] . . . to the Bolsheviki element which has secured control of the miner's organization in the Crowsnest Pass," an editorial in the *Toronto Globe* had asked in 1918. The state's "answer" was as unequivocal in District 18 in 1919 as it had been on Vancouver Island in 1913. The socialist-led One Big Union would be broken by a triple alliance of the international officers of the UMWA, the Western Canada Coal Operators' Association, and the federal government. P.F. Lawson's *Searchlight*, successor to the *Ledger*, was gagged by court orders and issued its final number in October 1920. The blacklist that was only a recent memory on Vancouver Island came into full force in District 18. Radicals met the "new slavery" with the only means at their disposal — the ballot — and the results showed as much continuity as the impact of dramatically altered circumstances. Socialists polled majorities in seven of the ten coal-mining towns canvassed in 1921. Indeed, had a system of industrial representation been in place, the coal miners would have returned two socialist deputies to join the new

<sup>53</sup> Beattie-Stephenson correspondence, 27 February 1919. The SPC vote in Newcastle in 1912 was 388 or 51 per cent; the FLP, which had a presumably broader appeal, took 917 votes or 66 per cent in the 1918 by-election. The first woman elected under female suffrage in British Columbia, in Vancouver in 1918, was none other than Ellen Spear, or Mrs. Ralph Smith, widowed in 1917. For socialists and working women see Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question, 1900-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 77-100.



“labour group” in parliament. Bill Pritchard, son of a Ladysmith collier, would have enlightened parliament on the subject of socialism, from the British Columbian point of view, while Alberta miner Jim Fairhurst would have seconded any motions he had to make.<sup>54</sup>

## V

ALIENATED FROM, THOUGH COURTED by, mainstream parties, the coal miners of British Columbia and Alberta made their presence felt in the political arena between 1900 and 1921 primarily through the vehicle of the socialist movement and the Socialist Party of Canada. The SPC leadership may have resembled at times “a wrangle of fishwives,” to paraphrase the words of one of its ideological mentors, Daniel DeLeon. It failed in the attempt to forge a powerful coalition, linking militant miners with the rest of the working class. In the coalfields, nonetheless, the party had substantial electoral support, buttressed by a network of socialist organizations, including socialist-led unions and ethnic associations. The socialist legacy included significant advances in protective labour legislation, achieved by the SPC deputies in British Columbia and, indirectly, by labour and socialist pressure brought to bear on legislators in Liberal Alberta.<sup>55</sup> The movement’s “revolutionary” character lay in its philosophy of radical Marxism and its educational activities. Intimately linked to the miners’ union organizations, this form of socialism was not welcomed by established authority. One “rebel miner” from the Crow’s Nest Pass wondered why his community had been invaded by that “expensive body of men,” the mounted police, in the autumn of 1919: “The only answer we can see is that we were reading too much radical literature.”<sup>56</sup>

Recent studies of contemporary American coal-mining communities have emphasized socialism’s appeal to “new immigrants, desperately trying to adjust preindustrial ways to an industrial society.” In western Canada, socialism embraced new immigrants, and sank roots among a large body of British and English-speaking workers without whom its electoral success would have been severely limited. Radical intellectuals wrote of the coal miners’ movement as “a forecast of the parliament of Man.”<sup>57</sup> Too little is as

<sup>54</sup> *Globe*, editorial, 3 October 1918; David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 196-214.

<sup>55</sup> Arnold Peterson, *Daniel DeLeon: Social Architect* (New York 1941), 30. The passage of such reform legislation as the eight-hour bills for underground coal miners in B.C. in 1903 and in Alberta in 1908, or the employers’ liability/worker’s compensation acts in each province between 1900 and 1918, was perhaps an ironic legacy of “impossibilism” — but not one forgotten by working-class voters, or socialist campaigners. See “You Vote for Them — They Vote against You,” *Western Clarion*, 13 November 1909.

<sup>56</sup> *The Searchlight* (Calgary), 21 November 1919.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Nash, *Conflict and Accommodation: Coal Miners, Steel Workers and*

## What We Would Have Under Conservative Rule



George Taylor, One of the Conservative Leaders, Driving the Miners to Work at the Point of the Bayonet. Our Genial Friend, John Herron, is on Mr. Taylor's Right Hand Side.

*Liberal campaigners in Alberta in 1911 based their working-class appeal not on Free Trade but on fears of industrial slavery under the iron hell of Conservative rule. Labour voters in the Crow's Nest Pass endorsed the socialists. From the Blairmore Enterprise, November 1911.*

yet known about the emerging working-class culture in the coalfields of which the Socialist Party was only the first coherent political expression.<sup>58</sup> What is clear is that coal miners in western Canada, organized and unorganized, plainly resisted what some have viewed as the structured hegemony of an emerging capitalist culture.<sup>59</sup> Socialists proposed alternatives to what the miners' leaders saw as the "unpatriotic, anti-social, and immoral" practice of industrial capitalism.<sup>60</sup> Workers did not willingly acquiesce in a system in which they were the losers.

*Socialism, 1890-1920* (Westport, CT 1982), 118, 130; P.F. Lawson in the *District Ledger*, 7 March 1919.

<sup>58</sup> See Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto 1984), 297-300.

<sup>59</sup> Michael B. Katz, Michael J. Doucet, and Mark J. Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge MA 1982), 2-3, *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> "Citizenship," editorial, *District Ledger*, 28 November 1908.

## Appendix 1

TABLE 1  
Birthplace of Coal Mine Workers (Salaried Employees Excluded) in Western  
Canada, 1921

	In B.C.	In Alberta	B.C. and Alberta
Total No.	6,484	8,038	14,522
born in:			
Great Britain and possessions (excl. Canada)	48%	37 %	37.5%
Continental Europe	21%	49 %	37 %
Asia	16%	2 %	8 %
U.S.A.	3%	6.5%	5 %
Canada	12%	12.5%	12.5%

Source: 1921 *Census*, vol. IV, 796-7, 816-7.

TABLE 2  
Ethnic/National Origins of the Population, Selected Colliery District, 1911  
Census

	Nanaimo (city)	Ladysmith* (c.d.)	Fernie* (c.d.)	Alberta** (seven towns)
Total No.	8,168	3,295	8,645	5,051
%				
"British Races"	80.5%	66 %	51.5%	46 %
East European	2 %	15.5%	22 %	22.5%
West European	3 %	7.5%	11.5%	16.5%
Italian	2 %	3 %	10 %	13.5%
Asiatic	8 %	6.5%	2 %	1 %
others/n.s.	4.5%	1.5%	3 %	.5%

\* census district, not municipality.

\*\* seven towns comprising the Alberta section of the Crow's Nest Pass: (Coleman, Blairmore, Frank, Lille, Bellevue, Hillcrest, and Passburg) in 1911.

Source: 1911 *Census*, vol. II, Table VII.

## Appendix 2

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 Results of Referenda on Affiliation to the One Big Union, Coal Miners' Locals, British Columbia and Alberta, 1919
 

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	For	Against	Membership
<i>Vancouver Island</i>			
Cumberland	163	5	263
Extension	20	3	32
So. Wellington	113	1	120
Nanaimo	162	8	170
Nanaimo: non-union miners	44	2	
Sub-total	502	19	585
<i>Crow's Nest Pass</i>			
Fernie	533	23	641
Michel	322	10	410
Corbin	47	0	47
Coleman (2)	525	7	652
Blairmore	254	3	320
Bellevue	276	14	426
Hillcrest	313	11	390
Firebosses' Assn.	70	3	142
Sub-total	2,350	73	3,028
<i>27 other locals in District 18</i>			
Sub-total	2,667	164	3,690
<i>Grand Total</i>	5,519	256	7,303

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Source: University of British Columbia, Special Collections, OBU Collection, official results of referendum ballot, typescript, 8 pp., courtesy of Douglas Booker.

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## Appendix 3

Socialist Vote, Western Canadian Coal Towns,  
Federal Elections, 1904-21

	in 1904	1908	1911	1921
<i>Town (pop. in 1911)</i>				
<i>in B.C.</i>				
Nanaimo (8,168)	37 %	54 %	—	38%
Ladysmith (2,000?)	42 %	43 %	—	53%
So. Wellington ?	22 %	92 %	—	77%
Extension ?	—	41 %	—	45%
Northfield ?	—	75 %	—	63%
Fernie (3,146)	11 %	39.5%	—	—
Coal Creek (800?)	—	68 %	—	—
Michel (800?)	46.5%	67 %	—	—
<i>in Alberta</i>				
Coleman (1,557)	—	46.5%	57.5%	64%
Blairmore (1,136)	—	10 %	29 %	36%
Frank (806)	—	25.5%	44 %	54%
Hillcrest (481)	—	67.5%	70.5%	69%
Bellevue (363)	—	46.5%	49.5%	61%
Lille (303)	—	11.5%	67 %	—
Canmore (754)	—	28.5%	—	—
Bankhead (694)	—	46 %	—	—

Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1905-22, Chief Returning Officers' Reports, electoral districts of Nanaimo, Kootenay, Calgary and MacLeod.

## Appendix 4

### Programme of the Socialist Party of Canada

1. The transformation, as rapidly as possible, of capitalist property in the means of wealth production (natural resources, factories, mills, railways, etc.) into the collective property of the working class.
2. Thorough and democratic organization and management of industry by the workers.
3. The establishment, as speedily as possible, of production for use in lieu of production for profit.

[Planks 4 and 5, later rewritten as a preamble.] The Socialist Party, when in office, shall always and everywhere, until the present system is utterly abolished, make the answer to this question its guiding rule of conduct. Will this legislation advance the interests of the working class, and aid the workers in their class struggle against capitalism? . . . The Socialist Party pledges itself to conduct all public affairs placed in its hands in such a manner as to promote the interests of the working class alone.

Source: *Western Socialist*, 24 April 1903; *Western Clarion*, 15 March 1913.

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### Miners' Election Broadside, British Columbia, 1909

The issue is plain and there need be no misunderstanding. The Socialist Party of Canada is the party of the working class. [Its mission] is to educate the workers to send men of their own class to the Legislatures on the Socialist ticket until they have enough there to legally transfer the ownership of all the means of production from idlers to the toilers. . . .

Source: *District Ledger*, 13 November 1909.

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## Appendix 5

### Socialist Party Locals in Western Canadian Coal Towns, 1908-1916

Bellevue, Alberta	Local 12
Canmore, Alberta	Local 52
Coleman, Alberta	Local 9/93*
Cumberland, B.C.	Local 70
Fernie, B.C.	Local 17
Hillcrest, Alberta	Local 15
Ladysmith, B.C.	Local 10
Lethbridge, Alberta	Local ?
Nanaimo, B.C.	Local 3**
Michel, B.C.	Local 16

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\* re-chartered, 1919

\*\* to the Social Democratic Party of Canada, 1911-16

Source: Socialist Party directories, *Western Clarion*, 1908-1916.

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