

The Great War and Nova Scotia Steelworkers

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The Great War and Nova Scotia Steelworkers

THE EUROPEAN CONFLICT OF 1914-18 became known as the "Great War" for more than just its staggering body count. In Canada, as elsewhere in the western world, that war shook up class relations profoundly. The years between 1917 and 1920 became a period of widespread working-class revolt against the terms of workers' subordination within the workplace and in capitalist society generally.¹ For many years, however, it has been well known that there were significant variations in the local and regional expressions of that revolt. Several western Canadian historians have, in fact, described a great divide between the conservative "East" and the radical "West".² Unfortunately, that kind of analysis has created an oversimplified dichotomy and has homogenized too thoroughly the experience on either side of the dividing line. It would be more fruitful to approach this remarkable moment in Canadian history with more subtlety and less regional chauvinism. Although there have been some valuable recent efforts to describe the local differences, it is time to try to explain them.³ This paper grew out of a larger study of the Canadian steel industry in the early 20th century and out of a curiosity about the unevenness of working-class resistance within that industry — especially the saliency of Nova Scotia, where the special characteristics of mass-production steelmaking in Canada blended

- 1 Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt", *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), pp. 11-44; Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925", *ibid.*, 7 (Spring 1981), pp. 41-66; James E. Cronin, "Labor Insurgency and Class Formation: Comparative Perspectives on the Crisis of 1917-1920 in Europe", in James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni, eds., *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 20-48; David Montgomery, "New Tendencies in Union Struggles and Strategies in Europe and the United States, 1916-1922", in *ibid.*, pp. 49-87.
- 2 Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston, 1968); David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII, 2 (June 1977), pp. 154-75; H.C. Pentland, "The Western Canadian Labour Movement, 1897-1919", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, III, 2 (Spring 1979), pp. 53-78.
- 3 David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal, 1974); Charles Allen Seager, "Proletariat in Wild Rose Country: The Alberta Coal Miners, 1905-1945", Ph.D. thesis, York University, 1981; Brian F. Hogan, *Cobalt: Year of the Strike, 1919* (Cobalt, n.d.); David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979; Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919", *Acadiensis*, IX, 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 56-77; Craig Heron and George de Zwaan, "Industrial Unionism in Eastern Ontario: Gananoque, 1918-21", *Ontario History*, LXXVII, 3 (September 1985), pp. 159-82; W. Craig Heron, "Working-Class Hamilton, 1895-1930", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1981.

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with unusual wartime conditions and specific regional features to produce a more vigorous revolt than in the Ontario branches of the industry. The following analysis suggests some criteria for explaining both the widespread nature of the working-class revolt and its different complexions across the country.

By the First World War the Nova Scotia steel industry was in the hands of two large corporations, the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company (Scotia) and the Dominion Iron and Steel Company (Disco), which together turned out nearly half the country's primary iron and steel.⁴ Both companies were integrated operations with iron mines on Bell Island off Newfoundland, coal mines in Cape Breton, and facilities for iron and steel production in Nova Scotia. Scotia had its primary steel plant at Sydney Mines in Cape Breton and its finishing plant nearly 300 kilometers away at Trenton, an industrial suburb of New Glasgow in Pictou County where the firm had begun in 1872. Scotia's development had been based on widely diversified product lines and markets, but a growing dependence on the transportation industry was evident in 1912 when the corporation opened the Eastern Car Company next door to the Trenton steel plant to absorb more of its finished goods in the production of railway cars.⁵ Disco was a much larger, more specialized operation, opened with great fanfare in 1901, which concentrated on turning out large quantities of one main product — steel rails, for the country's rapidly expanding transportation system.⁶ Steel production in Nova Scotia therefore came to have two geographical focuses — the Pictou County complex at New Glasgow-Trenton and the Cape Breton operations at Sydney and Sydney Mines.

Visitors to these new steel plants in the early 20th century found them to be technological marvels. Huge furnaces belched out enormous volumes of iron and steel. Massive machines lifted or carried raw materials and finished products through the smoky gloom with speed and ease. Contrary to a widespread assumption, however, the men who worked in these plants were not all deskilled machine-tenders.⁷ There were proportionally fewer unskilled

4 File 82, RG 87, vol. 18, Public Archives of Canada (PAC); Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Iron and Steel and Their Products* (Ottawa, 1930), pp. 68, 73.

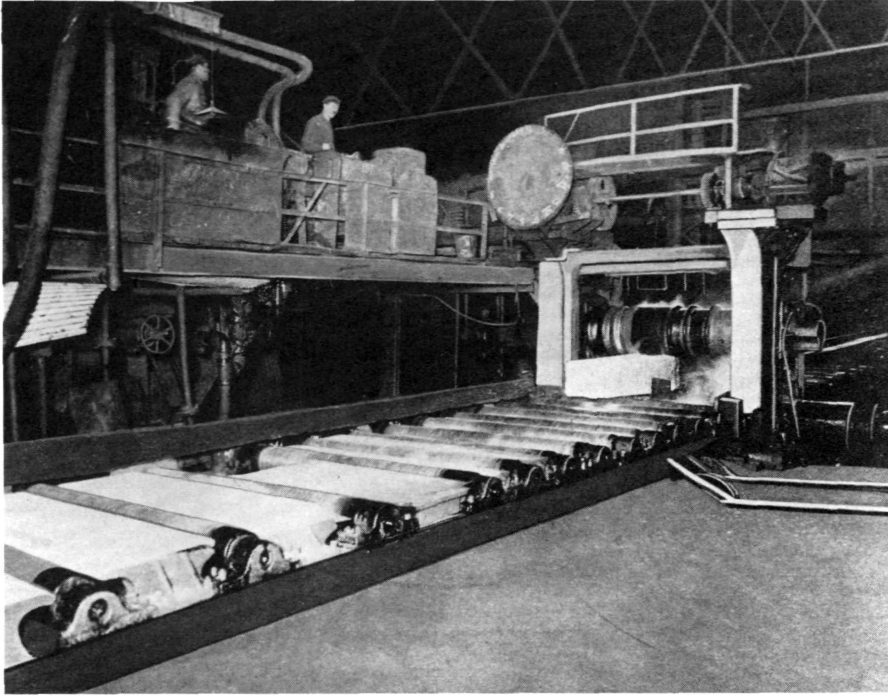
5 James M. Cameron, *Industrial History of the New Glasgow District* (New Glasgow, n.d.), pp. III-14; L.D. McCann, "The Mercantile-Industrial Transition in the Metal Towns of Pictou County, 1857-1931", *Acadiensis*, X, 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 40-57; Edward J. McCracken, "The Steel Industry of Nova Scotia", M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1932, pp. 81-3; Christopher Alfred Andreae, "A History of Nineteenth Century Iron Works in Nova Scotia", M. Museum Studies thesis, University of Toronto, 1981, pp. 131-45; W.J.A. Donald, *The Canadian Iron and Steel Industry: A Study in the Economic History of a Protected Industry* (Boston, 1915), pp. 195-9; Kris E. Inwood, "Local Control, Resources, and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company", paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting, 1986.

6 Don Macgillivray, "Henry Melville Whitney Comes to Cape Breton: The Saga of a Gilded Age Entrepreneur", *Acadiensis*, IX, 1 (Autumn 1979), pp. 64-7.

7 This assumption is most often based on Katherine Stone's influential article, "The Origins of Job Structures in the Steel Industry", *Radical America*, VII, 6 (November-December 1973), pp. 19-64, which has been reprinted several times.

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Figure One



Rolling-Mill Workers at Nova Scotia Steel, 1916

(Picture Courtesy of Beaton Institute, Sydney)

labourers than in the past, and, while some of the old-time craftsmen of the 19th century industry had disappeared from the steelmaking process, notably iron puddlers, there was a range of important skills among the new categories of steelworkers. Whatever machines were used, iron and steel production required judgment based on a familiarity with metallurgical chemistry that could only reside in a human mind. Blast-furnace keepers, open-hearth melters, and rollers on the smaller finishing mills were highly skilled men at the head of production teams on whom the corporations relied for the quality and efficiency of production and who were granted a great deal of autonomy on the shop floor. Operating the many trains in the plants and the huge overhead travelling cranes were also important new skills, since incompetence in transporting tons of molten iron and steel could result in great expense to the company and danger to other workers. All the new machinery also required maintenance by a large staff of skilled craftsmen like machinists, moulders, stationary engineers, and electricians. In short, there were still many skilled men in the new steel plants, although the corporations probably needed fewer of them in relation to output

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than in the past.⁸ At the same time the new mechanized processes in these steel plants were opening up a much larger occupational category — the so-called “semi-skilled” jobs of operating the new machines. These men did work that demanded more responsibility and competence than labourers, but less general knowledge than craftsmen. Their formal training for the work was usually minimal, but they learned the intricacies of their tasks by working alongside their more skilled workmates. Their conscientious application to their work and their accumulated experience with the complex machinery was essential to the steel companies. These workers were not simply interchangeable parts in a mechanically controlled system.

In private correspondence and testimony before government commissions, corporate officials admitted their reliance on these skilled and semi-skilled men, and both of Nova Scotia’s steelmaking corporations made efforts to encourage them to settle down. At Trenton, Scotia made it a conscious policy to recruit locally, and even when part of the Pictou County operations were moved to Sydney Mines in 1904, experienced workers were taken along to run the new plant. Scotia also made loans available for its workers to purchase homes in both Pictou and Cape Breton. Disco provided company housing to enable some of its workers to settle in the town.⁹ Both firms started up mutual benefit societies to encourage the men to tie their long-term economic fortunes to their employers. For the sake of efficient production, Scotia and Disco wanted these workers to stay put.¹⁰ Many steelworkers developed the pride and determination of men who knew their value as “producers” in the industry. “When I worked there”, a Disco open-hearth worker later recalled, “men were proud to work

8 This argument about technology and skill is developed more fully in my forthcoming book *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada*, ch. 2. See also Craig Heron and Robert Storey, “Work and Struggle in the Canadian Steel Industry, 1900-1950”, in Heron and Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal, 1986), pp. 210-44.

9 Cameron, *New Glasgow*, pp. VI-40; L. Anders Sandberg, “The Closure of the Ferrona Iron Works, 1904”, *Acadiensis*, XIV, 1 (Autumn 1984), pp. 98-104. On Disco’s company housing, see *Canadian Mining Manual* (1901), p. 128; Ronald F. Crawley, “Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry, 1899-1904”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1980, pp. 54, 56; Canada, Department of Mines, Mines Branch, *Report on the Mining and Metallurgical Industries of Canada, 1907-8* (Ottawa 1908), p. 527; Nova Scotia, Commission on Hours of Labour, *Report* (Halifax, 1910), p. 70; *Labour Gazette*, XIII, 8 (February 1913), p. 816; Canada, Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, pp. 3831, 3834, Labour Canada Library, Hull; *Iron and Steel of Canada*, X, 11 (November 1927), p. 341. On Scotia’s corporate housing, see Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company Limited, 1909, MG 1, vol. 1309, p. 1, Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS).

10 Scotia’s mutual benefit society was founded in 1889 and Disco’s in 1906. *Complete Evidence and Statements of Conciliation Court Between Workmen and Management of Nova Scotia Steel & Coal Company and Eastern Car Company* (n.p., n.d. [New Glasgow, 1915]), pp. 73, 76-7, 82-3; *Herald* (Halifax), 18 January 1921; J. Dix Fraser, “Graham Fraser - His Life and Work”, MG 1, vol. 215, pp. 80-1, PANS; *Post* (Sydney), 9 April, 22 November 1906; 13 December 1916; *Labour Gazette*, VI, 12 (June 1906), p. 1301.

Figure Two



A Group of Workers at Nova Scotia Steel (c. World War I)

(Picture Courtesy of Beaton Institute, Sydney)

there, and they took pride in their work, I'll tell you that.... It's the men on the furnace — that's who makes the steel".¹¹ What had changed dramatically was the context of most of these skills. Aside from the craftsmen found in the steel plants' mechanical departments (like machinists or electricians), who participated in a wider labour market for their skills, most skilled steelworkers moved up job ladders within the individual corporations. They were therefore vulnerable to replacement from within these internal labour markets, depended on their employers for access to better jobs, and could not carry their skills outside the industry. Thus, while many steelworkers undoubtedly had the technical competence of skilled workers, they lacked the independence of craftsmen, who had developed apprenticeship systems and craft-union controls to buttress their power in the workplace.¹²

The corporations reinforced that dependence with rigidly authoritarian

11 "Jim Hines: A View From the Open Hearth", *Cape Breton's Magazine*, XXVII (December 1980), p. 15.

12 On craftsmen's labour-market and job controls, see David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, 1979), pp. 9-31; Gregory S. Kealey, "'The Honest Workingman' and Workers' Control: The Experience of Toronto Skilled Workers", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), pp. 32-68; Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century", *ibid.*, 6 (Autumn 1980), pp. 7-48.

supervision by foremen and superintendents, surveillance by company spies, and firing and blacklisting of any alleged troublemakers. Disco also followed the North American practice of driving an ethnic wedge into the work force by recruiting transient labourers from Europe and Newfoundland for the least skilled work. They gathered in the cramped boarding houses of Sydney's new immigrant ghetto known as "Whitney Pier". A labour organizer passing through the Maritimes in 1914 saw the impact of these managerial policies on Sydney's steelworkers: "the spirit of the men seems to be cowed or virtually broken".¹³ As a result, Nova Scotia steelworkers lacked the power of collective control in the workplace not because they had all been deskilled, but because they lacked the leverage in their own labour market to assert their own needs and concerns, as craftsmen, and even coal miners, had been able to do.

The arrival of mass-production steel plants in Nova Scotia, then, did not imply the complete and permanent shattering of all workers' on-the-job power and independence, but rather corporate employers' largely successful efforts to keep workers from using what workplace influence they still had to make their own demands on the industry. The managers of these corporations wanted to hold on to these workers and were prepared to allow many of them considerable discretionary power in the workplace, provided it was directed to maintaining the rapid flow of good-quality steel. What they would not concede was the same discretion in determining the general shape of the labour process or the wage rates, hours of labour, and other terms and conditions of employment. Applying these managerial practices, however, did not always produce the same results in each steel town. New Glasgow-Trenton was an old, settled community with a relatively stable, ethnically homogeneous work force recruited in large part from the region. Once Scotia moved its blast-furnace and open-hearth facilities to Sydney Mines in 1904, the steelmaking processes carried on in Pictou County were limited to finishing work. The corporation manufactured such a wide variety of finished goods on its older, more labour-intensive equipment that it had to maintain a flexible, skilled work force in this Pictou County community.¹⁴ Sydney, on the other hand, was a much larger boomtown that had swollen from 2,427 in 1891 to 17,728 in 1911. Disco had all of its production facilities here and therefore introduced a wider range of skills, although, with its emphasis on specialized production of rails, the firm probably needed less flexible skill in its rolling-mill work force than Scotia. Disco's recruitment policies also introduced a more pronounced ethnic stratification into the local work force, with large numbers of labourers from Europe and Newfoundland at the bottom of the occupational ladder. The small town of Sydney Mines fell somewhere between these two patterns. Scotia seems to have maintained in Sydney Mines

13 Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, *Proceedings*, 1914, p. 80.

14 McCann, "Mercantile-Industrial Transition", pp. 33-58; Cameron, *New Glasgow*, pp. VI-40; Ralph Murray Guy, "Industrial Development and Urbanization of Pictou County to 1900", M.A. thesis, Acadia University, 1962.

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its preference for a more settled Anglo-Celtic work force, with a considerably higher percentage of Newfoundlanders. But the production processes in the town were limited to blast-furnace, open-hearth, and blooming mill work and therefore lacked the clusters of highly skilled rolling-mill men found at the finishing end of the steelmaking process.¹⁵

The differences between the managerial styles of the two corporations were equally striking. When the Nova Scotia Commission on the Hours of Labour visited the steel towns in 1909, it discovered a deep animosity among steelworkers toward Disco and its absentee owners, but a greater trust and respect for Scotia's owners and managers, many of whom were familiar, trusted local figures. "In Sydney, organized labor men feel strongly and speak hardly of the Dominion Iron & Steel Company, [while] in New Glasgow no such spirit appeared to the Commission", it reported the next year. "On the contrary the feeling among the men in regard to the Company [Scotia] is exceptionally good". A New Glasgow labour leader later acknowledged this spirit in the Scotia work force: "Both men and officials grew up with the plant, and in general, there has been a feeling of friendliness between the two and a remarkable freedom from trouble". The bonds between management and men at Scotia became a potent mythology that the firm's officials liked to evoke regularly whenever industrial conflict threatened to erupt in their plants, even once the even-handed paternalism was little more than a memory.¹⁶

Despite the corporations' efforts at controlling their workers, they had always faced some form of resistance, both individual and collective. Many of Nova Scotia's first steelworkers refused to develop a steady attachment to the industry and fitted their stint in a steel plant into a series of short-term work spells that could include farm labouring, construction and, increasingly, machine-tending in other mass-production plants. Thousands of these workers refused to settle down and accept the new work world of mass-production.¹⁷ During the First World War the problem of "labour turnover" seemed to reach crisis proportions for the steel companies, since military recruitment and the closing off of European immigration robbed them of their normal reserve army of labour.¹⁸

15 C.W. Vernon, *Cape Breton, Canada, at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century: A Treatise of Natural Resources and Development* (Toronto, 1902); *Report on Mining and Metallurgical Industries*; "The Steel Boom Comes to Sydney, 1899", *Cape Breton's Magazine*, XXXIX (1985), pp. 33-53; R.V. Sharp, "The Industrial Importance of Sydney and District", *Industrial Canada*, XXIII, 2 (June 1922) p. 52.

16 Commission on Hours of Labour, *Report*, p. 72; *Conciliation Court*, p. 8; see also L.A. Sandberg, "Capital, Labour and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Corporation, c. 1883-1943", unpublished paper, pp. 5-6. For an effort to dust off the old myth, see Thomas Cantley's greeting to his steel workers in *Herald* (Halifax), 27 December 1920 (my thanks to Ian McKay for this reference).

17 Commission on Hours of Labour, *Report*, p. 69; *Conciliation Court*, p. 62.

18 On the general wartime phenomenon of labour turnover, see R.H., "The Industrial Slacker", *Canadian Foundryman*, IX, 5 (May 1918), p. 105; C.B. Gordon to General Elliot, 18 August

10 *Acadiensis*

The results were frequent labour shortages and declining productivity. Without the whip of poverty to discipline them, workers quit or took days off, confident of their ability to find work again soon. "Employment is so easily obtained that workmen change from one occupation to another for no apparent reason", Nova Scotia's factory inspector reported in 1917, "and employers complain that it is impossible to enforce discipline in their factories". He noted that Disco had had to hire 6,000 workers to fill its 4,000 positions during the previous year.¹⁹ Disco's general manager saw the immigrant workmen as a particular problem: "The foreigners in our employ, particularly the Austrians, realizing the scarcity of labour, are not doing a fair day's work. It is extremely difficult to keep them in hand".²⁰ By 1918 Disco's president was worrying out loud in the *Sydney Post* about "the very serious loss of production" in the plant "even though we have now more names on our payroll than we had some time ago when the output averaged fifty per cent more than it is today".²¹ When the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations reached Sydney in 1919, Disco's general manager explained that the corporation had to carry about 15 per cent more men on their payroll than were actually working in the plant because "our men don't come out to work".²² Partly, this transiency reflected personal and family strategies for building up a nest-egg of cash savings, especially among the less skilled migrant labourers from Europe and Newfoundland, but it also suggested plenty of disgust with employment conditions in the huge, intimidating, dangerous plants.

Collective resistance did not emerge easily among such footloose workers. It was difficult, in fact, to get co-operation within a work force drawn from such a variety of backgrounds and with such a wide range of expectations. Before World War I, it was rare to find such solidarity among the three main occupation groups who found themselves gathered under the same large factory roof — specialized steel-production men (initially often from American plants), skilled tradesmen, and ethnically diverse unskilled labourers. Yet the absence of plant-wide organization did not mean workers never joined in collective resistance. On the contrary, the occupational or ethnic solidarity of work groups could erupt into confrontations with the steel-plant management. These were usually episodes of informal shop-floor bargaining over a wide range of corporate labour policies, from low wages to abrupt changes in customary work routines. The most militant of these groups were the least skilled and the most

1916, Sir Robert Borden papers, MG 26, H 1(c), vol. 211, p. 18813, PAC; T. Findley to T. Crothers, 31 March 1916, Sir Joseph Flavelle Papers, MG 30, A 16, vol. 2, File 11, PAC; M. Irish to J. Flavelle, 20 June 1918, *ibid.*, vol. 38, File 1918-19, PAC.

19 Nova Scotia, Factories' Inspector, *Report* (Halifax), 1917, p. 6.

20 D.H. McDougall to Mark Workman, 2 September 1916, MG 26, H 1(c), vol. 211, p. 118826, PAC.

21 *Post*, 14 September 1918.

22 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, p. 3831.

skilled — the unskilled labourers and the skilled craftsmen and production workers — both of whom had some independence from the control mechanisms of the corporations. Rarely, however, was there any formal organization involved.²³

Nonetheless, from the beginning, there had been skilled and semi-skilled men attached to their jobs in the steel industry who wanted the more permanent, regularized negotiating relationship with their employers that they believed a plant-wide industrial union could offer. The burst of prosperity that began in the late 1890s spurred on new labour organizing throughout Canada,²⁴ but it was the unique character of the Nova Scotia labour movement that made possible the first experiment in industrial unionism in the province's steel industry. Beginning in 1879 as a miner's union, the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) had expanded its membership base into a few other industries by the turn of the century. This initiative inaugurated a long tradition in the province, especially in Cape Breton, of well-organized, class-conscious coal miners extending the hand of solidarity to other workers in the region. In 1897 the PWA briefly recruited the steelworkers of Scotia's Trenton and Ferrona plants, who were outraged at a wage cut, but these men soon abandoned the union in the face of company threats to fire any unionists.²⁵ The PWA had greater success among steelworkers in Sydney, where two lodges were organized in the winter of 1902-3. In June 1904 the unionists launched a plant-wide strike to get severe wage cuts restored, but after nearly two months returned to work defeated. Their leaders were blacklisted, and for the next decade unionism was unknown in the Nova Scotia steel plants.²⁶

The first new stirrings came again in Pictou County. Scotia may have prided itself on its long record of good labour relations, but traditions were under attack in the corporation's plants by the first year of the war. Older patterns of work had been shaken up in the previous half decade. New technology in some

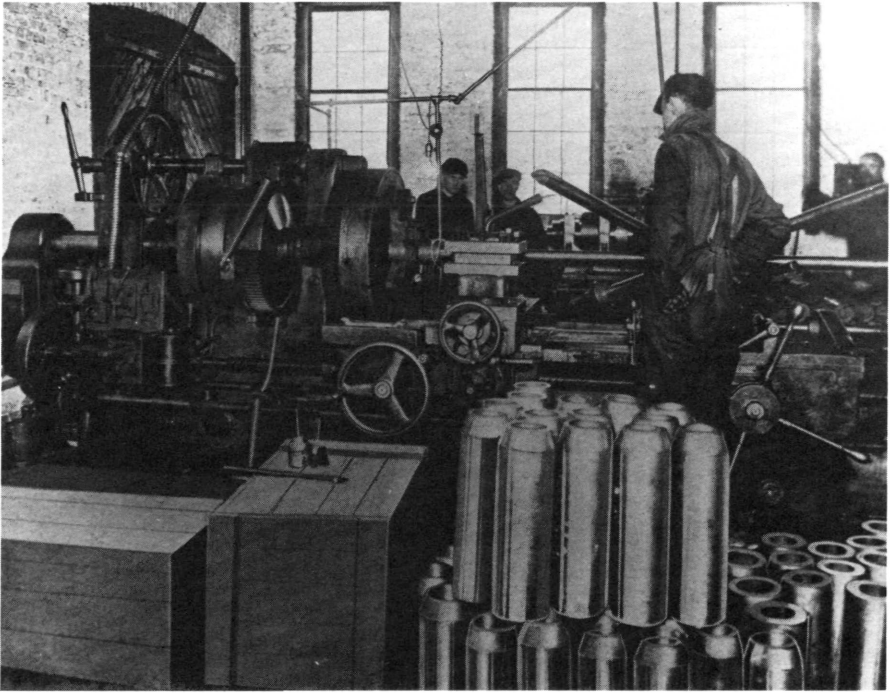
23 Heron and Storey, "Work and Struggle". For examples of these confrontations, see Crawley, "Class Conflict", pp. 64-75; *Post*, 2-4 March 1903; 3, 5 October 1908; Ian McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914", *Acadiensis*, XIII, 1 (Autumn 1983), p. 23; *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 17 March 1908; unidentified clipping, 19 March 1913, in MG 12, vol. 139, c, Beaton Institute.

24 Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 38-54.

25 Ian McKay, "The Provincial Workmen's Association", in W.J.C. Cherwinski and G.S. Kealey, eds., *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History* (St. John's, 1985), pp. 127-34; Sandberg, "Closure of Ferrona Iron Works", p. 99; Provincial Workmen's Association, Grand Council, Minutes, vol. 2, September 1897, p. 335, Labour Canada Library.

26 Crawley, "Class Conflict", pp. 70-78, 86-131; Joe McDonald, "Unionism of the Steel Plant", Miners' Museum (Glace Bay, N.S.), *Museum Notes*, II (July 1977), n.p.; File 222(7), Department of Labour Records, RG 27, vol. 69, PAC; *Post*, 11, 17, 18, 24, 28, 30 November, 2, 4 December 1903; 1-4, 11 June, 6, 13, 18, 23 July 1904; *Record* (Sydney), 1 October, 11, 16, 18, 20, 23, 30 November, 1, 2 December 1903 (clippings in MG 12, vol. 24, f, 1, Beaton Institute).

Figure Three



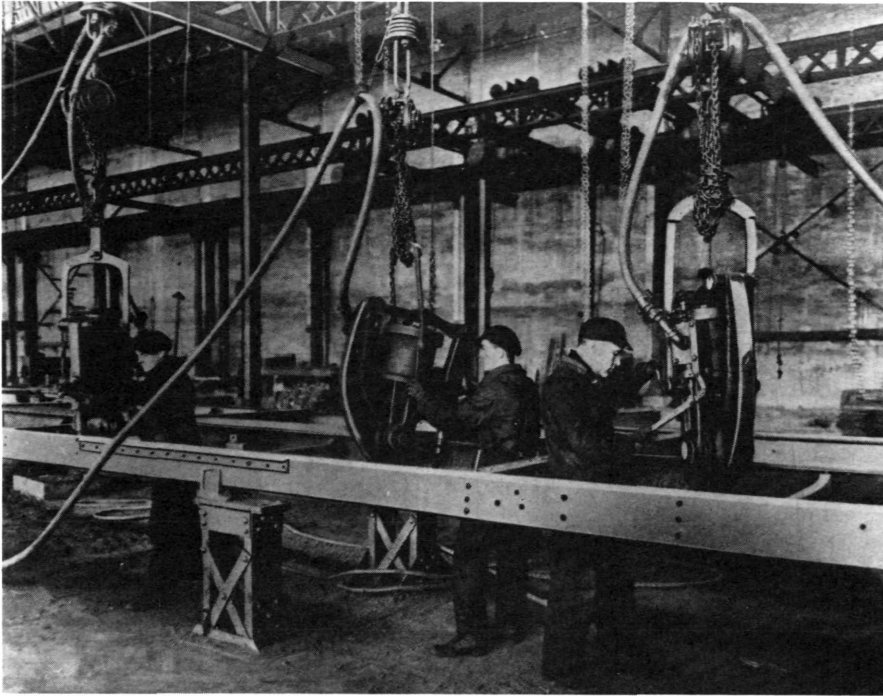
Munitions Workers at Nova Scotia Steel, 1916
(Picture Courtesy of Beaton Institute, Sydney)

parts of the rolling mills had allowed for a speed up and intensification of work on the rolling mills. The workers had also had to accept two wage cuts, in 1908 and 1913. Perhaps even more disruptive was the opening of the Eastern Car Works, Scotia's subsidiary for producing railway cars and equipment, next door to the steel plant in 1912. This new operation brought many newcomers to the town, including American managers and Trenton's first continental European immigrants. The constant resetting of piece rates for new orders in car plants made them a scene of frequent labour turmoil, and Eastern Car was no exception. The tensions in the plants increased as Scotia shifted over to munitions production early in 1915. That spring the resentments of the men in the two plants began to converge.²⁷

The new car works had attracted one other important element to the town — a tough-minded, Australian-born socialist boilermaker by the name of Clifford C. Dane, who quickly became the driving force and inspiration for a resurgent

27 *Conciliation Court*, pp. 2-10; *Evening News* (New Glasgow), 27 August, 14 November, 24 December 1913, 24 June, 20, 27 July 1915.

Figure Four



Riveters at the Eastern Car Company, 1916

(Picture Courtesy of Beaton Institute, Sydney)

labour movement in Pictou County. In November 1913 the car workers had met to form a union, with some words of advice and encouragement from the Cape Breton miners' leader, J.B. McLachlan. Dane became the new union's secretary.²⁸ The structure the workers chose, presumably on his advice, was a "federal labour union", a structure created by the American Federation of Labor as a kind of holding tank for unskilled workers who could not be fitted into any craft union. In this case, however, Dane and his fellow unionists transformed the structure into an industrial union, a decision that raised the eyebrows of at least one craft-union organizer who passed through New Glasgow the next year.²⁹ By the summer of 1914 the new union, locally known simply as the Federation of Labor, claimed over 200 members and was maintaining a "Federation Hall" for meetings and socializing.³⁰ Sometime that

28 *Evening News*, 7 November, 6 December 1913.

29 *Machinists' Monthly Journal*, XXVI, 12 (December 1914), p. 1170.

30 *Evening News*, 6 July 1914.

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year Dane was fired and blacklisted and subsequently became the union's full-time business agent and the *bête noire* of Scotia's management.³¹

Under Dane's leadership, the Federation began to put pressure on Scotia to address the growing list of grievances of the car workers and, by early 1915, of the steelworkers as well. Dane's tactic was to write to the federal Department of Labour to request a board of conciliation under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act — a device that Canadian steelworkers would turn to increasingly during the war years. In February 1915 his efforts forced the corporation to restore the 25 per cent of workers' wages that had been cut the previous year at both plants, and in March to adjust the wage scale of some munitions workers. In June the Federation was emboldened by fuller employment and Scotia's concerns about its war contracts to demand an eight-hour day and threatened to pull out all the union men in both plants. The strike plans apparently fell through, but, when the waterboys in the car plant decided to strike for an eight-hour day with no cut in pay and a group of shell workers discovered a new piece-rate scale that could mean wage cuts, all the accumulated grievances and resentments snowballed into a walk-out of all workers at both plants on 16 August. For the first time in New Glasgow's history, a huge labour parade snaked through the town's streets. Three days later they returned to work with the guarantee that their wage concerns would be placed before a federal board of conciliation whose decision would be binding on both parties.³² When the board convened in New Glasgow late in September, Dane marshalled a parade of witnesses, who voiced concerns about long hours, difficult working conditions, and wages that failed to keep up with the rising cost of living or to recognize the workers' indispensable skills in the work process. Their testimony was printed verbatim in the local press and later circulated in pamphlet form. Never before had the working conditions of the community's leading employer been exposed to such intense public scrutiny.³³ The board's final report went some distance towards meeting the workers' demands for wage increases, and the Federation of Labor could claim a victory. But there were problems buried in this first successful episode of industrial unionism. Dane and the other committed unionist had been able only to consolidate the many narrow grievances of individual departments and work groups, not to unite all the workers around shared demands. The union had won considerable respect among many local workers and made an effort to maintain its prominence with dances and other social activities and a new co-operative store.³⁴ But the habit of

31 *Conciliation Court*, pp. 3, 68; *Herald*, 17 February 1919; Clifford Rose, *Four Years with the Demon Rum* (Fredericton, 1980), pp. 5-9, 83.

32 *Conciliation Court*, pp. 3-5, 8-9, 87-103; *Evening News*, 28 January, 2 April, 16, 22 June, 13, 14, 16-18, 20, 23, 27 August 1915; File 15 (28), RG 27, vol. 304, PAC; *Labour Gazette*, XV, 3 (September 1915), p. 287.

33 See *Conciliation Court* for all the documents and testimony presented to the hearing; also *Evening News*, 21, 30 September 1915; *Labour Gazette*, 4 (October 1915), pp. 441-5.

34 *Evening News*, 5 April, 1 May 1916.

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unionism among Scotia's steelworkers and car workers was apparently still weak. Whether from fear, inexperience, or indifference, they stopped wearing their union buttons, and the Federation of Labor's strength in New Glasgow-Trenton slipped away. Strikes in Scotia's plants in the spring of 1917 followed the pre-war pattern of unorganized battles in single departments.³⁵

Dane's office nonetheless became the centre of a whirlwind of organizing activity in Pictou County over the next three years. He had already spearheaded the creation of a Pictou County Trades and Labor Council and now helped various groups of workers organize their own unions — machinists, blacksmiths, electricians, carpenters, retail clerks, and the workers of the Canadian Tool and Specialty Company in Trenton, who organized their own branch of the original Federation of Labor.³⁶ In May and December 1916, he also initiated other branches of this Federation in the local coal towns of Stellarton and Westville, where the old Provincial Workmen's Association had once been powerful. By the following spring, all coal miners in Pictou County had joined.³⁷ Dane's energy overflowed the bounds of Pictou County, as he carried his new all-inclusive industrial model of organizing far and wide. Late in 1916 he helped the Sydney Mines steelworkers organize an AFL federal labour union and, by the following spring, was urging Scotia's coal miners in that town to join. On his way home he initiated the Inverness coal miners into another of these bodies, but further moves into the mining communities were headed off by the formation of the province-wide Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia that summer (which the Pictou and Inverness miners did not join). By this point Dane was also promoting the idea of a provincial federation of labour.³⁸ His stirring oratory at the American Federation of Labor's 1916 convention in Baltimore brought warm praise from observers.³⁹ In November 1917 a large meeting in Sydney, called with the support of the local miners' union, launched a new federal labour union (or "Federation of Labor") among Disco's workers, which quickly signed up over 1,200 members. But when Dane applied to the AFL for a charter for this new organization, the AFL's secretary contacted the interna-

35 *Evening News*, 2, 7, 26 September, 2, 5-6, 8, 11, 13, 17, 23 November 1915, 5 January, 21 March, 5, 25 April, 1, 26-27 May, 20 July, 6 September, 18 November, 1, 9 December 1916, 20 February, 12, 15, 21, 28, 30 March, 5 April 1917; File 15(42), RG 27, vol. 304; File 17(52) and File 17(60), RG 27, vol. 306, PAC. Four years later a writer in the *Halifax Herald*, 17 February 1919, reached the cynical conclusion that "When the employees had got their wages up as high as they could hope for, their interest in the union began to wane and the union began to fall to pieces".

36 *Evening News*, 16 November 1914, 10 April, 6, 12, 19 July, 29 August, 26 September, 18, 21 October, 2, 5, 6, 8, 22, 23, November, 3, 6 December 1915, 5 January, 25 April, 1 May, 9 December 1916, 10 January, 26 February, 12 March, 9, 13, 15, 18, 25 August, 22 November 1917; File 15(42), RG 27, vol. 304, PAC.

37 *Evening News*, 1, 27 May, 6 September, 1 December 1916, 20, 21 February, 15, 23, 30 March, 5 April, 8, 18 June 1917.

38 American Federation of Labor, *Membership Book and Working Card*, held by James A. Casher from December 1916, Beaton Institute; *Evening News*, 21 April 1917.

39 *Evening News*, 18, 27 November 1916.

16 *Acadiensis*

tional president of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers, who arrived in Sydney the next month.⁴⁰

The Amalgamated was an old international union that traced its history back nearly half a century. Originally a craft union whose strength had lain in the old wrought iron industry, the Amalgamated had lost its influence in the iron and steel industry in the 1890s and remained a preserve of the highly skilled in the more antiquated, more labour-intensive plants. By the middle of the war, however, the union was taking a new lease on life with organizing initiatives to include most steelworkers in one plant (although deference was still paid to the jurisdiction of the metal-working craft unions, like the moulders and machinists). During the winter of 1917-18, there was considerable tension in Sydney between the proponents of the emerging Nova Scotia variant of industrial unionism based on the Federations of Labor and those promoting the more orthodox, mainstream Amalgamated Association, who controlled the town's new labour newspaper, the *Labor Leader*. Ultimately, it was the latter organization to which most of Sydney's steelworkers decided to hitch their star in the winter of 1917-18, apparently in the hopes of gaining some bargaining clout from the international connection.⁴¹ Dane's position in this controversy is mystifying. Despite his well-established commitment to the model of the federal labour union, he placed an advertisement in the New Glasgow *Evening News* in August 1917 urging steelworkers to join the Amalgamated Association. It would appear that AFL officials in the United States had finally got wind of his unorthodox unionism, and had pressured him to conform to existing craft-union jurisdictions. In September he resigned as business agent for the local Federation of Labor, but the various Federations continued to operate as they had, eventually with Dane's leadership once again.⁴² To complicate the picture, the Trades and Labor Congress' secretary, P.M. Draper, granted these Federations additional (or alternative?) charters as TLC federal labour unions.⁴³

The next year was a tumultuous one in the Nova Scotia steel industry, as the steelworkers' organizations in Pictou County and Cape Breton strengthened their membership base and threatened to bring production in the plants of both Scotia and Disco to a halt. After a week-long strike at the Eastern Car Works in late December 1917 against the employment of "enemy aliens", Dane managed

40 *Post*, 2 November 1917, 6 February 1918; *Amalgamated Journal*, 27 December 1917, 16 May 1918; *Canadian Labor Leader* (Sydney), 26 February 1918.

41 Jesse E. Robinson, *The Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers* (Baltimore, 1920); David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York, 1960), pp. 1-79; Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal, 1979), pp. 83-5; *Post*, 6 February 1918; *Canadian Labor Leader*, 13 April 1918.

42 *Evening News*, 3 August, 4 September 1917.

43 Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1917, p. 140; 1918, pp. 10, 91.

to lead a "Grand Organizational Revival".⁴⁴ The workers at the steel and car works were reorganized into two branches of the original Federation of Labor in Pictou County, whose seven branches (including one for women workers) were now co-ordinated by a "Federal Council", which claimed some 5,000 members in local factories and mines by the early spring of 1918.⁴⁵ On 8 April, this remarkable "one big union" met together with unionized blacksmiths and electricians to demand that Nova Scotia Steel, Eastern Car, and two small munitions plants recognize their unions and grant a 30-cent-per-hour minimum wage.⁴⁶ In contrast to the 1915 strike, these demands reflected greater unity and solidarity among the workers. Scotia had tried to dodge the union by convening a meeting of hand-picked, presumably loyal workmen from their plants to form what the press learned were to be called "mutuality committees" as part of a new corporate welfare scheme. The workmen, however, had walked out and left the union to negotiate for them.⁴⁷ When the corporation continued to ignore union overtures, the steelworkers and other metal workers struck a week later, in what amounted to a local general strike. Federation of Labor miners in neighbouring Westville also walked out briefly in support.⁴⁸

Negotiations between unions and management proceeded simultaneously in Cape Breton and included a one-day walkout at Scotia's Sydney Mines plant in early March.⁴⁹ Both of Cape Breton's steelworkers' unions now had substantial support in the steel plants. In March the Sydney Mines Federation of Labor boasted it was "100 per cent strong", and the Amalgamated lodge claimed 2,500 members by April.⁵⁰ That month the unions' leaders joined a large meeting of the province's miners, who had been fighting their own difficult battle with Scotia, to "map out a plan of campaign for the labor men who are demanding that the corporations recognize the various unions here".⁵¹ Prime Minister Robert Borden had already despatched James Watters, president of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada and a new ally in containing labour unrest in the country, to mediate and to caution restraint in both Pictou and Cape Breton.⁵²

44 *Evening News*, 13-15, 17-22, 26 December 1917, 4, 10, 29, 30 January, 1, 14 February, 6, 14, 15, 20 March 1918; File 17(71), RG 27, vol. 306, PAC; *Labour Gazette*, XVIII, 1 (January 1918), p. 30.

45 *Herald*, 28 March 1918.

46 File 18(77), RG 27, vol. 308, PAC.

47 *Herald*, 28 March 1918.

48 *Labour Gazette*, XVIII, 5 (May 1918), p. 332; *Evening News*, 15-19 April 1918; Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1918, pp. 71-3.

49 *Herald*, 6, 8, 26 March 1918; *Post*, 2, 4-8 March 1918.

50 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 13 April 1918; *Amalgamated Journal*, 18, 25 April 1918.

51 *Herald*, 1, 4 April 1918; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926", pp. 306-7. The April meeting in Sydney was seen by the delegates as a first step toward a provincial federation of labour and led to the introduction of an unsuccessful bill in the provincial legislature to compel employers to recognize unions among their workers. *Herald*, 16, 23 April 1918.

52 *Herald*, 8, 28 March, 4 April 1918; Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1918, p. 71.

But the federal government was now shocked at the prospect of a full-scale tie-up of the province's steel industry, with possible support from coal miners, and promptly brought the New Glasgow-Trenton strike to an end after two days. Borden promised to appoint the royal commission demanded by the workers to investigate the entire Nova Scotian steelmaking industry. The militancy was not completely dampened; Scotia's 2,000 steelworkers in Sydney Mines walked out again for one day on the eve of the royal commission's visit at the end of April.⁵³

The commission's report was released on 22 May and immediately met a torrent of criticism from Dane and his fellow unionists. Not only were the proposed wage increases for Scotia's workers considered too small — a fact for which Dane roundly denounced the labour representative on the commission, Cape Breton's J.B. McLachlan — but the only concession to the demand for union recognition was a recommendation that the corporation agree to meet "committees of workmen" to discuss grievances. Consequently, on 13 June the Scotia and Eastern Car workers struck again for their original demands. Once again the press caught rumours of impending strike support from the coal miners (a few Pictou County miners actually did walk out believing that a province-wide general strike had been called, but most stayed on the job). With vigorous pressure not to disrupt the war effort at a crucial moment and the restraining influence of James Watters, the steel and car workers were convinced four days later to accept the company's new offer of slightly higher wages and a willingness to deal with a committee of employees (but not the union *per se*). The strike organization had apparently been cracking, but the union declared a victory. "On the whole the men are well satisfied with the outcome", suggested the *Canadian Labor Leader*. Even the unsympathetic New Glasgow *Evening News* concluded that they had "demonstrated their strength and in doing so are likely to be treated with due consideration in future".⁵⁴

Meanwhile, there had been renewed fear that the Cape Breton steelworkers would turn this second Scotia strike into an industry-wide walk-out in the province. At Sydney Mines intense negotiations with the strike threat looming culminated in a settlement paralleling the New Glasgow-Trenton outcome. In Sydney the Amalgamated lodge was just as unhappy with the royal commission's recommendations and demanded a new wage scale. When the federal government announced in early July an informal ban on strikes for the duration of the war, the union hit on the novel tactic of taking a "holiday" each Sunday between mid-July and mid-August until the Disco workers' demands were met — a tactic borrowed from the miners. After four successive one-day strikes,

53 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 9-30 March, 6, 13 April, 4 May 1918; *Post*, 27, 30 April 1918; *Herald*, 6, 8, 26, 28 March, 1-6, 27-28 April 1918; Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1918, pp. 71-2; File 18(77), RG 27, vol. 308, PAC.

54 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 1-29 June 1918; *Evening News*, 5, 12-18, 20, 24 June 1918; *Herald*, 17 June 1918; Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Co. Strike 1918, File 146, MG30, A16, vol. 14, PAC.

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these actions were called off when Disco agreed to the appointment of a board of conciliation, and modest wage increases followed in the fall.⁵⁵

The crucial new ingredient added in these great confrontations in the Nova Scotia steel industry during 1918 had been the demand for recognition of the steelworkers' unions. The outcome had not brought formal recognition, but in practice the managers of both corporations were soon engaged in regular, if informal, collective bargaining with union committees. As the *Sydney Post* noted, "when an agreement is entered into by a union committee and the officials of a company this practically constitutes the recognition of the union".⁵⁶ By the spring of 1919, when the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations arrived in the Nova Scotia steel towns, workers from both corporations could report that these informal arrangements had been operating for several months. "In the Steel and Car Plants the Companies meet our regular men's committee and many troublesome questions have been successfully negotiated", a Trenton labour leader explained, although "we have to make considerable progress yet...to be dealt with collectively as organizations".⁵⁷ In the summer of 1919 the Sydney lodge actually convinced Disco to accept the "check-off" (deducting union dues from workers' wages and turning them over to the lodge), as it had been doing for the miners, but generally the corporations avoided as much as possible tying themselves down to any formal arrangements.⁵⁸

Nova Scotia's steelworkers, then, had pulled together inside broad-based industrial unions in the three main steelmaking plants. In Sydney Mines all the plant's workers, regardless of skill, were in the same union, while in Trenton and Sydney some of the plants' tradesmen (machinists, electricians, and so on) had organized separately. The industrial and craft unions nonetheless co-operated in a common front. In Sydney the Amalgamated Association had even helped Disco's clerical staff to organize their own union, which claimed to have enrolled 75 per cent of these workers by the spring of 1919.⁵⁹ Yet a major shift had taken place in the organizational affiliation of these unions. Clifford Dane seems to have lost his influence over the Pictou steelworkers after the 1918 strikes. He may have slipped from favour because of his handling of the strikes, but the roots of dissent ran back three years. Dane had cold relations with the men who organized and ran the Pictou County Independent Labor Party, especially a lawyer-turned-munitions-worker, Alex T. McKay, who eventually led the attack on Dane. There is no evidence to clarify whether this hostility reflected a syndicalist streak in Dane (who never played a prominent role in the provincial

55 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 6-27 July, 3-24 August 1918; *Post*, 11, 19, 20, 22-25, 27, 29, 30 July, 1-2, 10, 12, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22 August 1918; *Herald*, 30 July 1918.

56 *Post*, 8 March 1918.

57 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, New Glasgow, p. 3537.

58 *Amalgamated Journal*, 17 July 1919.

59 *Eastern Federationist* (New Glasgow), 22 March 1919; Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, pp. 3785, 3876-7.

ILP either) or a personal feud with men whom he distrusted and opposed as opportunists. His public attacks on the widely respected J.B. McLachlan probably isolated him still further.⁶⁰ Whatever the role of Dane's leadership, the allegedly heightened bargaining strength of the international connection seems to have been more attractive than the local industrial unions, which were only loosely attached to the larger North American labour movement. Nova Scotia's steelworkers had abandoned the Federations of Labor in New Glasgow-Trenton and Sydney Mines by the summer of 1919 and affiliated with the Amalgamated Association, in keeping with the parallel decision of Nova Scotia's coal miners early in 1919 to link up with the United Mine Workers of America.⁶¹

Yet stronger links with the mainstream AFL labour movement did not mean an end to the regional flavour of the province's union activity. Dane helped the workers of Amherst, Nova Scotia, organize a new Federation of Labor on the Pictou model and was elected to the Nova Scotia executive of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada in the fall of 1918.⁶² At the end of February 1919, he was then instrumental in organizing the founding conference of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labor, where he was elected president. The new provincial federation brought the steelworkers into a dynamic alliance with the coal miners, various Halifax craftsmen, and the province's railwaymen in the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees (a buoyant industrial union formed in the Maritimes a decade earlier), for what the *Halifax Herald* called "a solid rebuilding of the fabric of society".⁶³

Three striking characteristics of this new industrial unionism in the Nova Scotia steel industry should be isolated to indicate the particular blend of industry, region, and wartime economy. First, in Nova Scotia, as in the rest of the Canadian industry, it was the more skilled workers at the centre of the steelmaking process who provided the cutting edge of this more organized resistance. A Disco union leader told the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations that the local lodge of the Amalgamated Association had 2,564 members — "practically all the trained men" except the craftsmen who had organized their own unions.⁶⁴ These were the men who had retained intense work-group solidarity and plenty of on-the-job independence, and who were

60 See *Evening News*, 3, 4 May, 27 August 1915; 27 May 1916; *Herald*, 17, 21 February 1919.

61 *Ibid.*, 21 February, 21 June 1919; Frank, "Cape Breton Coal Miners", pp. 307-8.

62 Reilly, "General Strike", pp. 62-3. In his honour, the main branch of the new organization was named the Dane Lodge. At the same point, Dane was also providing advice to the coal miners of Minto, New Brunswick, who proceeded to set up an independent miners' union. See Allen Seager, "Minto, New Brunswick: A Study in Class Relations Between the Wars", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 5 (Spring 1980), p. 106. Moreover, at the Trades and Labor Congress convention that fall, his influence shone out of a resolution from the Pictou County Trades and Labor Council urging that the Congress take action to link up the various federal labour unions in the country. See Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1918, p. 141.

63 *Herald*, 14, 25, 28 February, 1, 3-8, 11, 25 March 1919; *Citizen* (Halifax), 9 May 1919.

64 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, p. 3738.

now able to translate these strategic advantages into collective power. Many of these men had settled in the Nova Scotia steel towns and begun to develop a commitment to the industry.

The organizers and leaders of this new unionism were all English-speaking, as they had been in Sydney in 1902-4, but more successfully than ever before they reached out to draw in the less skilled Europeans.⁶⁵ There was still plenty of lingering ambivalence on both sides. In 1919, for example, the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations asked a leader of the Sydney union whether the “foreigners” in the plant were union members. “Some are and some are not”, he replied. “You cannot call them union men because we may see them this week at a meeting and not see them again for 2 or 3 months”.⁶⁶ Yet there seemed to be a new willingness to recognize the need for cross-ethnic solidarity if steelworkers were to stand up to their employers successfully. “It is up to you and me to get them all organized to save them and ourselves”, a Sydney unionist wrote a year later. “They need education and organization; they like to dress, live and get the education such as we have. They should get the same wages as the white man and to do this you must organize them”. The unionists therefore made an effort to bridge the cultural gulf. Organizers who spoke European languages carried the message to the immigrant ghettos, and reports began to roll in about success in recruiting the “foreign element”.⁶⁷ In Sydney the “foreigners” would eventually have their own lodge based in the town’s multicultural enclave, Whitney Pier.⁶⁸

Second, the timing of this new unionizing activity is noteworthy. Not until the final year of the war did the steelworkers’ unions take hold in Nova Scotia. Full employment at higher wages than ever before in living memory gave steelworkers (and many others) a new confidence based on their greater independence from their employers — reflected in higher rates of turnover, absenteeism, and reduced “effort” on the job. Equally important, the appeals of jingoism and self-sacrifice had worn thin, and the dislocations of wartime society, especially political mismanagement and private-sector profiteering, were fuelling a growing resentment among Canadian workers. In fact, the war provided a context for generalizing workers’ concerns from the narrower confines of skill, occupation, and ethnicity. As more and more workers began to turn their thoughts to what life would be like after the war, their unions became the vehicle

65 The Europeans had been involved in the 1904 strike, but apparently not as union members. Crawley, “Class Conflict”, p. 119.

66 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, p. 3744; see also pp. 3753, 3756-7.

67 *Amalgamated Journal*, 11, 25 March, 20 May, 26 August 1920; David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919* (Philadelphia 1965).

68 Separate meetings were held in Whitney Pier as early as March 1919, but a separate lodge, dominated by “foreigners”, was not created until the fall of 1922. *Amalgamated Journal*, 6 March 1919, 9 November 1922.

for consolidating wartime gains and insuring that the clock would not be turned back. As a Sydney union leader warned: "After the war is over, and we have a surplus of labor in the market, is not the time to get justice".⁶⁹

The demands raised in this new wave of industrial unionism suggest these steelworkers saw themselves struggling towards a future based on "industrial democracy" and not simply for the resolution of narrow wartime grievances. Their wage demands focused on their desire to put on a permanent basis the somewhat better living standards that some of them had begun to enjoy during the war and that they feared runaway inflation was eroding. For the historian (without access to any payroll data), determining real wages in an industry that used so much piece work is almost impossible. It is clear, however, that the cost of living in the Nova Scotia steeltowns, as in most of the rest of Canada, took an abrupt upturn in 1917 and continued to rise through 1919 and 1920 (see Table I). Steelworkers complained loudly about the effects of this inflation. "The cost of living has been going up continually but the men's wages have not increased accordingly". Sydney's labour paper, the *Canadian Labor Leader*, argued in 1918: "The real fact is that a large number of the employees of the Dominion Steel Corporation are not now receiving a living wage".⁷⁰ Yet, simply getting more money in their wage packets was not enough for, as a business journalist lamented, "the raising of wages does not appear to have proved a panacea for labor troubles in the east".⁷¹ The steelworkers also wanted to establish more fairness in wages rates in the face of excessive corporate profits, inequalities of pay for the same work, and grossly unequal earnings between categories of workers.⁷² They also insisted on a permanent shift in power relations within the workplace that would ensure them some kind of industrial citizenship, with the right to negotiate over a wide range of issues, including some important aspects of the labour process. The wartime appeals to sacrifice in the fight for democracy overseas were seized upon and transformed into demands for "industrial democracy" at home. A Sydney steelworker expressed the defiance that these workers had discovered: "The time is past when any concern, it matters not how big they are, can say, You must work under the conditions we say or not at all. The worker has learned that to run the mills they must have the men, and they will claim the right to say what conditions they will work under".⁷³ The

69 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 13 April 1918.

70 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 3 August 1918; see also 16 March 1918; Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1918, pp. 95-6; Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, *Evidence*, New Glasgow, p. 3611.

71 A.R. Kennedy, "Position of Canada's Steel and Iron Industry", *Industrial Canada*, XIX, 9 (January 1919), p. 164.

72 See *Evening News*, 29 June 1916, 4 May 1917, 14 June 1918; *Canadian Labor Leader*, 13 July 1918; *Workers' Weekly* (Stellarton), 14 November 1919, 4 June 1920; *Post*, 30 July, 1 August 1918; Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, "Evidence", Sydney, p. 3741; New Glasgow, pp. 3587-8, 3665-6. These issues are treated at greater length in Heron, *Working in Steel*, ch. 4.

73 *Amalgamated Journal*, 22 July 1920.

Table One

Cost Per Week of a Family Budget of Staple Foods, Fuel and Lighting, and Rent in Nova Scotia Steel Towns, 1913-1923

	Sydney		New Glasgow	
	Cost	Index	Cost	Index
1913	\$12.58	100.0	\$11.06	100.0
1914	12.31	97.8	11.20	101.3
1915	13.47	107.1	11.64	105.2
1916	15.42	122.8	13.33	120.5
1917	17.71	140.8	15.64	141.4
1918	20.07	159.5	18.57	167.9
1919	20.21	160.7	20.59	186.2
1920	22.10	175.7	22.53	203.7
1921	17.41	138.4	18.76	169.6
1922	16.69	132.7	17.76	160.6
1923	17.16	136.4	18.52	167.5

Source: These totals have been calculated from the detailed tables of retail prices collected monthly in the *Labour Gazette* (the December reports were used here), on the basis of a slightly modified version of the family "shopping basket" that the Department of Labour used to compute a national cost-of-living index. The 1913-20 figures for New Glasgow are based on statistics for neighbouring Westville.

steelworkers could also draw upon the same potent wartime rhetoric to denounce their employers' resistance. Disco's general superintendent won the title of "the local Kaiser" and the corporation's unwillingness to accept their employees' right to negotiate was labelled "Steel-gloved Kaiserism". "Does the Company realize that it has at least gone too far and that the people of Cape Breton have suffered too dearly on the fields of Flanders and at home to be ruled by an autocracy?" the *Canadian Labor Leader* asked when Disco fired the president of its clerks' union.⁷⁴

The steelworkers were equally resistant to corporate paternalism. Collective bargaining, they insisted, implied the preservation of workers' independence from the corporations through their unions, so that their particular interests could not be submerged within corporate concerns about profitability. When the Social Service Council of Canada sent a delegation to Sydney in 1919 to

⁷⁴ *Canadian Labor Leader*, 9 March, 10 August, 12 October 1918.

investigate employment conditions in the steel industry, they found the steelworkers “unwilling to receive on a charity basis anything whatever from the company. They want justice and if given it they will find their own club houses and recreation; they will not have benevolence from the company until they are given justice as human beings”. In 1920 the Sydney lodge made a direct assault on Disco’s welfare programmes by getting four unionists elected to the board of directors of the firm’s mutual benefit society. The Sydney Mines union made a parallel, but unsuccessful effort to scuttle their benefit society in favour of union representation.⁷⁵

The steelworkers’ new notion of “democracy” was not limited to the workplace. In each of the steel towns, their union leaders were active in broader working-class efforts to insure a greater voice in the political life of the country, most particularly the various local Independent Labor Parties. In 1917 Sydney steelworkers’ leader, John Gillis, ran as an ILP candidate in Cape Breton, and in 1920 a former Scotia machinist, Forman Waye, won a seat in the provincial legislature for the party, although the New Glasgow-Trenton workers saw their union president, H.D. Fraser, narrowly defeated. Several Labour aldermen were also elected in the Nova Scotia steel towns.⁷⁶ At the same time as the English-speaking steelworkers were turning to a revitalized form of Labourism, some of the European immigrant groups found their inspiration for industrial democracy in two new ideological strains — the nationalism that wartime struggle against the old European empires was creating and the radicalism that flowed from the Russian Revolution.⁷⁷

The aspirations of Canada’s steelworkers for decency, fairness, and democracy converged on the most important demand of the post-war Canadian labour movement, and the one with the most immediacy for the steel industry — the eight-hour day. In Cape Breton the miners’ success in winning an eight-hour day in February 1919 gave the local steelworkers an immediate point of comparison, and at mass meetings on the island in the spring and summer of that year they expressed their resentment at the inequality.⁷⁸ The Amalgamated lodges (and the craft unions in the industry) tried at various points to negotiate shorter hours with their individual employers, but invariably encountered their employers’

75 *Ibid.*, 4, 18 March 1920; *Workers’ Weekly*, 3 September 1920.

76 David Frank, “Company Town/Labour Town: Local Government in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917-1926”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, XIV, 27 (May 1981), pp. 177-96; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, pp. 65-71; *Workers’ Weekly*, 30 July 1920; Ernest R. Forbes, *Maritime Rights: The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal, 1979), pp. 38-53. For a discussion of the ideology of these parties, see Craig Heron, “Labourism and the Canadian Working Class”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), pp. 45-76.

77 *Herald*, 17 June 1919; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, p. 110; Donald Avery, “Dangerous Foreigners”: *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 65-89.

78 *Herald*, 22 February, 6, 7 March, 3, 21 May, 13, 27 June 1919.

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arguments that the competitive conditions of the industry prevented them from acting unilaterally. Increasingly, therefore, the steelworkers' union leaders turned to the state for legislation to bring the corporations to heel. In the spring of 1919 Nova Scotia's steelworkers joined with other unionists in the Nova Scotia Federation of Labor in demanding that the provincial government enact an eight-hour measure and threatened a general strike. Under strong counter-pressure by the local branch of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association, the government dodged the issue by agreeing to appoint a commission of inquiry into the implications of shorter hours. The commission was never convened.⁷⁹

A final important feature of this new burst of unionization was its remarkable strength in Nova Scotia compared with the other major steelmaking centres of Hamilton and Sault Ste. Marie. For a full explanation of these differences, one must look outside the labour process to compare the resources available to steelworkers in the communities where they lived and worked. Most important were the traditions and institutions of working-class life in each town. Here the contrast between Nova Scotia and southern Ontario is sharpest. In Cape Breton and Pictou County the coal miners had a history of organization and militancy running back four decades. Organized on an industrial basis, they had already helped the steelworkers in their first effort to create a union at the turn of the century. During the war they had joined Clifford Dane's pan-industry unionism on the mainland, and on the island had provided organizational and tactical support for the new steelworkers' unions. The threat of joint strike action by miners and steelworkers, most of them working for the same two corporations, was a powerful club to carry into negotiations with Disco and Scotia.

The miners' militancy rested on their proudly independent role in production, but also, in Nova Scotia, on the solidarity of a regional culture that blended the well-established Scottish traditions of the rural population with the independent ways of the province's miners, to produce a local pride and deep resentment of the outside capitalist interests that had controlled the region's economy for so long.⁸⁰ That spirit was evident among the leadership of the province's steelworkers as well, many of whom had deep roots in Pictou and Cape Breton, and it helped to generate challenges to the legitimacy of corporate ownership and control. The battle lines were drawn between the local community and

79 *Eastern Federationist*, 19, 26 April, 24 May, 7 June 1919; *Herald*, 21 April, 20 May, 5 June 1919; *Citizen*, 20 June 1919; *Industrial Canada*, XX, 1 (May 1919), p. 54.

80 Charles W. Dunn, *Highland Settler: A Portrait of the Scottish Gael in Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1953); Del Muise, "The Making of an Industrial Community: Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1867-1900", in Don Macgillivray and Brian Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, 1980), pp. 76-94; David Frank, "Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century", in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985* (Sydney, 1985), pp. 203-18; David Frank and Donald Macgillivray, "Introduction", to Dawn Fraser, *Echoes From Labor's War: Industrial Cape Breton in the 1920s* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 9-23; Frank, "Cape Breton Coal Miners", pp. 314-5; James M. Cameron, *The Pictonian Colliers* (Halifax, 1974).

insensitive “outsiders”. After Scotia was taken over by American interests in 1917, the steelworkers of New Glasgow-Trenton and Sydney Mines were outraged at the new owners and their managers. “A batch of Yankee officials get themselves elected to the prominent offices on the board of directors, and presto, all the *old fashioned* methods must go by the board”, the *Canadian Labor Leader* snarled in 1918. Disco’s absentee owners prompted even more anger. According to the same paper, this was a “soulless corporation, the directorate and shareholders of which are not even natives of our province...(and who) want to grind the last sou in profits out of the poor labourer”. “Do the Iron Industry and Coal Fields of Cape Breton belong by right to this Montreal Magnate?” the paper asked of the corporation’s president, Mark Workman, later the same year.⁸¹ That summer a steelworker wrote to the *Sydney Post* to complain that Disco officials “neglected to study the temperament of the people they had to deal with”, whose proud independence led them to expect that any demand they raised “should be theirs by right and not as a concession granted by any corporation”.⁸² Nova Scotia’s steelworkers thus became part of the regional working-class protest that the coal miners were articulating most forcefully.

In contrast, working-class Hamilton had no comparable source of strength and solidarity to offer Stelco’s steelworkers. The city’s craft union movement had never had much sympathy with industrial unionism and had to be prodded into helping to organize Stelco in 1919. Craft unionists had no secure base in any of Hamilton’s new mass-production plants and had suffered a major defeat in 1916, when Stelco led the city’s metal-working firms in crushing a huge machinists’ strike. Working-class solidarity thus remained weaker and more fragmented in Hamilton than in industrial Nova Scotia, where AFL-style craft unionism had never made the same inroads. The Amalgamated lodges in Hamilton never signed up as large a percentage of the work force nor won the recognition from their employer that Nova Scotia steelworkers enjoyed between 1918 and 1920. It is clear that similar production processes did not necessarily induce the same responses from Canadian steelworkers.⁸³

By the spring of 1919, as western Canada was exploding into militant general strikes, industrial relations in Nova Scotia were following their own rhythm, which had not yet brought a decisive confrontation. But if Nova Scotia seemed quieter, it was the result of workers’ collective strength, not their conservatism. “We enter the year 1919 with organized labor in the saddle as never before in Cape Breton”, Sydney’s *Labor Leader* declared in January.⁸⁴ The steelworkers

81 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 30 March, 4 May, 24 August 1918.

82 *Post*, 11 July 1918.

83 Myer Siemiatycki, “Munitions and Labour Militancy: The 1916 Hamilton Machinists’ Strike”, *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), pp. 131-52; Craig Heron, “Hamilton Steelworkers and the Rise of Mass Production”, Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1982), pp. 103-31; and “Working-Class Hamilton”, pp. 714-29; Trades and Labour Congress, *Proceedings*, 1917, p. 190; Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Organization in Canada* (Ottawa), 1911-19.

84 *Canadian Labor Leader*, 4 January 1919.

were not alone in winning some form of arrangement with their employers. The coal miners had already developed formal collective bargaining procedures and in February finally won the eight-hour day. In May the Halifax building trades workers were forced out on an eight-week strike, but managed to extract significant concessions from their employers after the city's trades and labour council voted to hold a referendum on a general strike.⁸⁵ In Amherst a three-week general strike led by one of Dane's Federations of Labor also ended in success.⁸⁶

None of this activity was directly connected to developments in the western Canadian labour movement, about which most Nova Scotia's labour leaders were not well informed. But the same spirit was evident, especially the working-class solidarity and the radical edge. All working-class leaders in the region were not revolutionaries, but there was unanimity amongst them on the need for greater working-class power in post-war society. Industrial unionism was well established among steelworkers, miners, railwaymen, and factory workers at Amherst, and even the Halifax building trades workers showed an astonishing solidarity and egalitarianism by forming a common front in their 1919 strike and by demanding a common wage of 75 cents per hour for all tradesmen regardless of craft. As in the west, they accepted the leadership of acknowledged radicals. Probably no one personified and inspired this new provincial labour movement like Clifford Dane, who travelled between Halifax, Pictou, and Cape Breton, counselling the Halifax building trades workers, speaking to mass meetings of steelworkers and coal miners, helping to organize new unions, and loudly threatening a general strike if the provincial government did not pass an eight-hour-day act. "I am a Bolshevik", he declared before the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, "and I will warn these two Governments that trouble is coming and the men will have what belongs to them".⁸⁷ What clearly distinguished Dane and most other provincial labour leaders from their western counterparts was their decision to stay within the mainstream North American labour movement while militantly pursuing their radical goals, rather than following the secessionist route of the One Big Union (the Amherst workers were the major exception). Yet the Nova Scotians were as uncomfortable as the western leaders with the new, more conservative leadership of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada. In October the president of Sydney's Amalgamated lodge returned disgusted from the TLC convention. "There was no time for discussing such unimportant issues as the 8-hour day, minimum wage, independent political action, the great co-operative system, and all the questions that are important to the uplift of the workers", he reported. "J.C. Watters, J.B. McLaughlin [sic], and all the Cape Breton

85 Ian McKay, *The Craft Transformed: An Essay on the Carpenters of Halifax, 1885-1985* (Halifax, 1985), pp. 69-73.

86 Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919", pp. 56-77.

87 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Halifax, pp. 4355-9.

delegates were howled down when they attempted to take the floor".⁸⁸ Nova Scotia unionists would continue to go their own way in the years to come. The province's steelworkers, then, were caught up in a broad-based, militant, regional working-class movement with visionary goals for social reconstruction in the post-war world.

Surprisingly, that movement soon lost one of its most important leaders. Dane had moved to Halifax, where he had begun to resurrect the old "Federation of Labor" structure. By the fall of 1919, he had organized six different groups of unskilled workers into branches of a new federal labour union (marine labourers, building trades labourers, rope workers, coal handlers, bakery and confectionery workers, and fish handlers), four of which were eventually involved in strikes. Dane was their business agent. As the labour movement began to polarize over the "one-big-union" strategy pioneered in the west, he seems to have fallen out of favour in Halifax, and in September he resigned from the presidency of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labor (which never met again). Eventually, in the spring of 1920, Dane and his loyal union associates transformed themselves into the Nova Scotia Independent Federation of Labor, which was empowered to charter unions across the province. The depression that hit later that year destroyed this last remnant of Dane's grand plans, and he slipped from sight in the Nova Scotia labour movement.⁸⁹

Like other workers in the region, Nova Scotia's steelworkers had to face the specific conditions of their industry and they knew that the post-war equilibrium had not yet been established in the workplace. As Forman Wayne told the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, "They recognize our union when we hold the whip hand, when we are strong enough to warrant it; but when we are not they do not recognize it".⁹⁰ By the fall of 1919 the whole American steel industry was convulsed by a national strike that the steelmasters seemed determined to break. Across Canada employers in many industries were locking horns with the local labour movements and provoking general strikes in cities like Amherst, Toronto, and Winnipeg by the spring of 1919. But the struggles were unfolding at different paces in different communities and industries. In steel, the unionists watched anxiously for the shape of their employers' post-war labour policies.

88 *Eastern Federationist*, 18 October 1919; see also 25 October 1919; Frank, "Cape Breton Coal Miners", pp. 317-9. This confrontation at the TLC convention was the culmination of weeks of verbal battles between the Cape Breton labour leaders and the TLCC leadership, especially over the selection of delegates to the National Industrial Conference in Ottawa in September; according to the *Halifax Herald*, it was "a fight to the finish between the ideas of the radical east and the radical west, and the central conservative sections led by Tom Moore and his friends". See *Herald*, 1, 6, 25, 27, 28 August, 16 October 1919.

89 *Citizen*, 9, 23 May, 20, 27 June, 4, 11 July, 8 August, 17, 24 October, 7, 14, 21 November, 12 December 1919, 30 January, 6, 13 February, 9, 23 April, 7 May 1920; *Herald*, 23 September 1919; Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Organization in Canada* (Ottawa), 1919, p. 157; 1920, pp. 130-1; 1921, p. 287; Trades and Labor Congress, *Proceedings*, 1921, pp. 61, 174.

90 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, p. 3811.

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The Nova Scotia steel companies were also concerned about their place in the post-war world. Disco's wartime boom had not brought a solution to its overspecialization in production for railways, and the once proudly diversified Scotia now admitted that it too was deeply dependent on railway work. In the decade before the war, Stelco had begun to threaten the latter's access to the central Canadian market, and the post-war changes in freight rates made competition with Ontario steel makers more difficult. The Maritime metal-working industries were not large enough to take up the slack and immediately after the war began to show signs of long-term decline and decay, as central Canadian industry closed down their Maritime operations or drove local competitors out of business. Partly to compensate for the loss of these markets, Scotia's pre-war expansion plans had involved a shift towards greater production for the transportation industries. The opening of its subsidiary, the Eastern Car Company, was clearly part of this re-orientation. In 1919 the corporation's general manager at Trenton told a royal commission: "Our work for a number of years has been largely railway work....Our orders vary very materially according to the needs of the railroads".⁹¹

As Algoma and Disco were discovering, this was an unreliable basis for industrial growth. During 1919 and 1920, markets for both corporations remained unstable, and in the steel towns production was sporadic, resulting in temporary shutdowns and short time for most workers. A major re-organization of the Nova Scotia industry had taken place by 1920, however, with the creation of the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco), a massive consolidation of both Nova Scotian steel companies, extensive coal holdings, and the Halifax Shipyards.⁹² The success of this dramatic new corporate merger hinged to a great extent on the labour situation in Nova Scotia. The flexibility of the corporations' diverse pre-war labour force was declining as returning veterans demanded the dismissal of "aliens" and many of the Europeans headed home. With the lingering menace of an unsympathetic public opinion and the resurgence of a powerful farmers' protest movement, corporate leaders initially seemed more concerned to placate the new unions in their plants and to draw them into an alliance to protect and stabilize the industry. "What is most important is that there should be patient and complete co-operation of the management, the operating staff and the employees generally...through an unsettled period that may now possibly be ahead", Disco argued through the Halifax press. "Every man should bend his energy to the work of conservation, the elimination of waste, the effort to save and cut out unnecessary expenditure of every kind".⁹³ When a federal tariff commission passed through the region in

91 *Ibid.*, New Glasgow, p. 3581.

92 Frank, "British Empire Steel Corporation", pp. 3-34; McCracken, "Steel Industry", pp. 180-232; *Iron and Steel of Canada*, II, 7 (August 1919), p. 193; II, 8 (September 1919), p. 217; III, 2 (March 1920), p. 72; III, 5 (June 1920), p. 155.

93 *Herald*, 1 January 1919.

1920, the corporations made sure that local union leaders joined them in making a common plea for protection.⁹⁴ By the early months of 1920, however, as production picked up somewhat, a consensus had apparently emerged among the corporate leaders of the steel industry to follow the example of their American counterparts, who had broken the great steel strike of 1919: they decided to root out the new steelworkers' unions and to re-establish their undisputed hegemony over the steel plants. They were aided by the growing anti-labour momentum of the national "red scare" that was being fanned by the press in the wake of the Winnipeg general strike and the creation of the One Big Union. The result was a series of skirmishes with the various unions that would reach a violent climax in Sydney in 1923.

Each of the steel companies began by softening up their workers with 10-per-cent wage increases in the early months of 1920.⁹⁵ By this point they were also practising the new personnel management that was sweeping across North America, which professed to take account of the "human factor" in production. Both Scotia and Disco had tried unsuccessfully to convince their workers to accept the new model of "industrial councils" pioneered in the United States by Mackenzie King, and distinct offices or departments of "Industrial Relations" appeared to promote welfare programmes that would build loyalty and commitment to the firm among steelworkers.⁹⁶ Elaborate "Safety First" programmes were introduced, and in 1920 Disco announced the creation of an "employees' service division" within its new Department of Industrial Relations, which would oversee the various welfare plans and much more: "The plans for this division contemplate district nurses, hospitals, garden plots, Company's farm, employees' clubs, athletic, musical and dramatic societies, employees magazines, boarding camps, cafeterias, restaurants, and the accommodation for single-men boarders". Most of these grandiose plans, in fact, never saw the light of day in Cape Breton and before long, the corporations began to reveal the iron fist inside the velvet glove.⁹⁷

The apparent change of tactics coincided with the organization of the new Besco conglomerate, but the new toughness seemed to reflect a corporate wisdom of the whole steel industry, since the same moves came from the Ontario steelmaking corporations during 1920. In New Glasgow-Trenton Scotia stubbornly resisted the combined efforts of the Amalgamated lodge and the electricians' and machinists' unions for a new wage schedule and for several months refused to accept a board of conciliation. The corporation conceded to such intervention only when the workers began to organize their own new

94 File 13, Tariff Enquiry and Commission, RG 36/8, vol. 6, pp. 1955-63, PAC.

95 *Iron and Steel of Canada*, III, 1 (February 1920), p. 34; *Herald*, 13 April 1920; *Workers' Weekly*, 25 June 1920.

96 *Canadian Labor Weekly*, 4 May, 1 June 1918; *Eastern Federationist*, 9 August 1919; Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Evidence, Sydney, pp. 3821, 3840.

97 *Iron and Steel of Canada*, III, 7 (August 1920), p. 208.

weekly work schedule with Saturday afternoon off, "until such time as the eight-hour day comes into effect". That board reported on 1 June and offered its services should there be any further disputes over wages. But when the union requested its help later in the year, the federal Department of Labour refused to act in the face of Scotia's rigid opposition.⁹⁸ In Sydney Disco resisted the unions in its midst just as vigorously. It managed to break a lengthy machinists' strike for higher wages and shorter hours in the spring and summer of 1920.⁹⁹ The defeat of these skilled workers had a severe dampening effect on Sydney's steelworkers. "The failure of the machinists' strike recently has made the majority of the men more careful about walk-outs unless the cause is really serious", the press reported when 25 black firemen in Disco's rolling mills, apparently unorganized, lost a strike for higher wages in August 1920.¹⁰⁰ By the fall, both Disco and Scotia were preparing to fend off yet another challenge from their skilled workers, this time the unionized railway workers on their property, who wanted wage parity with other North American railwaymen and an eight-hour day. In a demoralizing year-long battle that saw non-union crews recruited to replace the strikers, the corporations broke the strike and the union and managed to survive a brief boycott by the Railway Brotherhoods early in 1921.¹⁰¹

The knock-out blows came when the material basis of the unions' original bargaining strength was finally cut out from under them. After two years of sporadic production, the winter of 1920-21 saw the first drastic curtailments of work and layoffs of thousands of Nova Scotia steelworkers. Some of the dislocation resulted from Besco's rationalization schemes. In November 1920 Scotia's blast furnaces and open-hearth facilities at Sydney Mines were shut down, never to be relighted, and Trenton's "cogging" (blooming) mill was closed in favour of Sydney's plant. A few months later Disco's brand new plate mill was shut down permanently. The corporations soon had a large pool of desperate unemployed workers to draw upon. "They are trying to work on us", a Sydney unionist reported; "they are laying off men and bringing other men from foreign countries to work in the plant....Perhaps it is for cheap labor or to alienate the men from their union".¹⁰² Early in 1921 both the province's steel companies felt they now had the freedom to cut wages by an average of 20 per cent. To symbolize the return to the pre-war regime of industrial management, the firms

98 *Workers' Weekly*, 26 March, 9, 16, 23 April, 14, 21 May, 4 June, 17 December 1920; *Labour Gazette*, XX, 5 (May 1920), p. 521; 6 (June 1920), p. 651; 7 (July 1920), pp. 831-3.

99 File 20 (107), RG 27, vol. 320, PAC.

100 *Herald*, 9 August 1920.

101 *Labour Gazette*, XXI, 1 (January 1921), p. 41; 12 (December 1921), p. 1479; *Herald*, 23, 24, 26 November, 10, 11, 18, 23 December, 4, 8, 18 January 1921; *Canadian Railroader*, 5 February 1921; *Workers' Weekly*, 26 August 1921; File 21 (158), RG 27, vol. 326, PAC; *Iron and Steel of Canada*, III, 11 (December 1920), p. 323.

102 *Amalgamated Journal*, 28 October 1920.

also blacklisted prominent union activists. The local unions rallied for a fight with mass meetings in all the steel towns and a joint demand to the federal Department of Labour for boards of conciliation to mediate with their employers. Besco, however, scoffed at such a proposal. The Amalgamated Association's Canadian vice-president, Ernest Curtis, travelled between the centres of agitation and announced the threat of a general strike in all three plants. But with all the plants closed and many men even leaving the region to look for work elsewhere, the corporations could safely ignore all this bluster, knowing that they held the upper hand. Further cuts followed later in the year. The steelworkers' organizations in Sydney Mines and New Glasgow-Trenton soon fell apart, and the attendance at the Sydney lodge meetings shrank to a mere handful.¹⁰³

For what was left of the workers at Nova Scotia Steel, the fight was over for another 15 years. But in Sydney a group of Disco's steelworkers was determined to continue the struggle for the kind of industrial democracy that had captivated the imagination of so many of their fellow workers at the end of the war. Once again it was the Cape Breton miners who made the difference. During the spring and summer of 1922 the miners had vigorously resisted a wage cut with a prolonged strike that ended in early September.¹⁰⁴ Emboldened by this example, and by the return of somewhat fuller production, the steelworkers' union at Disco began a new organizing drive and even added a new lodge based in Whitney Pier, made up predominantly of less skilled Europeans. In February the union took control of a spontaneous plant-wide walk-out and won a minor concession from the corporation to investigate the grievance that lay behind the strike. Over the next four months, both sides prepared for a more decisive confrontation. The union pressed for recognition, wage increases, and the eight-hour day, and at the end of June led workers out on strike for the first two demands. Disco rallied a force of militiamen, provincial police, and company police to impose what has become known as Cape Breton's "Peterloo" — a bloody repression of pickets and innocent bystanders that eventually broke the back of the strike, though not before the coal miners had come out on strike in sympathy with the steelworkers. In the face of blacklisting and other forms of

103 "Memorandum with Regard to the Conditions Presently Existing in the Coal and Steel Industries of the Province of Nova Scotia...", E.H. Armstrong Papers, MG 2, vol. 38, F4, PANS; *Iron and Steel of Canada*, III, 12 (January 1921), p. 365; IV, 1 (February 1921), p. 9; IV, 3 (April 1921), p. 67; IV, 5 (June 1921), p. 142; IV, 12 (January 1922), p. 9; *Amalgamated Journal*, 28 October, 2 December 1920, 20 January, 17 February 1921; *Labour Gazette*, XXI, 2 (February 1921), p. 147; 3 (March 1921), p. 314; *Workers' Weekly*, 14 January, 11, 25 February, 4, 18, 25, 29 March, 8, 16, 29 April, 20 May, 3, 10 June, 1 July, 6, 19 August 1921; *Maritime Labor Herald*, 6 May 1922; McCracken, "Nova Scotia Steel Industry", pp. 200-1.

104 David Frank, "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry, Cape Breton, 1922", in Kealey and Warrian, *Essays*, pp. 161-84; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, pp. 9-91; Donald Macgillivray, "Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton, 1919-1925", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1971, ch. 11.

intimidation, industrial unionism soon gave up the ghost in Sydney.¹⁰⁵

An important phase of worker resistance to the terms and conditions of employment in Nova Scotia's steel plants thus came to an end. The steelworkers' post-war vision of "industrial democracy" had finally been smashed. The steelmaking corporations had vigorously rejected the idea that their workers might exercise some formal power in co-determining workplace policies. With the active assistance and collaboration of the Nova Scotia government, the corporations had re-established their systems of hierarchical, authoritarian control, which left the workers in a state of fearful dependence and vulnerability. In the rhetoric of the wartime unionists, industrial "Kaiserism" had been firmly implanted in the heart of the province's major mass-production industry.

The activism of Nova Scotia's steelworkers at the end of World War I can be explained in part by their situation within the industry's labour processes and the impact of the war on their work world, and in part by specific regional factors. In the early 20th century, these workers, like those in Ontario's steel plants, found themselves immersed in new mass-production labour processes where many of them still exercised considerable skill and shop-floor independence, but where the structures of internal labour markets and managerial control made it extremely difficult to assert their own needs and concerns. The unusual social, material, and ideological conditions created by the "Great War" changed all that, and the steelworkers developed a new freedom from complete corporate control. Initially these workers simply refused to work as hard, as long, or as regularly as their managers demanded. But, by the last year of the war, this individual resistance was overshadowed by a more concerted effort to establish new power relations and new standards of justice and democracy in the steel plants on a permanent basis. The more skilled segment of the work force, who led this new organizing effort, now had the leverage that they had lacked before the war to assert their pride and importance to the industry. Industrial unions took hold in Pictou and Cape Breton and, after a series of major confrontations in the spring and summer of 1918, informal collective bargaining arrangements developed with Scotia and Disco.

These developments conformed to the patterns of worker resistance in the Canadian steel industry generally, but, on the whole, Nova Scotia's steelworkers were better organized and more militant. The explanation for this difference lies not inside the steel plants, but in the working-class communities of the region. In particular, the stubbornly independent coal miners who worked nearby, often for the same corporations, provided an aggressive leadership that was not

105 Macgillivray, "The 1923 Strike in Steel and the Miners' Sympathy Strike", *Cape Breton's Magazine*, XXII (June 1979), pp. 1-9; William G. Snow, "Sydney Steelworkers: Their Troubled Past and the Birth of Lodge 1064", Beaton Institute, typescript 1979; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, pp. 91-110; David Frank, "The Trial of J.B. McLachlan", Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1983), pp. 210-1; Don Macgillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s", in Macgillivray and Tennyson, *Cape Breton Historical Essays*, pp. 102-3.

available in the Ontario steel towns. Mass-production workers were thus drawn into the orbit of resource-sector industrial relations. These two groups of workers also shared a regional working-class culture that pitted them against the absentee corporate capitalists who controlled the coal and steel resources, a culture that was taking on an increasingly radical edge. By the spring of 1919 they were co-operating with other workers in the industrialized region of the province to impose a new working-class agenda on the industrial and political life of Nova Scotia. The defeat of this movement for "industrial democracy" came later than in western Canada, but it was just as devastating. The steelmaking corporations turned against the unions in 1920 and, in the context of mass layoffs, re-established the forms of industrial autocracy that had preceded this interlude of union strength. It was the severity of the depression that set in at that point, and the long-term structural problems of the Maritime economy, that undercut the steelworkers' collective strength and determination. When Sydney's workers rallied once again in 1923, their employer called on the state for armed intervention and managed to crush this last round of resistance.

Yet the story was not over. In the aftermath of the 1923 strike, Disco created a plant council of equal numbers of workers' and employers' representatives, which within a few years became a new focus of agitation for higher wages and shorter hours. Frustrated by the weakness of the council, the leaders of this new militancy raised the banner of "industrial democracy" from independent steelworkers' unions in both Sydney and Trenton in 1935. The next year these unions joined the new Steel Workers Organizing Committee (later renamed the United Steelworkers of America), an affiliate of the burgeoning Congress of Industrial Organizations and, thanks to new provincial labour legislation, won recognition from their employers in 1937. A first contract was signed in 1940, but it took the social and political disruption of another World War and then a successful national steel strike in 1946 for the steelworkers to secure permanent status for their industrial unions in the Nova Scotia steel industry.¹⁰⁶

106 George MacEachern, "Organizing Sydney's Steelworkers in the Thirties", in Gloria Montero, ed., *We Stood Together: First-Hand Accounts of Dramatic Events in Canada's Labour Past* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 60-68; MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, pp. 207-24, 253-65; Laurel Sefton McDowell, "The 1943 Steel Strike Against Wartime Wage Controls", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), pp. 175-96; Ronald McDonald Adams, "The Development of the United Steelworkers of America in Canada, 1936-1951", M.A. thesis, Queen's University, 1952.