

J. B. McLachlan

A real Nova Scotian hero

by David Frank

Meet James Bryson McLachlan. Born in Scotland in 1869, McLachlan came to Canada in 1902 to work in the Cape Breton coal mines. As the popular leader of Nova Scotia's coal miners, McLachlan became one of the most effective and brilliant individuals in Canadian working class history. His story is in many ways the story of the coal miners and working people in Nova Scotia, and a short sketch of his life and times can help remind us of an unusual man and the movement of which he was a part.

McLachlan's family were cotton weavers and farm labourers who left the countryside of southern Scotland in the 1870s to find work in the booming mining towns of industrial Lanarkshire. McLachlan grew up in the bleak poverty of the Scottish coalfields and he was only ten years old when he followed his brother and his father into the mines. There he learned the pride and skill, danger and hardship of the miner's work. As he progressed from trapper boy to collier, the clouds of coal and stone dust caked his lungs and his hands and face became pitted with the blue scars that mark the dangers of the mine. These years made a strong impression on McLachlan's character. He always remembered the "blood splashed over the coal"; for all the millions the coal operators put into the mines, nothing could match the human investment the miners made every day.

As a young man McLachlan supported trade union leaders like Keir Hardie who were trying to build strong unions in the Scottish coalfields. Like them, he saw the miners' fight as a battle for better conditions, higher wages and, in Hardie's words, "the complete emancipation of the worker from the thralldom of wagedom." McLachlan's careful study of the Bible and of social critics like Thomas Carlyle convinced him that the chaos, cruelty and inhumanity of industrial capitalism must be ended. Like thousands of coal miners of his generation, McLachlan was a staunch socialist and trade unionist by the time he left Scotland in 1902.

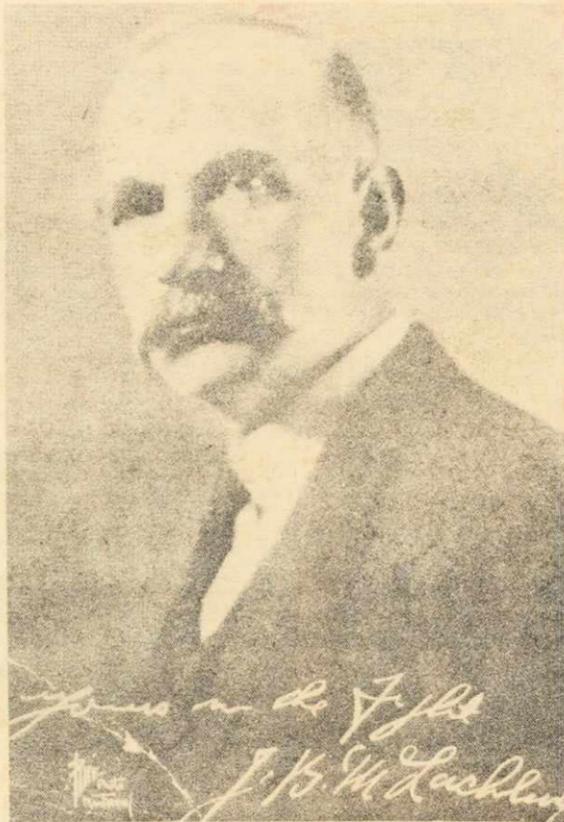
Large scale industrial capitalism arrived in the Nova Scotia coal industry in the 1890s and McLachlan was among the thousands of workingmen who settled their families in the expanding mining towns. Conditions for the coal miners in Cape Breton were no better than in Scotland; the same harsh poverty and exploitation prevailed and McLachlan again plunged his energies into efforts to build a strong and aggressive union. The existing Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA), formed in 1879, was no match for the large new coal companies and the majority of the miners voted to merge the PWA with the more powerful United Mine Workers of America.

In March 1909 District 26 of the UMWA was formed and McLachlan was elected secretary-treasurer. With the encouragement of the coal companies, the PWA leaders bitterly resisted the new union and a long struggle followed. McLachlan was at the centre of the storm. During the 1909 strike, he administered the union strike fund, gathered relief, he administered for evicted families, organized parades and fought court battles. Blacklisted for the rest of his life from the province's coal mines, McLachlan remained a tireless agitator, speaking widely in halls, theatres and kitchens, writing letters, leaflets and speeches, visiting immigrant workers in their crowded boarding houses to convince them, through an interpreter, to support the union. The long, hard work of union organizing could sometimes prove dangerous. For years McLachlan could not walk down the street without having his movements reported by company policemen. McLachlan later recalled that at one union meeting during these dark years two men got into a fight and one of them was shot dead; it turned out that both men were detectives sent to disrupt the union's campaign.

These years established McLachlan's reputation as a devoted working class leader. His popularity grew; never defeated in a union election, he remained secretary-treasurer of the miners' union until 1923. The campaign for effective trade unionism finally succeeded in 1917 when the government, anxious to prevent a wartime strike in the coal industry, forced the coal companies to recognize a union which had the miners' support. The result was the dissolution of the PWA and the formation of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, which in 1919 became District 26 of the UMWA. That year the miners at last gained the eight hour day and they looked forward to great improvements in their long substandard living and working conditions. "It took a long time for us to wake up," commented one veteran miner at the time, "but we have alarm clocks all around us now and McLachlan is one of the noisiest of them all. Good luck to him."

Almost at once a new crisis faced the coal miners. At the end of the war the coal industry was in trouble: markets were disappearing and unemployment and suffering invaded the mining towns; the formation of a new profit-hungry corporation, the British Empire Steel Corporation (BESCO), added more troubles, for the new company soon launched a damaging round of wage reductions, beginning with a one-third cut in wages in 1922. McLachlan led the resistance to BESCO. Few miners

who lived through the 1920s can forget the defiant picture McLachlan cut on the stage of local theatres, pacing restlessly back and forth, his red mustache bristling, his eyes flashing, his pipe issuing a steady stream of smoke, his deep Scottish burr reading out endlessly from government reports, financial statements, family budgets and pay slips. To demonstrate the company's profits he asked his audience to imagine a trail of silver dollars, end to end, all the way from Cape Breton to Vancouver — and back; to represent the wage cuts he spilled milk from a child's full glass; to measure the miners' poverty he conducted contests among the miners' wives asking them to show how it was possible to support a family on the meagre wages the miners received.



Behind his oratorical flourishes was McLachlan's underlying argument, one he never tired of repeating: "You hold your present jobs not because your employer cares whether you get a living, but because he can make profit out of your labour. Profit is the end for which you are employed at all. The kind of life you live is only an incidental matter with your boss." "This land is yours, all yours, and you should own it and work it," he told his listeners, "You are doing the work and the capitalists are getting the riches." McLachlan believed that there could be no permanent peace for the working class under capitalism, which he saw as a basically irrational and inhuman system. Perhaps his most profound belief was his conviction that the working class must "redeem the world from the chaos of capitalism" and he devoted his life to this cause.

A superb agitator, McLachlan was also a practical leader. His intimate knowledge of coal mining conditions and his utter loyalty to the coal miners made him an effective trade union leader. As secretary-treasurer he negotiated the first detailed wage agreements in the Nova Scotia coalfields and under his leadership the miners made important gains in their standard of living. McLachlan demonstrated his tactical resourcefulness during the 1922 strike, when his imaginative application of the traditional Scottish miners' weapon, the "wee darg" or restriction of output, countered the one-third cut in wages with a one-third cut in coal production. Perhaps one of the greatest tributes to McLachlan's effectiveness came from Besco President Roy Wolvin, who blamed McLachlan as "the concentrated cause" of the unrest among the coal miners. McLachlan would have been amused to hear Wolvin's comments; a firm believer in democratic trade unionism, McLachlan knew that no leader could ever cajole or intimidate the independent-minded miners. His popularity and leadership depended as much upon the militancy and radicalism of the coal miners themselves as on any of his personal qualities.

One of McLachlan's greatest hopes was to see the benefits of trade unionism extended to the steelworkers of Sydney. By 1923 the steelworkers had been struggling for 20 years to establish an effective union at the steel plant. When they went on strike that summer against Besco to try again to win recognition of their union, the company and provincial government retaliated with armed force. A squad of mounted provincial police ran riot on Victoria Road, riding down and beating residents of the working class neighborhood near the steel plant. At McLachlan's urging, the coal miners came out on strike to their

outrage and to support the steelworkers. For this gesture of working class solidarity, the miners paid heavily. John L. Lewis, president of the international UMWA, withdrew the autonomy of District 26, suspended McLachlan from office and expelled him and other officers from the union. At the same time the provincial government jailed McLachlan on a charge of seditious libel and sentenced him to two years in Dorchester penitentiary. It was clear that neither the province nor the international union would tolerate the militant, class conscious trade unionism McLachlan represented. Supported by protests from workers all across the country, the coal miners won McLachlan's release from prison early in 1924 and he returned home to Cape Breton to a hero's welcome. But the strength of the miners' union had been broken and the traumatic 1925 strike proved a crushing blow. Not until the 1940s did the union come near to regaining the effectiveness it had under McLachlan's leadership.

As well as leading the coal miners, McLachlan played many other important roles in the labour movement. He was a pioneer advocate of working class political action and belonged in turn to the Socialist Party of Canada, the Independent Labour Party and the Communist Party of Canada. He ran six times for the provincial and federal parliaments; never successful, his campaigns opened the way for victories by other labour candidates locally, provincially and nationally. In 1917 he was a founder of the Independent Labour Party in Cape Breton and two years later he helped form the provincial ILP, which scored a great success in the 1920 provincial election. In 1919 McLachlan helped organize the original Nova Scotia Federation of Labour, which did not survive the 1920s. He was also prominent on the national scene and was widely known in the early 1930s as president of the Workers' Unity League, a federation of radical Canadian unions which heralded the achievements of industrial unionism in the later 1930s and 1940s.

McLachlan's formal education ended at a young age, but he remained a lifelong student. He read widely, ranging freely through philosophy, history and economics studying mathematics and foreign languages, devouring reports, newspapers and magazines. His impressive command of fact, figure and arguments helped make him a compelling leader. He believed strongly in the need for working class education and through the miners' union he tried to start labour scholarships for miners' children and to begin a labour college in the industrial area. A vigorous advocate of the labour press, McLachlan in 1921 helped establish the **Maritime Labor Herald**, which he edited from 1924-1926, and in 1929-1935 he edited the **Nova Scotia Miner**. In the pages of these and other newspapers he renewed his constant efforts to agitate, educate and organize. Perhaps his belief in the importance of an independent working class point of view was summed up in his statement to a royal commission in 1925: "I believe in education for action. I believe in telling children the truth about the history of the world, that it does not consist of the history of kings, or lords or cabinets. It consists of the history of the mass of the workers, a thing that is not taught in the schools. I believe in telling children how to measure value, a thing that is not taught in any school."

When he died in 1937 McLachlan left behind a considerable legend. His funeral procession stretched for miles through the streets of Glace Bay and tributes poured in from across the country. The press of his day had pilloried him as a wild anarchist and madman; to the RCMP he was a "fiend" and to John L. Lewis "an evil genius." But those who knew him always remarked upon his great personal character; his generosity, humour, honesty, courage and his keen appreciation of people. A radical, McLachlan had no simple formula for the achievement of socialism, but he knew that no revolutionary changes could be accomplished without constant struggle by the working class. Over the years he made an outstanding contribution to this struggle.

For the working people of Cape Breton, the name of James Bryson McLachlan has come to stand as a symbol of those historic years of hardship, struggle and achievement by the coal miners. But 50 years after the dramatic 1920s, industrial Cape Breton remains a monument to the colossal failure of industrial capitalism in Canada. This winter unemployment was higher than 30 per cent and the local economy, drained for so long by private capital, now requires immense transfusions of money from the government in order to stay alive. That Cape Bretoners have survived so many years of economic exploitation is a tribute to the determination and confidence of the community. The future remains uncertain, but Cape Bretoners have never been willing victims and the lessons that McLachlan taught 50 years ago have not lost their relevance.

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