

Nova Scotia Labour Chronology

by John Bell

The educational system and the media represent two of the most important sources of information available to us. Both of these institutions exert an enormous influence on our lives, ultimately molding the prejudices which determine the way we perceive the world. To control them obviously requires power and wealth — both of which business has in surplus.

Labour, however, derives its strength elsewhere — from numbers and solidarity, neither of which can buy a T.V. station or influence educational policies. In short, labour is at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to presenting its case before the public. And it shows. For example, you will look in vain in our textbooks for an account of the contribution of working people to Nova Scotia. Similarly the media, when not neglecting workers, allows half-truths and lies to pass as facts.

All of this contributes — and is intended to contribute — to labour's isolation. Without public knowledge of their past struggles, and with lies prevailing about their contemporary struggles, workers can expect little understanding or support.

While the following chronology cannot, of course, redress this situation, it may serve to outline just some of the highlights of the history of N.S. labour, a history of sacrifice, determination and, above all, courage.

1777 Wage controls were imposed throughout the province.

1789 The Brother Carpenter Society of Halifax was organized.

1814 Shoemakers were organized by this date, if not earlier.

1816 The government, in an effort to thwart union activity, passed an Act which outlawed all associations attempting to increase wages and improve working conditions. The statute pointed to the growing influence of unionism among tradesmen, journeymen, and workmen in Nova Scotia.

1840 Coal miners at Albion Mines, Pictou County conducted what was probably the first recorded strike in N.S. Appropriately, a wage reduction was at issue.

1841 Pictou miners went on strike against company efforts to force a wage decrease. During the strike over 100 women and children besieged the house of a company agent.

1861 Miners in Stellarton founded the province's first cooperative.

1864 A miners' strike for higher wages at Sydney Mines was met with violence and intimidation as the company and the government colluded to defeat the workmen. The tactics employed were later to become familiar to Cape Breton workers: importing strike breakers, forcing evictions, calling in troops, and pushing through anti-labour legislation. In the face of such an overwhelming onslaught the strike was broken. Journeymen house joiners (carpenters) participated in one of Halifax's first recorded strikes.

1869 Robert Murray organized the Halifax Typographical Society which was chartered as Local 130 of the International Typographical Union. This marked the arrival of the first international to the province.

1879 The Provincial Workmen's Association was formed at a secret meeting organized by Springhill miners.

1880 The Provincial Workmen's Association successfully struck for recognition at Drummond Colliery, Westville.

1882 A year-long miners' strike occurred at Lingan, Cape Breton. The company resorted to the importation of Scottish strike breakers and militia.

Bricklayers and masons in Halifax were organized.

1883 The first attempt was made to amalgamate Halifax unions.

1884 Stonecutters in Halifax were organized. An attempt was made to prohibit the employment of children in N.S. mines with a Child Labour Act which was finally enacted in 1885.

A Halifax dock strike, the largest strike action in the city during the nineteenth century, ended in victory for the Halifax Labourers' Union.

1886 The Provincial Workmen's Association fielded candidates in the provincial elections. This marked labour's first participation in the electoral process.

1889 The Amalgamated Trade Unions of Halifax was formed.

1891 Halifax letter carriers formed a union.

1893 The newly formed Dominion Coal Company was granted a 99-year lease and exclusive rights

to unworked coal deposits. It was also offered the option to assume control of existing collieries.

1897 The Knights of Labour made substantial, but short-lived, gains in the province at the expense of the conservative P.W.A.

Both Halifax railway carmen and plumbers organized unions.

1898 The Halifax Trades and Labour Council was organized.

The International Typographical Union strikes occurred at the **Herald** and **Mail**, and the **Chronicle** and **Echo**. Striking workers published **The Toiler** and **Weekly News**.

1900 By the turn of the century about 70 local unions existed in the province.

1902 The Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (T.L.C.C.) chartered the Halifax District Trades and Labour Council.

J.B. McLachlan, a recent immigrant from his native Scotland, arrived in Nova Scotia.

An International Longshoremen's Association local was organized in Halifax.



19th century fish plant at LaHave, N.S.

1904 The Provincial Workmen's Association's bid to embrace a much wider range of trades came to an abrupt halt with the defeat of a P.W.A.-sponsored steel strike against wage cutbacks. Troops were brought to Cape Breton during this strike.

1905 The Fishermen's Union of Nova Scotia was incorporated. Textile workers in Windsor struck.

1906 The British Canadian Cooperative Society was founded at Sydney Mines by a group of miners.

1907 The International Longshoremen's Association struck at Halifax.

Electrical workers in the capital formed a

union. The Canadian Federation of Labour held its convention in Glace Bay.

1908 The first United Mine Workers (U.M.W.) local was chartered at Springhill.

An extraordinary P.W.A. convention voted in favour of affiliation with the U.M.W.

1909 District 26, U.M.W. was chartered as battle lines between the P.W.A. and the U.M.W. were drawn.

A bitter strike began over the issue of U.M.W. recognition. Over half of the man-days lost in Canada this year were to be attributable to this divisive strike which pitted miner against miner.

1910 The P.W.A. - U.M.W. confrontation continued until April 27 when the U.M.W. was forced into submission.

Dominion Steel Co. was formed. Dominion Coal was a subsidiary of this firm.

The Provincial Workmen's Association, about 5,000 strong, affiliated with the Canadian Federation of Labour thereby providing Nova Scotia with a powerful voice in that organization.

1911 John T. Joy, a Halifax longshoreman, contested a Halifax seat in the provincial election for the Direct Labour Representation Party. Joy would later become Labour's first representative on the Workmen's Compensation Board.

1914 The war ushered in a period which witnessed a general slackening off of trade union activity as working people diverted their attention, both on the home front and the battlefields of Europe, to the war effort.

1915 J.B. McLachlan ran in the provincial election on the Socialist ticket.

McLachlan, Bob Baxter, and Silby Barrett organized the United Mine Workers of Nova Scotia.

Although it was earlier agreed that the A.M.W. would remain an independent, provincial union, the organization's move to affiliate with the U.M.W. provoked no protest.

Sixty delegates met in Halifax in a convention sponsored by the N.S. executive of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. Delegates resolved to form a provincial Federation of Labour and endorsed a proposal to establish a N.S. Independent Labour Party as well.

More than 3500 Amherst workers, members of the One Big Union, organized a three-week General Strike, the second such strike in Canada during this year.

The building trades in Halifax struck. Included in the work stoppage were carpenters, joiners,

Sing the song of the workers in a picket line patrol
Who fought to add some elbow room, a dollar to the dole,
And through all cops and clubbing kept to their far-off goal.

Sing the song of the workers, the great anonymous
Who on a thousand lonely fields gave up their lives for us,
Living without a fanfare and dying without a fuss.

masons, bricklayers, plasterers, electrical workers, painters, and plumbers.

The first issue of the Halifax anti-capitalist weekly, **The Citizen**, appeared. The paper, founded by E.E. Pride, was endorsed by the Halifax Trades and Labour Council. Joe Wallace was appointed editor.

1920 U.M.W. District 26 voted \$500 to the Winnipeg Strike leaders' defense fund.

The Halifax Labour Party contested 4 wards in the Halifax civic election, winning three seats: J.A. Scanlon, Ira Mason, and E.J. Rudge. In addition, Dr. Hawkins, a candidate endorsed by Labour, was elected Mayor.

The Halifax Labour Party organized the founding convention of the N.S. Labour Party which met in Truro.

Farmers and the N.S. Labour Party agreed on joint action in the forthcoming provincial election.

BESCO, a merger of the Halifax Shipyards, Dominion Steel, and Dominion Coal, and the third largest employer in the country, was formed.

2000 Halifax Shipyards workers struck for a wage increase, a 44-hour week, and recognition of their Marine Trades Council. Strike breakers from Great Britain were brought to the city. The workers were eventually starved into submission and blacklisted.

The Farmer-Labour coalition elected 11 members, forming the official opposition in the provincial legislature.

A group of waitresses in Halifax struck. The government passed a statute which it did not enforce: A Minimum Wages and Maximum Hours for Women Act.

The International Typographical Union finally won closed shops at both the **Herald** and the **Chronicle**.

1921 The **Maritime Labour Herald**, a spirited anti-capitalist weekly, was founded by J.B. McLachlan, D.N. Brodie, and others.

BESCO announced a 1/3 wage cut.

1922 The Workers' Party (W.P.) made significant headway in the province: recruiting, among others, J.B. McLachlan and Joe Wallace.

Police moved to squash the Halifax Unemployed Movement which was becoming increasingly more militant in its demands.

Joe Wallace succeeded in engineering the affiliation of the Halifax Labour Party with the Worker's Party.

A 100% strike commenced in the coal fields. The government responded with brute force, dispatching 250 troops to Cape Breton from Halifax. Their number was augmented with troops from Petawawa and London, in Ontario.

1923 Steelworkers, after having been lured back to work from a short-lived walkout, struck once again. A battle ensued over the coke ovens, which the workers refused to relinquish. The armed forces invaded Sydney. The Provincial Police ran amok in Whitney Pier, whipping, clubbing, beating, and trampling innocent men, women, and children. A child was killed and a number of people were seriously injured as a consequence.

Miners, outraged by this violence directed

against innocent citizens, struck. The government responded in customary fashion — more troops were ordered to Cape Breton.

The courts were used to undermine the United Mine Workers District Leadership. Dan Livingstone, president, and J.B. McLachlan, secretary-treasurer, were arrested by the Provincial Police.

1924 As a result of a mass campaign J.B. McLachlan was released from prison, arriving in Cape Breton to rallies and parades.

Ben Legere, One Big Union organizer, former locals among N.S. steelworkers.

The **Maritime Labour Herald** publishing plant was destroyed by fire.

tion, under the direction of Moses M. Coady.

1929 The Women's Federated Labour Union was formed. The organization lobbied the government for enforcement of the minimum wage and maximum hours legislation passed 9 years before. J.B. McLachlan launched **The Nova Scotia Miner**.

1930 The first women representatives sat on the Halifax Trades and Labour Council.

The Liverpool Paper Makers' Union was chartered.

The United Maritime Fishermen Federation was formed in Halifax.

1932 The government established a Department of Labour.

A convention organized to probe the deteriorating situation faced by N.S. miners decided to form the Amalgamated Mine Workers, a union which would be distinguished by its rank and file democracy.

The first provincial credit unions were founded at Broad Cove and Reserve.

1935 George MacEachern, a leading trade unionist, spearheaded a drive to organize a steelworkers' union.

1937 The N.S. Trade Union Act, the first of its kind in Canada, was passed. The Act, which secured the right to union check-off and collective bargaining for N.S. workers, was largely the work of steelworkers MacKay, Neville, and MacEachern.

Lodge 1064 of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers at the Sydney Steel plant received an overwhelming majority in the first certification vote held under the provisions of the new act.

1938 A District 26 convention, held in Truro, committed itself to the establishment of the Nova Scotia C.C.F.

1940 George MacEachern played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Cape Breton Labour Council.

1943 Trenton steelworkers organized a meeting of N.S. union representatives to forge a strategy to combat Dosco's announced intention to close its Trenton plant. The outcome of this gathering was the province's first general strike which enjoyed the support of well over 20,000 workers.

1946 A steel strike began in Sydney. Workers, in addition to national demands, sought to wipe out the wage differential which separated them from their counterparts elsewhere in Canada.

1947 In the face of chronic unemployment, the government deported workers to Upper Canada.

Fishermen, organized by the radical Canadian Fishermen's Union, a Canadian Seamen's Union affiliate, were denied collective bargaining rights when the government bowed to concerted pressure from the fish companies and classified fishermen as 'co-adventurers'.



The old Windsor furniture factory.



George MacEachern, militant rank and file steelworker.

1948 Deep Sea Fishing Co. cut the wages of Canadian Seamen's Union members.

1949 Dosco, with the blessing of the government, joined in the national campaign to smash the Canadian Seamen's Union, breaking a C.S.U.-sponsored strike in Sydney.

1951 The Cold War manifested itself in N.S. The Nova Scotia Labour Relations Board rejected a bid for certification by the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of Canada as a consequence of J.K. Bell's Communist affiliations. In addition, the District 26 annual convention was marred by anti-communist hysteria and witch-hunting.

1952 A mining disaster in Stellarton claimed 19 lives.

1956 A mining disaster occurred in Springhill, with a death toll of 39.

1958 Another 75 men died in another tragic mine disaster in Springhill.

1959 A long, bitter strike of 14 months duration occurred at Canadian Gypsum near Windsor, as quarry workers, under the leadership of local president Sam Shiers, became the first Nova Scotia workers to confront one of the most intransigent and powerful enemies of workers throughout the world — the U.S. multinationals.

1962 N.D.P. candidate Malcolm MacInnes won a seat in the Federal House. The Provincial N.D.P. held its founding convention in Halifax.

1966 The Donald Report was released, recommending the death of the Cape Breton Coal Industry.

1967 The United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union dispatched organizers to Nova Scotia.

Black Friday — Hawker-Siddeley stunned the people of Cape Breton with its announcement of the closure of the Sydney Steel Plant. A march 35,000 strong took place in Sydney, demanding government action to save the steel industry. A provincial corporation, Sysco, was established to continue operation of the steel plant.

1970 Fishermen led by the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union struck for union recognition. Acadia Fisheries at Mulgrave and Canso, and Booth Fisheries at Petit de Grat turned to the courts and succeeded in securing an injunction against picketing. The injunction was ignored and twelve fishermen were arrested and sentenced to up to nine months in jail. Some 2,500 construction workers walked off the job in sympathy with the fishermen. They were followed by 3,000 miners; a general strike was also threatened.

1971 As the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union awaited revisions to the N.S. Trade Union Act which would allow the fishermen to ask for a certification vote, the companies voluntarily recognized the American-based Canadian Food and Allied Workers Union.

1972 N.S. Highway workers rallied to the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which earned them the right to bargain.

1976 Nova Scotia Labour joined in the first national general strike, precipitated by the Trudeau government's imposition of wage controls.

John Bell works at the Dalhousie University Archives, which has recently established a Labour Archives in conjunction with the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour.