

Coal Mining in Pictou County, N.S.

The Companies Vountarily Increase Wages.—Strike at the Acadia.

(From Our New Glasgow Correspondent.)

How to cope with the ever-increasing cost of living has been a serious problem in the coal mining districts of Pictou County, Nova Scotia, for a considerable time. Owing to the prevailing prosperity at all the munition plants of New Glasgow, Trenton and Stellarton, the pinch had been ameliorated to a large extent in the case of all munition workers, but conditions at the collieries were entirely different. The miners fully recognized the difficulties of their employers, and continued to bear their pinch with patience and fortitude. The Intercolonial Coal Mining Co., Ltd., who own the Drummond Colliery, were the first to publish the result of their consideration of the problem. After a consultation with a committee of the company's employees, consisting of Frank White (chairman), James Chabassol, F. Smith, Wallie Graham and Howard Salter, Mr. President Fergie wrote the following letter:

Westville, Nova Scotia, April 12, 1916.

To the Committee of Workmen,
Drummond Colliery:

Dear Sirs:—

Referring to our conversation this evening, I now confirm the proposition I then laid before you.

First—There shall be a general advance on all day labor at the rate of 6 per cent, with a minimum advance of 10 cents per day.

Second—There shall be a general advance at all mines of 6 p.c. on all cutting and yardage rates, the minimum cutting rate to be 50 cents.

The above rates to become effective 16th April.

Yours faithfully,

CHARLES FERGIE,

President.

The effect of accepting these proposals is to give men who were getting \$1.60 per day \$1.70, while to miners in the No. 4 Mine are guaranteed a tonnage rate of 50c. per ton. In both cases, it will be noted, the effect slightly exceeds the specified 6 per cent. During the interview referred to, Mr. Fergie is reported to have said that he realized the increased cost of living demanded increased wages, but the company had had such hard sledding during the past few years that they were not in a position to deal as generously with the men as he would like to do. The matter had been carefully worked out, and he was prepared to submit a proposition which he trusted the men would approve of. Mr. Fergie further stated that if the men worked steadily, maintaining a good average daily output, which would gradually increase as the work developed, later on he would make another small advance if he saw his way clear to do so. The company was up against the necessity of putting up a new bankhead which would entail a heavy expenditure, and had not recovered by any means from the effects of the fire and other adverse conditions encountered in the course of last year and the year before that as well.

At a mass meeting of the employees hurriedly convened in the Muir's Hall, Westville, their committee reported, with the happy result that it was promptly resolved that the employers' propositions be accepted. As regarded the promise of further increase, the men readily acknowledged their share of the responsibility for the reduced profits as the result of the enhanced cost of production during recent years as compared with those halcyon times when big business was the order, the advance now granted must be considered a fairly substantial one, while the willing service assured by the happy relationship between employers and employees is an asset of incalculable value.

A former employee of the company, commenting editorially in "The Evening News" (New Glasgow), of April 13th, writes:

The announcement that the employees of the Intercolonial Coal Co., at Westville, have been granted a general advance in wages naturally opens up the question as to what the employees of the Acadia Coal Co. are going to do about it, particularly the low-paid men. It also puts the issue up to the company fairly as well.

Conditions are more favorable with the Acadia than was the case at the Drummond. The Acadia has not had any serious trouble for some considerable time, has been securing a big daily output at a lower production cost than the

Drummond, and has undoubtedly been making money for the past few months. Whilst the Board of Arbitration went out of its way to suggest that no further advances be asked for during the continuance of the war, it lost sight of the increase, the tremendous increase in the cost of living, on the one hand, and the increase in the selling price of coal on the other.

Under the circumstances the Acadia Coal Co. should be prepared not only to duplicate the action of the Intercolonial Coal Co., but to go one better. If the Acadia Coal Co. were to grant a general increase of ten per cent their men would rise up and call them blessed. If they could see their way clear to do even better than ten per cent for the laboring men and low-paid labor generally they would earn a reputation for liberality and consideration for their workmen which would go far to discount labor troubles in the future.

It is a point worthy of emphasis in passing, especially in view of later developments, that before the penning of the foregoing comments of an aspirant to a nomination as one of the County's candidates for a seat in the Provincial Legislature at the forthcoming election, the management of the Acadia Collieries had already taken the important initiative. And the very next day—Friday, 14th of April—there was posted at their collieries the following:

NOTICE!

Stellarton, April 14th, 1916.

To the Employees of the Acadia Coal Co., Ltd.

Owing to the increased price at present prevailing for coal, I am pleased to advise the employees of the Acadia Coal Co., Ltd., that the question of a general advance in wages has been submitted to our Board of Directors, and I expect at an early date to be in a position to announce the amount of such advance. In the meantime, I can assure all our employees that such advance shall take effect on and after April 16th.

(Sgd.) HECTOR PRUDHOMME,

Vice President and General Manager.

The same newspaper is authority for the statement that the foregoing notice "was read with decided pleasure by the men and boys employed there"; it also stated, what seemed to be at the time the view of everybody else concerned, that,

Whilst it is premature to comment on the advance until it is definitely known just what it amounts to, we feel it is only fair to commend the company for the step which has already been taken. The old proverb has it, "A stitch in time saves nine," and the Acadia and Intercolonial Companies have shown good judgment in readily recognizing the claims of their men for increased wages.

The cost of living has advanced to such a degree that increased earnings were absolutely necessary if people were to make ends meet, let alone save money for future needs. If the companies had held back until the men practically forced their hands, they would have to grant larger increases, and the chances are that friction would have developed, where all is harmony and good will to-day.

Admittedly, therefore, "all was harmony and good will" until "The Evening News" had quite a talk on Saturday with some of the workmen of the Acadia Coal Co., Ltd.:

"I suppose the Acadia men are much pleased with the announcement that they are to get a general increase," said the News. "Yes," replied one of them, "we are, but we don't want to be staved off with any 6 per cent increase. We should have at least 10 per cent." "How do you make that out?" said the News' man.

"The case is not the same here as it is at the Drummond," was his answer. "The Drummond has been up against it for a long time now, and the men don't want to put the company out of business. That would be bad every way, but the Acadia Company is getting out a lot of cheap coal. They have the best coal on the market for house use, and that is the trade that they make their money on. I claim that the Acadia Coal Co. can better afford to give its men 10 per cent than the Drummond 6 per cent. Besides the Drummond have promised to come up a little later on." The others endorsed

his remarks, and the News practically concurred in what was said.

Thus we see that the man who, on Thursday, wrote that "it is highly gratifying to find such good feeling manifested on both sides," and, "if they exercise patience things will probably work out to their satisfaction," on the Monday following wrote that he "practically concurred" in the hostile attitude of the men's spokesman, and he even volunteered the advice that,—

If the company do not take kindly to the idea of giving 10 per cent, whilst a competing concern is only giving 6 per cent, the men might reasonably put up a counter proposition to the company. They might express their willingness to accept the same proportion of profits from the Acadia Coal Co., which the proposed increase will represent as far as the Drummond is concerned. Say for argument's sake that the increase in wages at the Drummond represents one-third of the company's profits. The Acadia men would be quite safe in agreeing to take the same percentage. There is not much doubt that as between the two propositions, the company would prefer to grant the 10 per cent.

In view of the enormous increase in the cost of living, and in view of the large increase in the cost of coal to the public the men have a good case.

The company have had more than their share of hard luck and the shareholders a long, weary wait for dividends. The men recognize these facts, and want to be reasonable. They got such raw hand-out, however, from the Board of Conciliation some time ago that they feel they are justified in asking for at least 10 per cent, and in so doing are not unreasonable in view of all the facts of the case.

We have quoted this so copiously on account of the effect which manifested itself on the next day, when (to quote the same authority again)—

THE ALBION MINERS ARE NOW OUT ON STRIKE.

The Albion Colliery of the Acadia Coal Co., Ltd., is idle to-day, owing to the fact that the men and boys refused to work this morning, and from no more reasonable a cause than that the said men and boys can see no good reason for withholding from them an announcement as to what the promised advance really amounts to. They have therefore dropped their tools and want a clear cut statement from their employers. When they know just what advance is to be obtained they will decide whether the Company's proposition is satisfactory or not.

Was there ever a strike upon a flimsier ground? They did not even know whether the promised announcement would be "satisfactory or not!" The little formality of a legal notice of warning is not worthy of consideration. Consequently, is it any wonder that the question is asked—why should the man who counselled the "exercise of patience" one day, so harshly incite a strike on the next? He has only himself to thank if people will think that the fact of his having conceived the notion of becoming a candidate for nomination for the Provincial Legislature has all to do with it. In fact, the Editor of the "Eastern Chronicle" (another New Glasgow newspaper), boldly asserts that—

"To ingratiate himself with these men he (The Editor of 'The News,') has lately published long articles showing why coal miners should get more pay. The plea was founded on the fact that coal was bringing more money. But was not the article made in his factory bringing more money when he refused the employees more pay? The money of coal companies is not his, so he could be generous with it. All he wanted was to be in a position, providing he secured the nomination, to read his editorials to the coal workers when he was asking them for their votes."

As stated in our issue of April 1st, we believe in helping and protecting to the utmost of our ability the miner when he is engaged in the dangerous occupation of producing one of our most indispensable raw materials, and that never more so than at the present moment, when the supply of coal is so essential a factor in the successful prosecution of this terrible war. But on the face of this evidence, the men and boys of the Albion Colliery were ill-advised in taking so extremely a drastic step for so flimsy a reason. And any would-be politician, who could descend to such a depth of political depravity in his greed for votes as to exploit his country's necessity by encouraging, if not inciting, any body of

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