

# Most contracts settled without strikes

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In this environment the effectiveness of unions depended mainly on their ability to force employers to grant them recognition. Although defeated in the years before the First World War, the coal miners successfully defended their right to a union of their choice in a dramatic series of strikes in the 1920s.

Another outcome of these strikes in the 1920s had national importance. Because the miners won such widespread support for their cause, after the 1925 strike the federal and provincial governments both virtually abandoned the issue of troops and police in labour disputes.

In 1937 the Nova Scotia government enacted one of the first pro-union laws in Canada. The 1937 Trade Union Act required employers to recognize the union chosen by their workers and prohibited employers from discriminating against workers for joining a union. In short, this was a law to protect workers' right to join a union and to have the union recognized.

This breakthrough took place as a direct result of organizing efforts by the steelworkers of Nova Scotia. In 1904 and in 1923 their unions had been smashed in unsuccessful strikes. When the steelworkers again organized a union in the 1930s, the company still refused to recognize the union. The steelworkers launched a campaign to win support for the new law. As had happened in 1872, the government again made a significant decision to support the labour movement.

The Nova Scotia Trade Union Act was followed by similar federal and provincial laws. In the late 1930s and 1940s union organizing drives took place all across the country and union membership increased rapidly to the present level of about one in every three workers.

These changes in the extent of union membership and in the legal status of unions marked the beginning of our modern labour relations system. The changes came slowly and involved considerable conflict and struggle.

These changes also took place because economic and social changes were making unions relevant to the needs of larger numbers of people.

Today more than 80 per cent of the work force is made up of people who earn their living by accepting employment in return for a regular wage or salary.

In the four Atlantic Provinces there were more than 216,000 union members in 1977. They belonged to a total of 1,472 local union branches in the region. About half the union

members belonged to unions which were international unions and about half belonged to Canadian-based unions. About 85 per cent of the union members belonged to unions which were part of the Canadian Labour Congress.

Some people object to unions on the grounds that unions cause strikes. But for most union members strikes are unusual and unfortunate events. Most people join unions because they want more, not less, economic security and the overwhelming majority of union contracts are settled without strikes.

In 1978 the amount of working time lost as a result of strikes under provincial jurisdiction in the Atlantic Provinces amounted to about 500,000 man-days. In the Maritimes, work stoppages accounted for an extremely low percentage of the total working time: Prince Edward Island 0.17 per cent, New Brunswick 0.23 per cent, Nova Scotia 0.11 per cent. The Nova Scotia figure was the lowest in Canada.

Still, no generalization about the "conservatism" of union members in the Atlantic Provinces is possible: workers in Newfoundland stopped work for an estimated 1.01 per cent of the working time in 1978 and this was the highest figure in Canada.

We also hear that workers are always going on strike for more money. But when we examine the actual causes of strikes in the Atlantic Provinces in 1978, the results show a different story. Government reports gave clear reasons for 33 strikes, but of these only 13 strikes were fought over wages and other economic issues.

The remainder of the strikes involved non-economic issues in which workers were attempting to have more say over the rules and conditions associated with their work. The causes of these strikes included the dismissal and suspension of workers (7), health, safety and working conditions (5), shift scheduling and overtime (3), and the status of the union at the workplace (5).

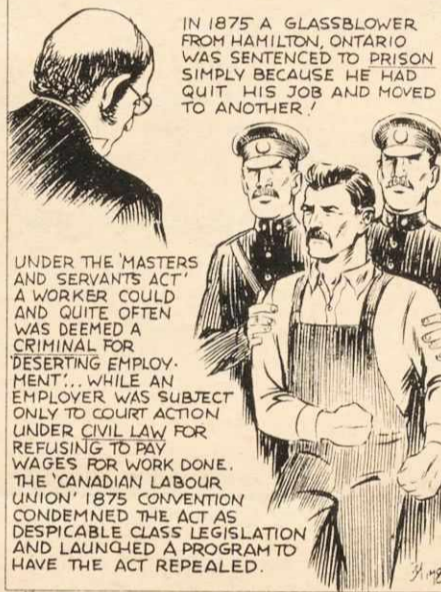
During the 1970s there have been several interesting developments in the activities of organized labour.

Since the 1940s social services such as education and medical care, and programmes such as unemployment insurance and workmen's compensation, have been improved immensely. With the growing importance of government employment, public employees have joined unions and attempted to overcome sub-standard wages and working conditions. Unaccustomed to unions and collective bargaining, governments have sometimes been tempted to pass laws in order to end disagreements between themselves and their workers. This

approach has, in turn, created more conflict. In a sense, many of the public service strikes of recent years may be regarded as strikes for union recognition.

Conflict between unions and governments has also grown for other reasons. In the 1970s governments have often attempted to improve their financial position by cutting back expenditures on non-profit-making social programmes, and this strategy has met resistance from union members. Also, the introduction of wage controls in 1975 provoked hostility between labour and government; to many union members it seemed unfair that wages were blamed for inflation and placed under strict controls while in the meantime price levels were unregulated.

## Spotlight on LABOUR HISTORY



Another important concern of labour has been the physical dangers associated with work. In 1977 there were 924 work-related deaths in Canada. In the same year compensation payments of various kinds amounted to \$874 million. It is interesting to note that the most hazardous industries in Canada were mining, forestry and fishing—all industries which are prominent in the Atlantic Provinces. In the Atlantic Provinces, in 1977, 67 people died as a result of work injuries. Compensation payments as a result of industrial accidents amounted to more than \$35 million.

Today there is a greater awareness of health and safety issues than ever before. Unions have been pushing for the right to know about work hazards and the right to refuse unsafe work. In several provinces now (though not in Atlantic Canada) there are laws requiring that every workplace must have an occupational health committee composed of management and employee representatives.

Governments and employers have often argued that in order to promote economic development it is necessary to have lower wages and poorer social standards than in other parts of the country. In the past governments were reluctant to introduce basic social reforms, such as the eight-hour day, on the grounds this might discourage investment. More recently the same theme was repeated in connection with the amendments to Nova Scotia's Trade Union Act in 1979; changes in the wording of the act have created extraordinary obstacles for union

recognition at the Michelin Tire plants.

But the history of labour in the region does reveal a tradition of struggle against the effects of regional underdevelopment.

By campaigning for better social standards and bargaining for wage parity with workers outside the region, unions have rejected the idea that people in Atlantic Canada must accept inferior standards. One little known episode of this type took place in the spring of 1919. For three weeks the factories of Amherst were closed down in a general strike. The workers were seeking union recognition, but one of their main demands was also that the Montreal-based Canadian Car and Foundry Company give their local workers the same hours and pay increases that workers in the Montreal shops had received.

The resistance to underdevelopment has been strongest in the coal and steel industries. As early as 1918 the miners' union was pressing for public ownership of the coal industry. By the 1940s the steelworkers were also convinced that their industry could not have a stable future under private control. In the 1960s the creation of the Cape Breton Development Corporation and the Sydney Steel Corporation represented the achievement of public ownership. In another way, though, this success has been limited: the government has been slow to make the investments which these industries need. As in the past, unions have had little say in investment decisions or development strategies in these industries.

One of the most interesting developments of the 1970s has been the growth of unionism in the region's extensive fishing industry. In the Maritime Provinces the Maritime Fishermen's Union is gaining support among the inshore fishermen, but has not yet succeeded in winning recognition and bargaining rights from the fish companies. On the other hand, the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers have succeeded in these areas. The union has also taken up strong positions on marketing and development strategies in the industry; the union seems likely to have considerable influence in the revitalization of the industry.

These attempts to overcome the effects of regional underdevelopment suggest that unions cannot be considered simply as organizations functioning within the individual workplace.

Because wealth and power are unequally distributed beyond the workplace as well, workers have also used their unions to pursue broader social goals. In the past, by working for reforms such as the abolition of child labour and the creation of old age pensions and unemployment insurance programmes, unions have helped to improve the position of all working people in our society. More recently unions have pursued issues such as occupational health and safety and equal pay for men and women workers.

As long as unions continue to pursue goals which are of interest to all working people, it seems likely that most Canadians will continue to believe that unions perform a useful and necessary function in our society.

by David Frank

The 10 Days Atlantic Regional Committee has produced this special section on unemployment, in co-operation with **Atlantic Issues**. Unfortunately, space restrictions meant that not all contributions from the various 10 Days Committees could be included.

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