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“Down with Hitler and Silby Barrett”: The Cape Breton Miners’ Slowdown Strike of 1941

THROUGH THE SUMMER OF 1941 THE virulently anti-union Toronto *Globe and Mail* published a series of editorials fulminating against the slowdown strike being conducted by the coal miners of Cape Breton. In July the paper denounced “the sheer pusillanimity” of federal Minister of Labour Norman McLarty in dealing with this “crystal clear case of deliberate sabotage of the national war effort” and by the end of August the editor was exhorting the government to “send in the troops now and end the grotesque and indefensible situation at the Cape Breton coal mines”.¹ The slowdown began on 11 May and was called off on 28 September 1941, after something over 90 working days, during which the approximately 7,500 Glace Bay and New Waterford miners produced about two thirds normal output.² The 1500 miners of Sydney Mines took part in the slowdown for only one month, or about 20 working days. By a quick estimate, if the slowdown was regarded as a full strike involving only one third of the men, the working days lost would be approximately 235,000. For the five month period of May to September 1941 Nova Scotia’s total coal production was over 600,000 tons less than for the corresponding months in 1940.³ Although this was one of the most costly labour disputes that occurred in Canada during the Second World War it has received little attention in what has been written on the labour history of this period.⁴ Most historians have concentrated on the important trend of the time, the eventually successful struggle for unionization of the workers in heavy industry and the consequent transformation of the Canadian labour relations system. Since strikes for union recognition have been regarded as the most important industrial disputes of the time, the significance of the coal slowdown, an action of workers who had long been unionized and a rebellion against established union authorities, has not been recognized. But a close examination of this dispute provides a revealing perspective on the nature of the union movement and on the transformation of labour relations that took place during the war.

In Nova Scotia the miners of District 26, United Mine Workers of America

1 *Globe and Mail*, 24 July, 29 August 1941.

2 Ninety days is an underestimate, based on a five day week. Some of the mines worked six days per week. See *Glace Bay Gazette*, 2 May 1941.

3 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Coal Statistics for Canada* (Ottawa, 1942), Table 45, p. 39.

4 The only published account of the slowdown is in Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers* (Toronto 1976), pp. 225-38.

(UMW) possessed what many workers in Ontario and Quebec were struggling to acquire: a well established union organization and collective bargaining rights, protected by law. Yet this did not lead to a contented workforce and stable industrial relations. On the contrary, the miners would appear to be the most dissatisfied group of workers in Canada at this time, prepared to defy the provincial and federal governments and the leadership of their union. There were, of course, specific local conditions that led to militancy in Cape Breton, but the rebellion against union authorities was motivated by the same impulse which led other workers to struggle for the establishment of a union. Coal miners in Cape Breton, like steel workers in Hamilton or metal miners in northern Ontario, wanted better wages and working conditions. They also wanted something less easily defined: much greater control over their work process and over their lives, democracy at the workplace. What the history of the miners' union in this period reveals most clearly is that from the beginning of large scale industrial unionism in Canada there was a divergence of aims between the most active and militant workers and the leadership of the unions.

As the writings of such historians as Irving Abella and L. S. MacDowell have shown, the upsurge of industrial unionism was powered mainly by the efforts of large numbers of rank-and-file Canadian workers to achieve union rights.⁵ Formal leadership in the fight for collective bargaining rights was provided by Canadian sections of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), which after 1940 formed part of the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). The new unionism had to overcome determined resistance from industrialists, and the reluctance of the Mackenzie King Liberal government to assist unionization by passing legislation comparable to the American Wagner Act. It was the rising tide of strikes in 1943 and the growing shift of workers' votes to the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) that eventually pressured the federal government in early 1944 to enact P.C.1003 which granted enforceable trade union rights to workers. But compulsory conciliation before a strike could begin was incorporated in the new law, as in the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, and work stoppages were made illegal during the length of a contract. As MacDowell points out: "The government's primary concern had been, and continued to be, the elimination of industrial conflict, and the concessions to labour contained in the new legislation were primarily designed to accomplish that purpose".⁶

5 Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (Toronto, 1973); Laurel Sefton MacDowell, 'Remember Kirkland Lake' (Toronto, 1983) and "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System During World War Two", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), pp. 175-96.

6 MacDowell, "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System", p. 194. See also Jeremy Webber, "The Malaise of Compulsory Conciliation: Strike Prevention in Canada during World War II", in Bryan Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle* (Toronto, 1986).

What MacDowell's account does not make clear is the degree to which such controls over workers were acceptable to the right-wing leaders of the union movement and their mentors in the national leadership of the CCF. Although the top leadership of the CCL, men such as Aaron Mosher, Charles Millard or Silby Barrett, found some of the legal constraints on unions irksome, they were fully prepared to accept, indeed consciously welcomed, a legal system designed for controlling the spontaneous militancy of workers. These men were business unionists who accepted the permanence of the capitalist system, and saw a common interest between capital and labour in productivity and prosperity. They were at times capable of a degree of militancy in pursuing wage concessions and, above all, union recognition and union security, but they believed that union officials must exert discipline over the workers in order to preserve the terms of contracts and repress direct action by the rank and file. Their conception of democracy was satisfied by formal elections in the unions which served to legitimize the power of bureaucrats. The system of labour relations that attained a mature form in Canada during the Second World War offered workers the concession of collective bargaining rights, but only within a structure of strong legal pressures designed to force all union activity into this bureaucratic, business unionist mold. This system helped to enshrine the power of union leaders, and from the beginning of the war the top CIO and CCL leadership held out the promise to government and industry of labour peace in return for union recognition. Even big business, if guided by enlightened self interest, it was argued, should see that more stable and peaceful labour-management relations, and hence higher and uninterrupted production, would result from recognizing unions and engaging in orderly collective bargaining. Responsible union leaders would then be able to control the militancy of workers, and both workers and business would thereby prosper.⁷

Consistent support for these principles of "responsible" business unionism in the new industrial unions came from the national leaders of the CCF. Almost all members of the CCL executive were CCF supporters, and there was a close alliance between the top leaderships of the CCL and the CCF. But this alliance was not without frictions, since some union leaders were more reluctant than others to involve the unions closely with CCF electoral ambitions. The CCF alliance with union bureaucrats was most evident at the top; at the local level individual CCFers not infrequently were strong leftists and militants. The left forces in the unions were generally led by Communist Party members, although this left wing ranged from relatively apolitical union militants to political radicals. Changes of policy placed the Communist Party sometimes to the right

7 Ideologically such concepts of the role of unions owed much to right wing social democracy. One of the most explicit and influential expressions of this viewpoint in the CIO of the time can be seen in a book written by two American Socialist functionaries of the SWOC. Clinton S. Golden and Harold J. Ruttenberg, *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy* (New York, 1942).

and sometimes the left of the militants who usually followed its lead. As with the CCF, a distinction has to be made between rank and file Communists and the Party leaders; many supporters were militant trade unionists first and followers of the political ideology second. Most often, at the shop floor level, Communists were recruited from the most militant workers and continued, whatever the Party line of the time, to function mainly as leaders of local militancy and demands for union democracy.

Rarely has the divergence between the militancy of the rank and file and the conservative business unionism of union officers emerged so clearly as in Cape Breton in the early years of the war. At this time the UMW was still the largest industrial union in Canada, and the most powerful union in the CIO/CCL which was leading the fight for the new unions in heavy industry. Canadian industrialists and politicians who hated and feared the CIO, and resisted as strongly as they could the establishment of industrial unions, regarded the UMW as the archetype of these unions and a leading force behind auto workers, steel workers, metal miners and other workers seeking union organization. Government authorities whom union leaders hoped to influence also had only the UMW to consider as an example of a long established industrial union in heavy industry.

In the United States the UMW had been the greatest organized force behind the CIO, providing the top leadership and much of the funding that combined with the often Communist-led but largely spontaneous upsurge of worker militancy to create the new industrial unions. John L. Lewis, the UMW International President, had at this time a degree of public fame and notoriety throughout North America that has probably never been approached by any other union leader. When he resigned the presidency of the CIO in 1940, the position was taken by his lieutenant Philip Murray, UMW Vice-President and Director of the Steel Workers Organizing Campaign (SWOC).⁸ The UMW also served as the organizational model on which the new industrial unions were built, particularly those organized more from the top down, like the SWOC. To a lesser extent, this was also true in Canada. In Nova Scotia the UMW's largest Canadian section, District 26, played a crucial role in some of the CIO's earliest Canadian successes, such as the organization of the first SWOC locals in Canada, at the Sydney and Trenton steel plants. It also successfully lobbied the provincial government to pass the 1937 Trade Union Act, the first law in Canada that, however weakly it was to be enforced, expressly declared a positive right of workers to organize trade unions. Perhaps of more importance to the early CIO, the Nova Scotia law forced companies to provide the automatic check-off of

⁸ See Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis A Biography* (New York, 1977) and Nelson N. Lichtenstein, "Industrial Unionism Under the No-Strike Pledge: A Study of the CIO During the Second World War", Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1974.

union dues, as had been done for the UMW for many years.⁹ The Nova Scotia miners' union had also advanced further on the road of direct involvement in electoral politics than any other section of Canadian organized labour. In 1938 District 26 had made the first union affiliation to the CCF, and it was able to help elect a CCF Member of Parliament, Clarie Gillis, in 1940. In many respects, therefore, the UMW in District 26 at the beginning of the war had achieved the position that the new union movement sought elsewhere in Canada. It was a well established industrial union, protected by law, with very considerable local political and economic power.

UMW officers were prominent in the national labour leadership. Up to 1939, when the CIO unions were expelled from the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), District 26 President D. W. Morrison had been TLC vice-president. Silby Barrett, the International Board Member for District 26, had been appointed by John L. Lewis to head the SWOC and CIO organizing drives in Canada. These men, and other appointed union leaders such as Charles Millard of the SWOC, were disturbed by the fact that a large proportion of the active organizers in the emerging CIO unions were Communists or militants prepared to work closely with the Communist Party. This fear provided much of the motivation for the 1940 merger of the Canadian CIO unions with Aaron Mosher's All Canadian Congress of Labour to form the CCL, which ensured that older and conservatively led unions would be in the majority. Two of the six man CCL executive were from the UMW, Silby Barrett of District 26 and Pat Conroy of District 18, who was to become CCL Secretary-Treasurer.

But the conservatism of the officers of UMW District 26 had only a limited and insecure base among the union members. Over a very long period this leadership had been strongly opposed by militant and politically radical groups among the miners. The fact that this union organization was one of the oldest in Canada meant that its right wing were well steeped in the principles of conservative union philosophy, but the miners of Cape Breton had lived and breathed unionism and class struggle for several generations, and still burned with a sense of their exploitation by corporation bosses and repression by state authorities.¹⁰ It was to be the endeavour of the officers to prove their

9 While the SWOC members in Nova Scotia received little advance in pay or conditions until the war years, their dues regularly flowed into SWOC organizing in Canada and the United States in a period when few other locals had the guaranteed check-off. See Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour*, p. 55.

10 See David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners 1917-1926", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979 and "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation", *Acadiensis*, VII, 1 (Autumn 1977), pp. 3-34; "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry; Cape Breton, 1922", in G.S. Kealey and Peter Warrigan, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto, 1976); Donald MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s", *Acadiensis*, III, 2 (Spring 1974), pp. 45-64; as well as popular histories: MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*; John Mellor, *The Company Store* (Toronto, 1983).

responsibility and moderation to government by repressing militancy that precipitated the rebellion of the miners and the 1941 slowdown strike.

The leadership of District 26 had long cooperated with the government of Nova Scotia, seeking to influence laws and regulations effecting the miners. One issue on which the miners, the union, the corporation and provincial politicians had long been united was that of lobbying federal authorities to maintain or increase the subventions paid on Nova Scotia coal delivered to central Canada, enabling the less efficient Maritime coal industry to compete with cheaper imports of American coal. The union could also point to the UMW policy, enshrined in its constitution, of always honouring contracts, a policy which had frequently brought the officers into alliance with the company and government. In the early 1930s the UMW had seemed very much a lesser evil to these authorities than the Communist-led militants of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia (AMW), the breakaway union that a majority of Cape Breton miners supported. Although in 1936 the "united front" policy of the Communists and the reunification of AMW miners with the UMW had helped to bring the right and left temporarily together in Cape Breton, by 1939 left and right were again moving apart, and the District officers were anxious to display their moderation to government.

The District 26 officers scored one great success by following this policy in the early war years, the organization of the miners in Minto, New Brunswick. At Minto a major UMW strike in 1937-1938 had failed to win union recognition, and a conciliation board had recommended against the UMW.¹¹ In July 1941, however, the UMW finally forced the Minto Coal Company, the largest coal company in the area, to sign a contract.¹² That same month the report of a commissioner appointed by the federal government to study the lack of coal productivity in Minto was sent to the Minister of Labour, Norman McLarty. The commissioner, Justice M. B. Archibald of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court, recommended as a first priority that:

The organization of the miners throughout the entire area should be continued and made as complete as possible, and in this organization the employees should have the encouragement of the operators. I am satisfied that the miners if permitted to organize and enjoy the benefits of collective bargaining and agreements with respect to working conditions would co-operate with the operators in producing the maximum amount of coal that is possible under present conditions.¹³

11 See Allan Seager, "Minto New Brunswick: A Study in Class Relations Between the Wars", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 5 (1980), pp. 81-132.

12 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 14 July 1941.

13 "Report of Commissioner on Inquiry into Causes of Lack of Capacity Coal Production in Minto-Chipman District, N.B.", *Labour Gazette*, 41 (September 1941), pp. 1073-84.

This reasoning is exactly what Silby Barrett and other UMW leaders wanted to impress upon the authorities. However, in the long organized Cape Breton sub-districts of the union, the policy of war-time cooperation with the government and careful avoidance of strikes came into direct conflict with the long frustrated aim of the coal miners to recover the wage reductions imposed on them during the 1920s and the early years of the depression. Not until 1943 did the wages of coal miners across Canada equal 1921 levels, and the wage rates in Nova Scotia remained substantially below those of miners in Alberta and British Columbia.¹⁴ Although almost all of the UMW miners of Nova Scotia worked for subsidiary companies of Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (Dosco), the miners of Dosco's subsidiaries in Sydney Mines and Pictou County, Nova Scotia Steel and Coal (Scotia) and Acadia Mines, had lower wage rates than did the Dominion Coal Company (Domco) miners in Glace Bay, New Waterford and Springhill. This inequity dated from the early 1930s, when Dosco had allowed Scotia and Acadia to go into receivership, and additional wage cuts had been forced upon the miners. When Dosco took over these companies again in 1938, it refused to agree to corporation wide contracts or equal wage rates for its miners throughout the province.

A sense of the inevitability of mine closures and mass layoffs when mechanization of the mines became a reality added to the militancy of coal miners. In 1938 an attempt by Dosco to introduce electrical cutting and loading machinery in a new mine at Glace Bay was defeated by the refusal of the miners to work the mechanized mine. After a strike that turned into a lengthy lockout involving 89 men, the company finally removed the machinery in early 1939, but corporation statements claimed that the Nova Scotia mines could never compete profitably with American coal production until they attained the same level of mechanization. The miners understood this threat to mean mass layoffs in the mines in the near future.¹⁵ And, like workers throughout North America during the war, the miners had a foreboding that the Depression would return at the war's end, and hence there was pressure to achieve good wage settlements while the war economy boomed.

For the leaders of District 26 to have had any realistic hope of suppressing the militant actions of the miners, some substantial concessions would have had to be made by Dosco, but the corporation was prepared to make no concessions it could avoid. Dosco advertised itself as "Canada's Largest Industry" with products that were "more nearly 100% Canadian than any similar products available anywhere", and the "Only Producer of Steel and Steel Products in

14 *Labour Gazette*, "Wage Rates and Hours of Labour in Canada, 1944", Supplement, October 1946, Table II, p. 9;

"Numbers and Earnings of Coal Miners in Canada, 1921-1938", Appendix C, Supplement, March 1940, p. 131.

15 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 23 January 1939.

Canada Wholly Self-Sustained Within the Empire”,¹⁶ but its war-time pride in being Canadian did not lead to generosity to its workers. In its Sydney and Trenton steel plants, at its Peck Rolling Mills at Montreal, and at its Halifax Shipyards, as well as in its Domco mines, Dosco was the adversary of the workers in important war-time strikes. It tenaciously resisted the establishment of unions in its unorganized subsidiaries and fought against any wage increases where it faced organized workers. In its mines, Dosco appears to have been determined to hold on to any short term profits it could make while the expanded wartime coal market lasted.

This intransigent attitude prompted a sustained militancy on the part of the miners. For Canadian labour in general the 1938-1940 period was one of few industrial disputes,¹⁷ but in Nova Scotia strikes increased, amounting to nearly half of all the Canadian strike activity throughout 1939 and 1940.¹⁸ Although a few of these strikes involved the newly organized steel workers in Sydney and Trenton, and the fish plant workers at Lockeport, locked out by their employers in 1939, the great majority were “outlaw” or “illegal” strikes of the miners. The *Labour Gazette* listed 39 miners’ strikes in Nova Scotia in 1939 and 55 in 1940.¹⁹

These were all short stoppages at individual mines, spontaneous actions by the miners or called by meetings of the union local. All were referred to as

16 *Globe and Mail*, 14 July 1941.

17 Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900 — 66* (Ottawa, 1976), pp. 277-8. Jamieson points out that the war years were the first time for decades that the pattern of labour strife in Canada diverged from that in the United States, and argues that this was a “delayed response”, as the great wave of industrial unionization that occurred in the United States in the late 1930s came to Canada in the middle years of the war. Jamieson notes that the number and duration of industrial disputes was high in 1937, fell to a low level through the 1938-1940 period, gradually mounted again in 1941 and 1942, and reached a peak in 1943. This is confirmed by other sources such as Douglas Cruikshank and Gregory S. Kealey, “Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 20 (1987), pp. 85-145.

18 Nova Scotia had 36.1 per cent of all strikes in Canada in 1939, 71.9 per cent of the workers involved in strikes and 43.4 per cent of the time lost through strikes. *Labour Gazette*, 40 (February 1940), Table V, “Strikes and Lockouts in Canada in 1939 by Province”. In 1940 Nova Scotia had 42 per cent of strikes, 51.3 per cent of the workers involved, and 24.9 per cent of time lost through strikes across the country. *Labour Gazette*, 41 (February 1941), Table V, “Strikes and Lockouts in Canada in 1940 by Province”. Cruikshank and Kealey, “Strikes in Canada”, pp. 136-8, estimate strikes in the national coal industry at 46 in 1937, 26 in 1938, 53 in 1939, and 66 in 1940, and show Nova Scotia provincial totals as 50 strikes in 1937, 31 in 1938, 49 in 1939, and 79 in 1940, while also showing that Alberta and British Columbia, the other areas of extensive coal mining, had few strikes during 1939 and 1940.

19 *Labour Gazette* 39, p. xiii; *Labour Gazette*, 40, p. xiii. During 1940 government authorities frequently complained of a total of 211 illegal miners’ strikes in District 26 in the two and one half years preceding November 1939. It is not clear how this figure was derived. It was advanced in Judge McArthur’s report and then constantly repeated in the rhetoric of politicians attacking illegal strikes.

“illegal” strikes for several reasons: none complied with the legal strike requirements in the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act; the strikes were not authorized by the UMW executive and contravened the well proclaimed UMW policy of abiding faithfully by the terms of its contracts; and the UMW contracts with Dosco subsidiaries all contained clauses outlawing any work stoppage for any grievance during the life of the contract. When, as was frequently the case, long negotiations for a new contract took place after the end of a contract period, the UMW officials invariably agreed that the miners would work under the terms of the old contract in the interim. Domco and the other Dosco companies consistently refused any direct negotiations of grievances with miners on “illegal” stoppages of work. From 1938, the UMW and Domco had agreed to submit grievances that could not be resolved between local union mine committees and management to a single “Umpire”, whose decision would be binding. The man whom the company and union officials had agreed upon to serve as Umpire was John W. MacLeod, a former District 26 president and then company official for many years. Neither the umpire system nor the decisions handed down by MacLeod were satisfactory to the rank-and-file miners, and by 1939 grievances were leading to strikes.

The varied grievances involved in these strikes seemed to contemporary authorities to show no pattern other than a militant predisposition of the miners to stop work on any provocation. In May and June 1939 Springhill and No.11 Glace Bay miners both struck in solidarity with men dismissed by the company after serving jail sentences for liquor offenses. Miners at Florence struck on a grievance concerning rates for working a new system; at Sydney Mines’ Princess mine a dispute concerned the demand of a few men for contract rates rather than daily pay; at No 16 in New Waterford the walkout concerned the rate for some longwall men; at 1B mine in Dominion a stoppage of several days occurred over the sale of a company house. The men of No.12 at New Waterford struck over the dismissal of a miner who had a fist fight with a company official, and the strike ended only when the official was charged with assault. A similar issue at the Albion Mine in Stellarton, the dismissal of a man for “inefficiency”, brought all four Pictou County mines to a standstill, and the Stellarton miners even threatened to bring out the maintenance and pump men.²⁰

These strikes indicate the widespread dissatisfaction of the miners with company policies and with the established grievance procedures. Most grievances involved a direct struggle between the miners and company officials for control of the work process in the pits. But while issues of control were the direct cause of most of these “illegal” strikes, they would have undoubtedly been much less frequent had the miners felt they were receiving fair or adequate wages from the hated Dosco corporation. Underlying all this wildcat strike activity was the

20 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 9 May, 3 June 1939; 24 May, 8, 11, 18 July 1939; 28, 31 July 1939; 27 July, 2 August 1939.

frustration of the men at the failure of union efforts to increase substantially the basic wage rates, or even to reach the wage level that existed before the wage cuts the miners had been forced to accept in 1932.²¹ In the 1937 contract there was a six per cent increase for the contract miners and most of the daily paid (datal) men, leaving wages still below the 1931 rates. The Domco miners, in a pit head referendum, voted by a narrow margin to accept this two year contract, although there was considerable opposition to it led by the former AMW leadership. The Glace Bay miners voted heavily against the contract, but it was carried by the votes of the miners of New Waterford and Springhill.²² It was under this unsatisfactory 1937 contract, which formally ended on 1 February 1939, that the miners were still working in 1939 and most of 1940. In the view of the militant miners the officers were taking a weak line in negotiations with the company. In August 1939, just as war was breaking out in Europe, a contract including no wage increases was voted down by the miners.²³ No strike action was proposed by the union executive, which declared it would re-enter negotiations with the company. The anger of the militants was shown by a two day general strike at most of the mines in both Glace Bay and New Waterford, purportedly in solidarity with strikes on local grievances going on at Caledonia mine and No.11. The district executive as well as the company denounced this "outlaw" strike. The miners returned to work on the promise from the union and the provincial government authorities of a general inquiry into grievance procedures; but as the Glace Bay and New Waterford men resumed work, the miners at Florence mine came out on strike on a local grievance.²⁴

Early in September the UMW officers of both Canadian mining areas, District 26 and District 18, met with the federal Minister of Labour and promised full co-operation in the war effort.²⁵ However, the beginning of the war

21 These wage reductions and the inability of the UMW to defeat them had played an important part in bringing about the creation of the rival AMW in 1932. See Michael Earle, "The Rise and Fall of a 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia — 1932-1936", M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984.

22 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 8 March, 1, 3 April 1937. Glace Bay sub-district voted 1973 for, 2891 against; New Waterford 1472 for, 551 against; and Springhill 941 for, 213 against. The total was 4386 for, 3655 against. The miners of Pictou and Sydney mines, as well as other UMW men who did not work for Domco, did not have a vote on this referendum. This was the usual breakdown of miners' votes throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. Glace Bay invariably had a majority against accepting contracts and for left wing candidates in union elections, while New Waterford and Springhill usually took less militant positions. A very significant change in the 1939-1941 period was to be the adoption of a more militant line by the New Waterford men.

23 *Sydney Post-Record*, 23 August 1939; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 23 August 1939. The vote was 3781 votes against, 2805 for acceptance, the heavy Glace Bay vote this time swamping smaller majorities for acceptance in New Waterford and Springhill.

24 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31 August 1939.

25 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 15 September 1939.

added a cause for additional work stoppages because of the refusal of the miners to go into the pits with “enemy aliens”. These stoppages had little direct connection with the miners’ militancy on other issues,²⁶ but they did add to the number of strikes, which quickly became a matter of concern to provincial and federal governments. After a strike at Sydney Mines in October 1939, the new provincial Minister of Mines and Labour, L.D. Currie, established a formal inquiry, conducted by Judge Neil R. McArthur.²⁷ In his report McArthur deplored the frequent illegal strikes in the mines, which he declared were brought about by small groups of men who “regard with no sense of responsibility the resultant loss of earnings occasioned to their fellow workmen”. Praising the UMW district and international organization, he pointed out that “the advocacy of illegal strikes and tie-ups is contrary to the established policy of the union”:

“Pit action,” as it is sometimes called, and collective bargaining through the avenue of negotiation, cannot both survive side by side. One is an orderly system, the other in the end destructive. One demands that Labour function through the voice of its elected officers and Local Unions, the other ignores and disregards constituted authority.... I urge, in the interests of the Union and its membership, a one hundred per cent loyalty to your elected officers while they hold office. It is their duty and responsibility, not only to promote the interests and protect the rights of the membership generally, but also to safeguard the constitution, principles and established policies of the Union. This responsibility may, and at times does, involve the distasteful task of using drastic measures in order to keep the “family home” in order. Nevertheless, when conditions require it, this duty and responsibility should be fearlessly faced.²⁸

26 It is perhaps relevant that 1B mine, which was most disrupted by the miners’ refusal to work with the local Italians, was to be the weakest Glace Bay local in terms of the miners’ support for the slowdown in 1941.

27 Currie, the M.L.A. for Glace Bay, had become Minister of Mines and Labour early in 1939 (*Glace Bay Gazette*, 7 February 1939), replacing Michael Dwyer, who had resigned to become President of Dosco’s subsidiary Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company when it came out of receivership. At this time the two Sydney Mines pits of this company, previously popularly referred to as “Scotia” mines, were renamed the “Old Sydney” pits. For simplicity the name “Scotia” is used throughout this article.

28 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 27 November 1939, gives a summary of the report. Lengthy passages were quoted in “Report of Board in Dispute between the Acadia Coal Company, Limited, and its Employees” and “Report of Board in Dispute between the Old Sydney Collieries, Limited, and its Employees,” *Labour Gazette*, 40(August 1940), pp. 768-78. Similar remarks to MacArthur’s were made by Judge J.K. Crowell in an inquiry into a strike at Springhill. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 21 November 1939.

The McArthur report was referred to favorably in all the conciliation proceedings in the Nova Scotian coal industry in the following year, for the union officers remained anxious to display their co-operative attitude to the government. In December the UMW executive circulated a letter to all locals warning against "petty strikes" and threatening union disciplinary action against violations of contracts and the UMW constitution, and the principal message in President D.W. Morrison's annual New Year message was that the UMW was now on a "wartime responsibility basis", pledged to avoid disruptions of war production as a patriotic duty.²⁹ By this point the Domco miners had been working for almost a year under the expired 1937 contract, and early in January a four party conference took place in Glace Bay between representatives of the UMW, Domco, and the provincial and federal Labour Departments. The result was a joint application by the UMW and Domco for a federal conciliation board.³⁰ When some UMW locals passed resolutions of no confidence in the district executive and opposed the conciliation board, President Morrison responded that particularly in wartime it was necessary to follow legal procedures, that the executive had rejected a company proposal for binding arbitration, and that the UMW would have an excellent representative on the board, Professor F.R. Scott of Montreal, well recommended by the CCF. Morrison further stated that at the recent International UMW convention he had discussed the situation with President John L. Lewis, who was very critical of the illegal strikes. Lewis had "said that the UMW was a business concern and had to carry out its operations and contracts on business lines".³¹

The conciliation board was chaired by Justice C.P. McTague of the Ontario Supreme Court, who was appointed by the federal government to head most of the important conciliation proceedings during the early war years. The Domco representative was businessman Ralph Bell of Halifax, while Frank Scott represented the UMW. The UMW argued for a 15 per cent rate increase on the grounds of the increasing cost of living in wartime, while Domco maintained it was financially unable to pay any additional wages.³² The report of the board, released in late March, was unanimous. It recommended minor pay increases ranging from three to 19 cents a day, retroactive to February 1939, for the lowest

29 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 22, 30 December 1939.

30 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 5, 23 January 1940.

31 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 5, 7 February 1940. Lewis was, in his leadership of the American UMW, entering perhaps his most militant period, when he broke with Roosevelt and the Democratic administration and the CIO leaders who continued full co-operation with the government, and led massive strikes that forced the equalization of the rates paid miners in the Southern and Northern coalfields and the union organization of the "captive" coal mines owned by the steel corporations. His policies with regard to District 26, however, were very different, since he constantly supported moderation throughout this period.

32 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27 February 1940.

paid datal men, and nothing for the contract miners except for a few of the longwall men at Springhill. It also recommended that the company write off any arrears of rent and coal payments owed by miners as of February 1940 and the report called for a tribunal to be set up in advance to arbitrate if a new contract was not negotiated by 15 January 1941. The report also criticized the custom of referring wage contracts to a referendum of the miners:

Such procedure is no longer effective in the same Union in the United States. It definitely imposes an almost unbearable burden on the Executive. The referendum frequently is not a genuine expression on the merits of the contract but tends to be one of want of confidence in the union executives who have negotiated it. We do not put our views in the form of any recommendation but merely throw out the suggestion that it is in the interests of the Union as a whole that these matters should be considered and within the Union itself rectified in the interests of efficiency and strength.³³

Since it seemed unlikely the miners would accept this poor offer, UMW President Morrison issued a statement that negotiations would be conducted with Scotia and Acadia coal companies seeking a uniform rate for all miners, and a referendum on the Domco recommendations would be delayed until the miners of Pictou County and Sydney Mines could vote at the same time. These negotiations led to another conciliation board, chaired by Justice W.H. Harrison, which recommended no wage increases.³⁴ Soon after this report the UMW executive announced that since the district convention was to be held at the end of August, the various conciliation boards' recommendations could be discussed then.³⁵

During these lengthy negotiations and conciliation proceedings the frustration of the miners had grown, as was evident from the support given to mass meetings called by left-wingers in Glace Bay.³⁶ None of the executive officers was present at these meetings, and prominent on the platform were men who had

33 "Report of Board in Dispute between the Dominion Coal Company, Limited, and its Employees," *Labour Gazette*, 40 (August 1940), pp. 321-3.

34 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 9 April, 30 July 1940. In separate reports on the two companies, Scotia and Acadia, the majority recommended no rate increases, accepting the employer's claim that it could afford no higher wages and that productivity at these mines was lower than the Domco mines. The UMW's representative, District 26 Vice-President P.G. Muise, in a minority opinion called for equal pay with the rates offered Domco miners by the McTague board. "Report of Board in Dispute between the Acadia Coal Company, Limited, and its Employees" and "Report of Board in Dispute between the Old Sydney Collieries, Limited, and its Employees", *Labour Gazette*, 40 (August 1940), pp. 768-78.

35 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 6 August 1940.

36 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 27 May, 24 June 1940.

been, and perhaps still were, members or sympathizers of the Communist Party.³⁷

At the same time government pressure on the officers to control the wildcat strikes continued. Labour Minister Currie said in the Legislature that the public would soon demand government intervention: "Every time we pick up a newspaper we find there's a new strike. Until laboring men agree to live up to contracts, I am sure that we cannot get new industries into this province". In response, CCF M.L.A. Douglas MacDonald, speaking as a member of the UMW District Board, said that the Board would do "anything we can" to help the Labour Department.³⁸ The concern of the federal government was emphasized by the appearance of Labour Minister Norman McLarty at the District 26 convention in Truro at the end of August 1940. In an interview in Halifax, McLarty said he had come to Nova Scotia to look into the disputes in the coal fields, a situation that was "not healthy in wartime". In his speech to the delegates at the convention, he pointed out that there were "more sporadic strikes in Nova Scotia than in all the rest of Canada.... It is true that the most labour strife is centred in a province where Canadian Labour has its widest privileges". He also argued that "some action must be taken to remove this canker. I am advised that these strikes are without the approval of your union and without disciplinary action from your union.... maintain the dignity and integrity of your union and see that these ill considered, irresponsible strikes are eliminated".³⁹ Provincial Minister Currie also warned the convention:

[The strikes] do you men more harm than the operators. It has been argued that the companies are largely responsible, but remember, gentlemen, that two wrongs do not make a right.... To a large extent I have every reason to believe your claims that the operators do not want your unions are correct, but as long as there is a trade union act in this province they will not be allowed to break your organization... [It is] the duty of the executive to discipline the men. The time has come to impose self regulation. It may be that some punitive law will have to be imposed, but so far I have refused to allow anything like that.... [The Nova Scotia Trade Union Act] is very imperfect, but it is pioneering the way.⁴⁰

37 It does not appear that much in the form of direct Communist Party organization was maintained in Cape Breton in this period of illegality, though there is evidence that some literature was distributed. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 4 June 1940, reports a Canadian Legion meeting denouncing the spread of "Communistic literature". No internments of local Communists are recorded, although there was a certain amount of RCMP investigation and harrassment. (*Steelworker and Miner*, 20 March, 6 April, 16 November 1940.)

38 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 12 April 1940.

39 *Halifax Herald*, 28 August 1940; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 29 August 1940.

40 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 29 August 1940. Presumably it was this concern with wildcat strikes that led

The principal message of both ministers was directed at the officers: government support for unions was conditional on the leaders showing that they were prepared to discipline and control the workers.

This message impressed the officers much more than it intimidated the rank-and-file delegates. A stormy debate followed the speeches and McLarty was “engulfed in a flood of complaints” against the policies of Domco. One delegate said: “They have put us in a bad position in the eyes of the people. The statement that there is no more loyal body of men than the miners of Nova Scotia is true, but we refuse to have our patriotism exploited for the profit of the Dominion Coal Company”. Although no delegate openly defended the principle of wildcat strikes, many argued that the specific strikes that had occurred were the fault of Dosco, not the workers. The executive was eventually able to get a clause opposing illegal strikes included in a vote of thanks to the speakers, but the mood of the miners was clearly far from conciliatory.⁴¹

When the convention was addressed by CCF leader M.J. Coldwell, CCF National Secretary David Lewis, and M.P. Clarie Gillis the delegates were more warmly welcoming. All three speakers argued that the war should lead to a new order in Canada, that it could best be fought by developing social and economic justice at home, and that labour should be given a place in government as had been done in wartime Britain. Gillis was the only one of the CCF speakers who dealt directly with the situation of the miners, and he attempted to dress up his basic support for the position of the UMW executive in militant language:

I am not in favour of these petty strikes. When we fight it should be a good fight.... Dosco owns some twenty-three subsidiary companies across Canada. They control the industry, yet we are tackling our problems in sections.... They will close up all the openings in Nova Scotia and they won't open new ones unless they are mechanized. They will reduce the number of employed and increase their own profits.... The Corporation can use the profits of one branch to establish another and come to the workers with empty pockets.... Conciliation boards are appointed by the government in the interest of the operators. We must go into the financial structure of the corporation, but not by a conciliation board.

the Nova Scotia Legislature, early in 1941, to pass an act empowering the Minister of Labour to appoint conciliators “whenever in his opinion the interests of industrial peace may require it to be done”. *An Act Respecting the Appointment of Commissioners of Conciliation*, Statutes of Nova Scotia, 1941. This act was never used, no doubt because of the extensive involvement of federal authorities in labour relations throughout the remainder of the war.

41 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 29 August 1940. The delegates' unhappiness with the existing grievance system was made clear by the resolution passed that in a new contract the UMW would no longer agree to pay its share of the umpire's salary. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 6 September 1940.

However, Gillis added,

the cause of the petty strikes in mines in this province was more deep rooted than any discontent among the men. Industry had advanced money to the American Federation of Labor in the effort to eliminate the Committee for Industrial Organization. The petty strike was used as a weapon to discredit and wreck the CIO.... This movement had extended to Canada and the same effort was being made against the UMW, a CIO affiliate. We should attempt a closer examination of our problems in each difficulty, closer co-operation with our executive and stricter adherence to our constitution.... The movement to wreck the unions had succeeded to a considerable extent and chaos exists in every local.... our organization is in danger.⁴²

The response of the miners to Gillis's ludicrous suggestion that their local strikes were the result of a plot laid by big business and the AFL was not recorded, but overall he and the other CCF speakers were well received and the convention passed a resolution praising Gillis for the "able and consistent manner in which he has represented his constituency and the workers of Nova Scotia" in Parliament.⁴³

When the contract dispute and the McTague recommendations were discussed, however, one delegate asked why there had been no minority report from Frank Scott, and said: "I, for one, don't believe Scott is the honestest man in Canada". The explanation from Secretary-Treasurer MacKay, that Scott had wanted to oppose the board's findings but could find no way to disprove the company's claims about its financial situation, was not well received by the delegates.⁴⁴

The convention would not accept the McTague recommendations, and some of the more militant even called for a general strike to restore the 1921 wage rates. Delegates also refused to agree that the recommendations were sufficiently acceptable to be put to the men in a referendum, and there were strong demands that the rates for the Scotia and Acadia miners be raised to equality with the Domco men. The convention eventually instructed the executive to

⁴² *Glace Bay Gazette*, 30 August 1940.

⁴³ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 4 September 1940. Clarie Gillis was in his most left phase in this early stage of his career as M.P. For example, he was the only CCF Member who supported Mrs. Dorise Neilsen's amendment to the bill introducing Unemployment Insurance that workers on strike should be eligible for benefits. (*Glace Bay Gazette*, 27 July, 1 August 1940.)

⁴⁴ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 31 August 1940. This question of Scott was particularly embarrassing to the CCF leaders and the UMW officers in their attempts at this convention to get agreement on the employment of a full-time research director, since it seems that the man they had in mind for the job was another CCF intellectual from Montreal, Eugene Forsey.

enter new negotiations demanding increases. If a better offer was not received by 30 October, the International was to be approached for assistance and a strike ballot was to be sent out.⁴⁵

President Morrison and the rest of the executive made no effort to conceal the fact that they were for acceptance of the McTague recommendations. "The fight we have on our hands is not to organize a strike but to prevent one", said Vice-President Muise. Morrison wound up the convention by appealing to the men to "bend our every effort to assist Canada's war effort", and by arguing for putting the McTague recommendations to a referendum: "Is it fair that 72 men here should tie the hands of 12,000? It is not, and I will not be a party to it".⁴⁶

The week following the UMW convention, the executive officers along with Clarie Gillis and David Lewis of the CCF were active participants at the founding convention of the CCL, having managed to get the District 26 delegates to endorse the merger with the CCL. As anticipated, the conservative slate, including Silby Barrett, was easily able to defeat the left wing in the election of the CCL executive. Barrett and the other right wing officers of District 26 had a much narrower victory in the district elections in October. All managed to win re-election, but the voting in Glace Bay sub-district and Pictou County was heavily against President D. W. Morrison and International Board Member Barrett, and their margin in New Waterford was slim. Barrett in particular was very nearly defeated by left-winger John Alex MacDonald, who led in the election until the votes of the peripheral regions of the district came in. Close as the election was, the domination of the right on the District Board was strengthened. The radical Bob Stewart, former AMW Secretary-Treasurer and the Board Member for Glace Bay since 1938, was defeated by 25 votes in a five man contest by John Morrison of the large Phalen local.⁴⁷ Several factors explain why right wing officers held District power even though the left was more influential among miners in the largest sub-district, Glace Bay: the "favorite son" bias of the miners, who tended to vote for a man from their own local or sub-district; the large number of candidates splitting up the vote, election to paid union office being one of the only avenues of social mobility open to ambitious miners; and the fact that incumbent officers were usually the only candidates known to miners in locals far from the centre, so that the incumbent could almost invariably count on the votes of men in the Joggins mines, in Inverness, or in Minto, New Brunswick.

With their tenure in office established for another two years, the executive officers held a referendum on the recommendations of the McTague and Harrison Conciliation Boards, disregarding the protests of union locals against

45 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 6, 7 September 1940.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 14 September, 9, 10, 16 October 1940.

this flaunting of the decision of the convention. The executive argued for acceptance of the awards since the contracts would only be applicable for a few months, until the end of January 1941, and they did offer some miners small increases retroactive to February 1939 and the remission of coal and housing debts. In the pithead vote of Domco miners on the McTague recommendations the contract was accepted by a vote of 3614 to 2775. As usual, the Glace Bay men voted against acceptance, but the New Waterford and Springhill votes provided the margin for agreement. The Pictou County and Sydney Mines miners totally refused to cast any votes in their referenda on the Harrison reports, and demanded the recall of the officers for holding the referenda in contravention of the convention decision.⁴⁸

Because "illegal" strikes had continued since the convention, the federal government called a meeting in early December at Ottawa attended by the District 26 officers, Thomas Kennedy, the International Secretary-Treasurer of the UMW, Nova Scotia Labour Minister L. D. Currie, and federal Minister McLarty. They decided to hold an enlarged conference at Halifax on 12 December which top Dosco officials would be asked to attend.⁴⁹ A few weeks previously District 26 leaders had attended the CIO convention at Atlantic City, and the presence of Kennedy at Ottawa and later at the Halifax meeting indicates a new level of intervention by the International.

On 8 December the 200 UMW workers at the International Pier in Sydney went on strike. These were not miners, but the men who loaded the ships with coal at the Pier. Their work had greatly increased since the war began, "bunkering" ships for the Atlantic convoys, but their wages had gone down because of a new system of payment. Dosco officials immediately blew up the importance of this strike by stopping operations at three Glace Bay mines on the grounds that there was nowhere to send the coal produced with the Pier closed down.⁵⁰ Immediately after the strike began the District officers revoked the UMW charter of the Pier local. Although the men returned to work after a strike of only three days, the charter remained suspended pending an investigation by the International Board.⁵¹ The charter was returned by the International, but the local's eight officers were expelled from the union, and blacklisted by the company. Among those blacklisted was the articulate young President of the local, Donald MacDonald, who ten months later was elected CCF M.L.A. for Sydney. It is difficult to think of MacDonald, who was to become President of the Canadian Labour Congress, as an extreme union militant, and he later claimed he had been opposed to the strike.⁵² However, the district leaders, going

48 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 8, 20, 22 November 1940.

49 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 4 December 1940.

50 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 10 December 1940.

51 *Halifax Herald*, 11 December 1940; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 11 December 1940.

52 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 13 January 1941.

into the conference on 12 December, may have felt that these Pier workers, isolated from the bulk of the miners, were a relatively safe group to choose for exemplary victims of the toughened discipline against wildcat strikes.⁵³

The Halifax conference was chaired by provincial Minister L.D. Currie, and was attended by the District 26 Board, International UMW Secretary-Treasurer Kennedy, Dosco President Arthur Cross of Montreal, Dosco Vice-President and General Manager H.J. Kelley, Nova Scotia Steel and Coal President Michael Dwyer, and numerous provincial and federal Labour Department officials. Federal Minister McLarty was not present, but was represented by Dr. Bryce Stewart, the Deputy Minister of Labour, and M.S. Campbell, Chief Conciliation Officer. Also representing the federal government was J. McGregor Stewart, Dominion Coal Administrator. This well publicized meeting was clearly intended to take some decisive steps to end strikes in the coal fields. The principal result, presented as an important breakthrough in labour-management relations by both the *Labour Gazette* and the *UMW Journal*, was the establishment of a tribunal for final and binding settlement of grievances in the mines, named the "Joint Board of Adjustment", with one representative from management, one from the union, and a jointly agreed upon chairman.⁵⁴ J.W. MacLeod, who had been the "Umpire" under the preceding grievance system, became the chairman, and Secretary-Treasurer MacKay the UMW representative, but there is no evidence suggesting that this board had better success in curbing walkouts than did the single "Umpire" it replaced.⁵⁵

The Halifax conference agreed with the recommendation of the McTague Board that, should the company and union fail to reach agreement in negotiations by 15 January 1941, a tribunal consisting of the same men, Judge

53 This threat of ejection from the union by removal of locals' charters was not to prove a very potent weapon, however. The UMW always faced the possibility that the miners would be driven to attempt a break with the International as in the AMW years. Early in the new year, when Stellarton and Sydney Mines pits each went on strike, a wire from John L. Lewis threatening charter revocation was used to get the Stellarton men back to work. There were no blacklistings, however, and no record of even the threat of removal of their charter against the Sydney Mines men. *Glance Bay Gazette*, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10 February 1941. The UMW officers may have been hesitant to use the threat of charter revocation against the Sydney Mines men in case the bluff would be immediately called, since these miners had stayed with the AMW for several years after the rest of the miners had returned to the UMW.

54 *Halifax Herald*, 13 December 1940; *Glance Bay Gazette*, 17 December 1940; *Labour Gazette*, 40 (December 1940), p. 1239; *UMW Journal*, January 1941. A revealing aspect of this agreement is that although Dosco persisted in the pretence that its various coal subsidiaries were quite separate, and must conduct negotiations independently, it agreed that the management appointee to this binding grievance board for all companies should be "from the management of one of the companies". If the company and union could not agree on a chairman, he was to be appointed by the federal Minister of Labour.

55 The attitude of the radicals is indicated from the name "Disjointed Board of Maladjustment" immediately given to the board by the *Steelworker and Miner*, 4 January 1940.

McTague, Ralph Bell and Frank Scott, should "settle the terms of a new contract". With unconscious irony the *Labour Gazette* report stated that it was a "fine tribute" to the work of the conciliation board that the same personnel for the tribunal should now be agreed upon by all parties.⁵⁶

The government's wartime wage policy for all Canada was made clear the next week, when P.C.7440 was issued on 16 December. Wage settlements were to be tied to a "fair and reasonable" standard, the rates payable in the period 1926-1929. However, for each five per cent rise in the cost of living index a five per cent wartime bonus could be permitted. Justice McTague was appointed "Conciliation Advisor" to the Minister of Labour, with the specific responsibility of reviewing all conciliation findings to ensure they complied with the order.⁵⁷ Predictably, the UMW and Domco negotiations failed, and on 15 January 1941 notice was given that the services of the McTague Tribunal would be required. The tribunal did not meet until 28 February, when the company again claimed it was financially unable to pay any general increase, while the UMW disputed this and argued that miners' wages in the 1926-29 period had been abnormally depressed, and that the cost of living was now unusually high in the area. The tribunal disregarded the union's pleas and accepted the company's claim that it could not afford a large pay hike. When the award, again unanimous, was made public on 13 March, small pay raises were included for the Scotia and Acadia men, for shippers at the Sydney Pier, and for the mechanics working in the mines, but no basic rate increase for most of the men. Although it was found that due to a rise in cost of living of 7.2 per cent, they were entitled to a 30 cent bonus per shift, the "finances of the companies and general condition of the industry ... do not ... warrant the full payment of this amount now". Instead, a 15 cent per shift war bonus was recommended, with an additional 15 cents to be added when it was judged appropriate. The tribunal stipulated that the increases and bonus would be retroactive to 1 February only if the union accepted the contract within 30 days.⁵⁸

It was extremely improbable that the miners would vote to accept this contract, since the "outlaw" strikes had continued through early 1941 and sub-district conventions had been held, with representation from Glace Bay, Sydney Mines, and New Waterford locals, that showed the increasing influence of the left. At these meetings the delegates had fruitlessly pursued the idea of a recall of executive officers, registered their opposition to the provisions of P.C.7440, and threatened a general strike over the delay in getting a reasonable contract. After the McTague report was published not even the *Glace Bay*

56 *Labour Gazette*, 40 (December 1940), p. 1240.

57 *Labour Gazette*, 41 (January 1941), pp. 22-4.

58 *Labour Gazette*, 41 (March 1941), pp. 231-36; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 15 January, 28 February, 1, 14 March 1941.

Gazette thought that the miners would agree to its terms. Rumours circulated that the executive might sign without a referendum, and resolutions were passed in several locals against any such action. However, at a board meeting on the eve of the Easter weekend, just before the 13 April deadline for signing the contract, the District Executive Board decided to accept the contract without a referendum, by a vote of five to three. This decision was revealed almost immediately by one of the minority, New Waterford Board Member and CCF M.L.A. Douglas MacDonald.⁵⁹

The indignation of the miners was at once made apparent. Miners at the Florence pit were already on strike on a local grievance, and they were joined in a general walkout of the men in all the mines in Glace Bay, New Waterford and Sydney Mines sub-districts. A statement supporting the miners' strike "to restore democracy" was issued by SWOC Local 1064 in Sydney. The strike call was sent out by a "tri-sub-district convention" attended by delegates from locals in the Glace Bay, New Waterford and Sydney Mines sub-districts.⁶⁰ This body and its "policy committee" were to guide the actions of the miners throughout the slowdown. Prominent in its leadership were the well known militants and radicals of the district, almost all old AMW men. Some, like John Alex MacDonald and Bob Stewart, were members or former members of the Communist Party.⁶¹ Others, such as Tom Ling of New Waterford and Angus McIntyre of Glace Bay, were from the left wing of the local CCF.⁶²

The executive officers, faced with this rising storm, argued that the only choices were to sign the contract or carry out a disastrous strike. There was no time for a referendum, given the 30 day deadline the tribunal had set; and they were advised by Professor Scott and the UMW International Board that it would be advisable to sign at once. The executive pointed out that while a referendum "is looked upon by some as a great democratic and sacred principal [sic], it is also true that our last district convention decided that no referendum

59 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 13, 15, 24 January, 10, 17, 25 February, 17, 29, 31 March, 12 April 1941. See also MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, p. 230.

60 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17 April 1941; *Sydney Post-Record*, 16 April 1941.

61 Stewart had left the Party in 1936, following J.B. McLachlan out in protest at the right turn of the time and the disbandment of the A.M.W. He does not appear to have rejoined the Party at this period, although he was a member or a very active supporter in the post war years. MacDonald may well still have considered himself a Party member at this time, and his stand in 1940-1941 seems to have adhered closely to party positions.

62 The Ling brothers had put forward the resolution at the 1938 convention for District 26 affiliation with the CCF. McIntyre had been the first secretary of the Cape Breton Regional CCF Council, and was one of the men Clarie Gillis defeated in the contest for nomination as party candidate for C.B.South. He then resigned as secretary and possibly from the beginning his leftism led to some uneasiness concerning him on the part of the leadership. See H.I.S. Borgford to D. Lewis, 17 August 1939; Lewis to Borgford, 24 August 1939, CCF Papers, MG 28 IV I, Vol. 27, Public Archives of Canada [PAC].

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vote would be held at that time, notwithstanding the fact that the executive officers had recommended that a referendum vote might be taken". A telegram sent to all District 26 locals by the top International officers, John L. Lewis, Philip Murray and Thomas Kennedy, called on the men to end the strike. Within a few days the Springhill local voted to endorse the district officers' actions.⁶³ Despite these endorsements, the district officers had permanently lost any substantial support from Cape Breton miners, even among the moderates. Only a small minority of right wing miners would henceforth speak in their favour, although the *Glace Bay Gazette* attempted to bolster up the confidence of the right wing by printing letters backing the officers. Reflecting radical opinion, the *Steelworker and Miner* declared that D.W. Morrison had joined the ranks of the world's great betrayers like "Judas, Benedict Arnold, Laval and Quissling [sic]".⁶⁴

The strike was ended after four days by a tri-sub-district convention decision, and a petition to the International Board was circulated, asking for the removal of President Morrison and Secretary-Treasurer MacKay from office. According to a later statement by the convention committee, this petition was signed by 5845 miners within a few hours.⁶⁵ The response of the International was to appoint Senator William Sneed of Pennsylvania, whom Lewis sent frequently to deal with District 26 problems, and David Stevens, UMW International Board Member for District 7, Illinois, to investigate "internal dissension" in the district. Sneed and Stevens arrived on 14 May, met with the executive on 16 May and then held hearings for two days at the Sydney Courthouse, after which they returned to the United States to report to the UMW International Board.⁶⁶ The miners were not placated by this investigation. Before the commissioners arrived, the slowdown strike had begun, at first as an apparently spontaneous movement among the miners in New Waterford and Sydney Mines. Memory of the slowdown strike conducted in 1921 under the leadership of J.B. McLachlan may have contributed to the popularity of this idea among miners. At a tri-sub-district convention held on 11 May the policy of "curtailment of production" was almost unanimously endorsed. The delegates also pledged that the locals would abide by this decision until it was rescinded by another convention.⁶⁷

A circular letter was promptly sent out by the district executive stating this policy was contrary to the constitution of the UMW, and would not be tolerated.

63 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 17, 21 April 1941.

64 *Steelworker and Miner*, 19 April 1941.

65 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 19 April, 11 July 1941. According to the Policy Committee's "A Message to the Unions of Canada", published in the *Canadian Tribune*, 16 August 1941, 10,000 miners eventually signed the petition demanding the resignations.

66 *Sydney Post-Record*, 16, 19 May 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 16, 17, 19 May 1941.

67 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 5, 8, 12 May 1941.

A full page Dosco advertisement in the *Glance Bay Gazette* appealed to wartime patriotism, quoted Winston Churchill, and declared: "We therefore join with the President and officers of District 26 of the United Mine Workers of America in requesting the immediate discontinuance of this policy of curtailment of coal production". These blandishments had little effect, nor did the first attempts by the company to coerce the miners. At the Sydney Mines collieries, when the management tried reducing the workforce after the mine output fell due to the slowdown, there was a week of strikes until the company rescinded the policy.⁶⁸

The "curtailment policy" posed several difficulties for the company. In both the mines working the longwall system and those operating under the older "room and pillar" system, the workforce was composed of roughly half contract miners and half "datal" men. The contract miners dug the coal and loaded it in cars to be sent to the surface, and were paid for the weight they produced. The datal men transported the coal and maintained the mine, and were paid a daily wage. It was the contract miners who were formally on slowdown, and although the amount they were paid would be reduced, they still had an income much greater than any strike pay they could have received in a full tieup. So long as the mine operated, the lower paid datal men would receive their full wage per shift. Since the company's profits suffered, the natural counter to such tactics was a lockout, but the company was under pressure from their customers and the government to keep up coal production, and wished to make what profit they could from coal operations while sales were assured. Presumably Dosco also preferred that all the odium incurred for disrupting war production be directed at the miners.

Support for the slowdown remained quite solid and effective in the Glance Bay and New Waterford mines throughout the summer. In some respects this solidarity was remarkable. The penalty of public disgrace for being a strike-breaker was immense in the union conscious mining towns, but breaking solidarity was neither so clear cut or readily detected during a slowdown. The miners generally worked in pairs in isolated places in the mine, and all that was required to increase a man's income when the unpaid bills began to mount was to load a little more coal. Yet it was universally agreed, by both proponents and opponents, that the slowdown was effective in cutting production in almost all Cape Breton's Domco mines by at least one third from May until September.⁶⁹ Although the Scotia miners in Sydney Mines voted to end their slowdown in the middle of June, when they and the Acadia miners received a slight pay increase,

68 *Glance Bay Gazette*, 13, 17, 21, 22, 27, 28 May 1941.

69 Since the Reserve mine was in the process of closing down and having a new pit opened, it took no part in the slowdown with the consent of the other locals at the conventions. The one mine in which support was reported to be somewhat weak and fluctuating was IB at Dominion. *Glance Bay Gazette*, 19 July 1941.

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the sympathies of the Sydney Mines men appear to have remained with the convention, since they continued to send delegates as observers, and it retained the title "tri-sub-district convention". At both Sydney Mines and Stellarton wildcat strikes took place during the slowdown.⁷⁰

On 6 June, by Order in Council P.C. 4016, coal mining was declared an "essential service" under the Defence of Canada Regulations. Although this amounted to no more than bringing mining into the same category as many other industries regarded as necessary to war production, the local newspapers interpreted the timing of this step as an effort to intimidate the Nova Scotia miners.⁷¹ Later in June the district officers went to Ottawa to meet with government officials, and this meeting was followed by a renewed effort by the UMW International to bring the Cape Breton miners under control. At the beginning of July John L. Lewis placed Silby Barrett in control of District 26, with "full authority to act for the international office in all matters involving the locals".⁷² Although the other district officers were not removed as the miners had demanded, Lewis seems to have thought this step could defuse the situation. However, it only succeeded in making Barrett, who for some time had not been much involved with district affairs, the main focus of the miners' resentment. Silby Barrett was certainly not helped by the historical parallel with his 1923 appointment as provisional head of the district when the left executive led by J. B. McLachlan had been deposed by John L. Lewis. Moreover, in July 1941 the *Steelworker and Miner*, with unconcealed relish, published the 1924 letter accusing Barrett of misappropriation of funds, which had led to his removal from office.⁷³ Barrett may have gained national prominence in the labour movement by his leading role in the Canadian CIO, but locally no union leader was more closely associated with heavy-handed bureaucracy.

Barrett met with the District Board, and then sent out a circular to the locals repeating the charge that the slowdown was unconstitutional, and demanding compliance with this stand by 15 July. The Board declared the tri-sub-district conventions "illegal and unconstitutional", on the grounds that conventions of a single sub-district only were permissible, and then only when properly convened by the Board Member. Letters were also sent to 13 individual leaders of the convention, ordering them to appear before a union tribunal on 15 July to face charges of violating the constitution. Barrett appealed to the miners to end the slowdown in the name of loyalty to the UMW and to Canada. Additionally he referred to "illegal spending" by the locals, and from this time the locals were cut

70 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 5, 9, 16, 24 June, 31 July 1941.

71 *Labour Gazette*, 41 (August 1941), pp. 963-4; *Sydney Post-Record*, 7 June 1941; *Halifax Herald*, 7 June 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 7 June 1941.

72 Telegram John L. Lewis to D.J. MacDonald, Chairman of the tri-sub-district committee, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 2 July 1941.

73 *Steelworker and Miner*, 12 July 1941.

off from receiving their share of the checked-off dues payments. The convention policy committee defiantly replied that the miners would end the slowdown only when the officers were removed, and the largest local, Phalen, sent a wire to Lewis demanding the removal of all the executive, not merely Morrison and MacKay. On 11 July the policy committee indicated that curtailment of production would stop only if the entire executive, including Barrett, resigned and were replaced by three provisional officers sent by the International to hold an election as speedily as possible, and if the miners received a “decent increase in wages that will allow us to live as Canadian citizens should live”.⁷⁴ The committee also called for a one day strike, a demonstration and a mass meeting on 15 July, the day the 13 men were to appear before the UMW tribunal.

On 15 July all the mines in the Glace Bay and New Waterford areas were shut down. Over 5000 men marched through Glace Bay “to form what was considered the largest parade of workers in the history of this mining community”. The event was very orderly, the miners of each local marching as a contingent carrying “Union Jacks and banners”. The entire procession was led by two large banners reading: “WE ARE FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY” and “DOWN WITH HITLER AND SILBY BARRETT”. The parade escorted the 13 accused men to the UMW District Office, and then proceeded to the Miners’ Forum, the hockey arena, where a mass meeting was held. The 13 accused, having made their brief appearances before what they called the “kangaroo court”, were greeted as heroes at the rally. Bob Stewart, John Alex MacDonald, Tom Ling, Angus McIntyre, Freeman Jenkins, and Convention Chairman Dan J. MacDonald, along with other speakers, all denied the validity of the trials, and urged the miners to continue the slowdown and not make the mistake of starting a full strike, in which the authorities could defeat them. Norman MacKenzie and George MacEachern of the Sydney steel workers’ union spoke in solidarity with the miners, and the meeting unanimously passed a resolution demanding the repeal of P.C.7440.⁷⁵

The efforts of Barrett and the UMW executive to bring the miners under control had been turned into a triumphant display of solidarity and of the ascendancy of the left in the locals and among the rank-and-file miners. A few days later a Phalen meeting passed a resolution that the local would have no further dealings with the district officers. Phalen did not, local President Freeman Jenkins assured the press, intend to break with the UMW, but it would no longer recognize this executive. Three other locals, Caledonia, No.11 and No.12 at New Waterford, sent telegrams to John L. Lewis demanding the executive’s removal. Lewis wired back an ultimatum that unless these locals complied with the constitution and subordinated themselves to the district office

74 *Halifax Herald*, 10 July 1941; *Sydney Post-Record*, 10 July 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 July 1941.

75 *Sydney Post-Record*, 16 July 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 15, 16 July 1941.

before the end of a week, their UMW charters would be revoked. On the same day, 19 July, Barrett issued another press statement repeating demands that the men return to full production. On 21 July letters were sent out to the locals informing them that the 13 men who had appeared before the tribunal were suspended from UMW membership.⁷⁶

By this time the slowdown had become a hot national news story, and editors throughout the country were demanding that the government deal promptly with this unpatriotic disruption of war production. Domco purchased space for full page spreads in newspapers and explained that the curtailment policy resulted from an inner-union quarrel, for which the company had no responsibility.⁷⁷ This pressure also affected Minister of Labour Norman McLarty, who decided to make a direct appeal to the miners' patriotism in a full page advertisement published in various newspapers and in a radio broadcast over CJCB Radio Station in Sydney, with the Minister's voice coming over the telephone lines from Ottawa. McLarty claimed that "all parties admitted the dispute concerned only the union members themselves", ignoring the fact that the men were also demanding better wages and repeal of the government's wage policy. Referring to the miners' defiance of the UMW executive he said: "Your government has declared in favour of collective bargaining but it is your responsibility to see that it works". Only one sentence came close to a threat: "This slowdown is discouraging the continuance of the government's policy of subventions to the coal mines of Nova Scotia and endangers the employment which they stimulate".⁷⁸

The CCL executive also met with McLarty and appealed for government support for collective bargaining rights by the active enforcement of P.C.2685, which called for employers to recognize unions. The slowdown was discussed, and Mosher, Conroy, Millard and the others were quick to back their colleague Silby Barrett. The executive passed a resolution expressing the "unqualified support" of the CCL for the UMW Board's efforts to obtain "full compliance with the policies and laws of the union by certain members of the union in the Cape Breton coal fields".⁷⁹

Neither the CCL endorsement of the executive nor McLarty's appeal weakened the stand of the miners. Delegates at the tri-sub-district convention said the Minister was mistaken if he did not understand that the wage rate was the principal issue. McLarty was then sent a request for a direct conference involving the convention, the government and the coal company. The response to John L. Lewis was even more determined. The convention sent him a

76 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 18, 19, 23 July 1941.

77 *Globe and Mail*, 9 July 1941; *Halifax Herald*, 9 July 1941.

78 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 22 July 1941; *Sydney Post-Record*, 22 July 1941; *Halifax Herald*, 22 July 1941.

79 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 24 July 1941.

telegram stating that if the charters of the three locals were revoked, all ten UMW locals in Glace Bay and New Waterford would secede from the union. Lewis, in fact, quietly backed down. The threatened locals were given an extension of the ultimatum, and then the matter was allowed to drop.⁸⁰

The miners' slowdown now began to get some support from a somewhat surprising source, the representatives of small businessmen in the area. The Glace Bay Board of Trade and the Retail Merchant Association informed McLarty that the men's unfairly low wages were the root of the problem, and that the miners had good reasons to have lost confidence in their union officers.⁸¹ The sympathetic stance of local small business towards the miners' rebellion continued through the summer, and perhaps is largely explained by the extent to which these merchants depended upon the miners as customers, and had a direct interest in higher wages being paid them. Some food retailers were by this time themselves in difficulties, having extended credit to miners.

McLarty remained impervious to this pressure, informing the the Retail Merchants' Association and the convention committee that the miners' grievances would only be considered when full production resumed. At the end of July the Minister met with UMW Secretary-Treasurer Kennedy and Barrett and they adopted two new initiatives: McLarty would visit the area himself and the UMW International would send Senator Sneed again to District 26 to take charge of union affairs. McLarty then travelled to Glace Bay where he repeated that nothing could be done for the miners until they gave up the slowdown, and urged them to co-operate with Senator Sneed. Although Sneed met with the convention committee on several occasions, and sent an optimistic wire to McLarty, he also failed to convince the miners to give way. In a last ditch effort, he warned the men in a radio broadcast that unless they resumed full production they could not "expect the protection" of the union. "Officers of local unions and membership in Cape Breton, you cannot fight your government; neither can you fight the international union of the UMW of A". If they complied, he hinted strongly, they would almost immediately get the full bonus payment under P.C.7440.⁸²

In the last week in August the coal company took more decisive action, apparently acting on a plan coordinated with the UMW officers and the government. On 23 August, a Saturday, executive officers Morrison, MacKay, and Muise met with Domco officials. On the Monday company officials formally questioned miners as they arrived at the pits on their stand on curtailment. On 27 August the officials at Caledonia mine began "refusing lamps" to some of the miners, turning them away when they reported for work.

80 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 24, 29 July 1941.

81 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 25 July 1941.

82 *Sydney Post-Record*, 28 July 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 28, 30 July, 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 15, 16, 21 August 1941.

Over the days and weeks that followed, these “lamp stoppages” went on in a planned system of escalation, first at one mine and then another. Only contract miners who supported curtailment were dismissed, 16 the first day at Caledonia, 20 the next day, and the same number on succeeding days. The same process began at No.2 on 29 August, and at No.12 New Waterford on 30 August, and later at other mines. Fruitless protests were sent to the Labour Minister and other authorities, a committee was set up to collect funds for the support of the laid off men, and there was discussion of launching a full strike. The Sydney SWOC passed a resolution that its members would strike in sympathy if the miners were forced into this action. By 3 September No.12, where 140 longwall men had been dismissed and others refused to work their places, had been completely closed down. M.L.A. Douglas MacDonald asked Minister of Justice Ernest Lapointe to take action against this “lock-out of 1100 men”, in “direct violation of the industrial disputes investigation act”. A similar protest was sent by the Glace Bay Army and Navy Veterans Association, who said many of those dismissed were veterans or the fathers of men serving overseas. McLarty replied that this was not a lockout; the coal company “is merely suspending men who do not give a day’s work for a day’s pay”, and they would be immediately re-employed if they expressed willingness to abandon the slowdown.⁸³ The government’s attitude to strikes was definitely stiffening at this time. On 17 September P.C.7307 was passed, tightening the regulations governing legal strikes and increasing the penalties for illegal strikes.⁸⁴

At the same time the “lamp stoppages” began, the government and company authorized the payment of the additional 15 cent per shift bonus to the Springhill miners.⁸⁵ This was presumably the “carrot” to go with the “stick” of the dismissals. There was also another rather farcical attempt to use the “stick” at this time. A strike of 15 pump workers in late August had led to the closing down of the two mines at Stellarton for several days. The authorities apparently decided to make examples of these men, and two of them were actually arrested and brought to trial for “illegal” striking, although the men charged could not be proven to have been involved in the strike, and the cases were dismissed.⁸⁶

In Cape Breton the company continued the lamp stoppages until the second week in September, when the total dismissed came to approximately 400 men, including most of the leading convention delegates. Other miners were unable to work because the number to operate a shift was insufficient, and they refused

83 *Halifax Herald*, 23 August 1941; *Sydney Post-Record*, 27 August, 4, 10 September, 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 August, 4, 8, 10 September 1941.

84 *Labour Gazette*, 41 (October 1941), p. 1209.

85 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 1 September 1941. A day later, the employees of the company-owned Sydney and Louisburg Railway also got the additional bonus. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 3 September 1941.

86 *Halifax Herald*, 3 September 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 22 August, 3 September 1941. One man was drunk on the day in question, and the other had been sent home by his supervisor.

transfers on principle. Money was collected from working miners for the men thrown out of work, and the slowdown policy was reaffirmed by votes of convention delegates, but the pressure had begun to have an effect on the miners' earlier unbreachable solidarity. As early as 24 August Bob Stewart of Caledonia mine had proposed that the miners return to full production for a month to see what the government would do for them. This idea was overwhelmingly rejected by convention delegates, and Stewart was attacked as a traitor by the *Steelworker and Miner*, but Stewart continued to press for this plan at subsequent convention sessions.⁸⁷

Pressure was particularly intense on the discharged miners, who had no income other than the amount that could be collected for their relief. Rumours were now prevalent that many working miners were increasing production to save their jobs, yet not contributing heavily to the fund for the men out of work. Soon after their dismissals these men had been handed discharge slips, implying their severance from the company was permanent. But the company also offered to return the lamp of any man who signed a paper promising full production, and by the middle of September a number of the men began to accept this offer. On 16 September, 84 No.12 men were reported to have accepted back their jobs on the basis of full production. On 22 September the local at No.16 voted to abandon the curtailment policy for 30 days; and at Caledonia, the mine hardest hit with dismissals, men were gradually returning to work, promising to end the slowdown.⁸⁸

The second annual CCL Convention was held at Hamilton in early September. The Cape Breton miners understood the importance of having their position presented, and in mid-August had elected delegates. Because the locals' funds had been frozen by the officers no money was available to send these delegates, but at the end of August one delegate, John Alex MacDonald, was sent. He spoke at various union meetings in Ontario and collected money to pay for the attendance of miner delegates at the convention, and a delegation of 34 led by Angus McIntyre was rushed to Hamilton at the last moment. Arriving a day late, the delegation marched on to the convention floor greeted by a standing ovation. A large banner had been hung on the wall reading: "GREETINGS TO THE FIGHTING NOVA SCOTIA MINERS".⁸⁹ This welcome was extremely displeasing to the right wing, a displeasure openly revealed by President Aaron Mosher.⁹⁰ Mosher had earlier directly involved himself in attempts to prevent the left wing delegates coming from Cape Breton,

87 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 25 August 1941; *Steelworker and Miner*, 30 August 1941.

88 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 8, 16, 22 September 1941.

89 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 16, 19 August, 1, 8, 18 September 1941.

90 Mosher reportedly tried to damp down the applause, saying: "You can please yourselves if you want to make a rebel of this convention or carry on in the proper manner". *Glace Bay Gazette*, 10 September 1941.

in his anxiety to ensure a right majority.⁹¹ Before the convention opened the CCL executive had passed a resolution opposing any strikes that broke existing contracts, and Mosher's opening speech, broadcast nationwide by the CBC, appealed to government to make it mandatory for employers to engage in collective bargaining, but called for labour peace in wartime. "It is more important to defeat Hitler and his gangsters than to bring the most tyrannical and reactionary employer in Canada to his knees".⁹² The left appears to have had the majority of vocal floor delegates, but they were in the minority in roll call votes conducted on the basis of workers represented. In the election of CCL executive board members John Alex MacDonald got 199 votes, more than any other left candidate, but the right slate was elected, with Charles Millard getting 269 votes and Silby Barrett 231. A heated struggle arose over a resolution tabled by the Sydney SWOC delegation which asked the convention to "condemn the action of the Executive in opposing the struggle of the miners for trade union democracy and a better standard of living". The convention resolutions committee, chaired by Pat Conroy, put forward an alternative resolution calling for the dismissed men to be re-employed, the slowdown to end, and urging the government to get more money for the miners. In the end the right wing resolution, defeated by a floor vote, was carried by a roll call vote of 199 to 158.⁹³

Although the Cape Breton delegates were disappointed by this decision and by opposition shown to their position by prominent CCF leaders at the convention, they were heartened by the strong support they had been given by the left forces at Hamilton, which included the support of almost all the rank-and-file CIO delegates in attendance. At the tri-sub-district convention held on 17 September it was decided to carry on with the curtailment policy, even though there was no hope of official support from the CCL and it was clear the solidarity of the miners was collapsing. In fact, the miners surely felt they were defeated, for in a telegram sent to McLarty they agreed to resume full production if the government would guarantee that Domco would rehire all the dismissed men and pay the full bonus under P.C.7440. McLarty replied that the men must first begin normal working, and then their grievances could be dealt with. The delegates interpreted this reply to mean that "McLarty thought they were going back licked".⁹⁴

91 Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour*, p. 71.

92 *Labour Gazette* 41 (October 1941), pp. 1245-6.

93 *Canadian Congress of Labour 1941, Minutes*, pp. 98-9, 102. Abella, in his account of this convention, argues the left forces, influenced by the change of Communist policy now that the Soviet Union was in the war, "were less fractious than ever": "Most ironically, they even joined with the Congress executive in condemning District 26 of the UMW for conducting an 'illegal strike'". Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour*, p. 71. This is untrue, as a reading of the convention minutes clearly shows.

94 *Steelworker and Miner*, 20 September 1941; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 18, 30 September 1941.

Although the convention held to the curtailment policy, it was now mainly concerned to extract some face saving concession from the government and union authorities. At a public meeting on 24 September it was decided to send telegrams to Prime Minister King and to John L. Lewis. King was asked to guarantee full bonus payments, and Lewis to meet with three delegates from the policy committee to hear their side of the matter. On 28 September a convention was held to consider the replies from the Prime Minister and President Lewis. Neither promised anything, but the delegates chose to interpret the wording of each as sufficiently conciliatory to permit a return to full production. There seemed little choice, since two locals, Caledonia and No. 16, had already voted to return to full production, and individual miners were beginning to do so at the other mines. The convention almost unanimously voted to abandon the curtailment policy. This was a retreat “in good order”, wrote the *Steelworker and Miner*, and the *Canadian Tribune* claimed the miners had scored a “moral victory”.⁹⁵ Tom Ling was one of the few delegates who spoke frankly of the slowdown having been defeated, but he asked the miners not to get discouraged: “We took a bad licking in 1925 and came back in 1941 and 16 years from now the younger generation will come back driven by the same conditions”.⁹⁶ The dismissed miners were taken back, and within a short time the additional bonus was paid to the Domco miners.⁹⁷ The union also reinstated the 13 suspended members, and restored the funds to the locals, and no local lost its charter. But at best these concessions were evidence that the miners surrendered in sufficiently good order to prevent the authorities from attempting any retribution against them. They can hardly be called the fruits of victory.

Given the forces arrayed against them it is difficult to imagine how the slowdown could have resulted in a victory for the miners. There was always an element of confusion over whether the main aim of the curtailment policy was the removal of undemocratic officers or concessions in wages. McLarty may have deliberately misinterpreted the miners’ aims when he claimed this was purely a union matter in his July statement, but up to that point many statements had been made indicating that the dismissal of the officers would immediately lead to the resumption of full production. And on both questions the miners were throughout inhibited from pushing their struggle to its full extent. Part of the reluctance to stage a full scale strike arose from the fact that the miners realized how unpopular a wartime strike would be, and their own frequent protestations of patriotic support for the war effort were not insincere. Moreover, they were never prepared to seek a full break with the UMW.

95 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 25 September 1941; *Steelworker and Miner*, 27 September 1941; *Canadian Tribune*, 4 October 1941.

96 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 29 September 1941.

97 At the same time the government permitted the coal company to increase the price of coal twenty-two cents per ton. *Labour Gazette*, 41 (October 1941), p. 1268.

Memory of the defeat of the AMW must have had much to do with this reluctance, as well as the fact that both the Communist Party and the CCF threw the weight of their influence against an action that would split the union movement at this time.

The role of these two parties during the struggle had been quite different. The Communists had consistently and actively supported the miners. The *Canadian Tribune*, for example, published statements by the miners' policy committee and editorials with titles such as "Miners Fight for Justice".⁹⁸ *Tribune* editor A.A. MacLeod visited Glace Bay several times during the slowdown to express support for the miners, once speaking at a mass meeting in the Miners' Forum along with Communist supported M.P. Dorise Neilsen and CCFer Clarie Gillis.⁹⁹ The Communist Party's policy on union struggles began to change when the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany in June 1941, and in 1942 the Party had adopted a position strongly against any disruption of war production. But this policy change did not take place as sharply and suddenly as is frequently claimed.¹⁰⁰ In the summer of 1941, while calling for unification behind the war effort, the Party took the line that unity could only be achieved by increasing democracy, creating trade union rights, and removing inequalities in Canada, and that strikes were inevitable so long as employers were permitted unchecked exploitation of workers.¹⁰¹ This was very similar to the line the CCF had adopted; the difference was that the Communists were willing to make statements critical of the policies and actions of important union leaders, and the CCF were not.

The miners' actions created a very difficult situation for the CCF, particularly for a local politician such as Clarie Gillis. The miners had elected Gillis to Parliament, but the District officers were themselves prominent members of the CCF, and the District Office provided the money for campaigns. It was also clear, from statements made by CCF leader M. J. Coldwell opposing the slowdown, that the central leadership of the party supported the UMW officers rather than the men.¹⁰² Gillis compromised as best he could, attacking the coal company and criticizing the government, while avoiding any direct reference to the officers; and he came under strong radical attack for this.¹⁰³ Eventually, to his embarrassment, he had to share a platform with Mrs. Neilsen and A.A.

98 *Canadian Tribune*, 26 July, 16, 23 August 1941.

99 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 25 August 1941.

100 For example, see Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour*, p. 70 and Ivan Avacumavic, *The Communist Party in Canada* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 139-66.

101 See "Labor is the Key to Victory", *Canadian Tribune*, 13 September 1941. This article specifically mentions the slowdown, fully supporting the miners in a section entitled "Dosco Stalls Coal Production".

102 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 13 August, 17 September 1941.

103 *Steelworker and Miner*, 19 May, 21 June 1941.

MacLeod at a rally in support of the slowdown; but while they gave full support to the miners' attacks on the officers, Gillis could only offer to act as a negotiator, saying "no side was wholly right and no side wholly wrong" and "someone has to act as a bumper".¹⁰⁴

Communist support for the slowdown won some temporary increase of Party influence in Cape Breton, but nothing that could be consolidated. One reason for this was that many local CCFers were strong proponents of the slowdown, and M.L.A. Douglas MacDonald of New Waterford increased his popularity with the miners by his actions.¹⁰⁵ The CCF came out of the matter very well, in fact, despite the anger of some of their supporters at the role of CCF leaders at the Hamilton CCL convention. There was a threat of independent labour candidates being nominated in the October 1941 provincial election, which might have hurt the CCF badly.¹⁰⁶ This was not done, and when the election was held the CCF in Cape Breton was the beneficiary of the workers' frustration with the policies of government. Douglas MacDonald was re-elected in New Waterford, and Donald MacDonald won the seat in Sydney. In Glace Bay, Minister L.D. Currie went down to defeat by CCFer D.N. Brodie by the largest majority in any of the contests in the province.¹⁰⁷ The anger of the miners defeated in the slowdown had been translated into electoral triumphs for the CCF.

The miners' revenge against the union executive was taken a year later when all the District 26 officers were defeated in the district election by humiliatingly large majorities. Freeman Jenkins became President, Tom Ling Vice-President and John Alex MacDonald became International Board Member. Adam Scott, another former AMW leader from Sydney Mines, won the office of Secretary-Treasurer. The victory of the union left in this election was in the long term to prove illusory. Once in office these officers, particularly President Jenkins, gradually became as bureaucratic as had been the Morrison executive. This was a pattern that repeated itself again and again in District 26 history. Most district presidents first came in defeating an incumbent with the votes of the left, and ended by becoming identified with bureaucracy and right-wing policies.

The efforts of D.W. Morrison, Silby Barrett and the other UMW officers to

104 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 25 August 1941.

105 MacDonald, of course, was the District Board Member who opposed signing the contract, and revealed what the executive were doing, as well as taking a strong stand against the dismissals by the company. It seems likely that these actions did him little good with the right in his own party. After the October election, when he was joined in the Nova Scotia Legislature by two other CCFers, Douglas MacDonald was passed over and the position of CCF House Leader given to Donald MacDonald of Sydney.

106 *Glace Bay Gazette*, 30 September 1941; C. Gillis to David Lewis, CCF Papers, MG IVI, vol. 5, PAC.

107 MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, p. 242.

influence government by their moderate policies had thus led to the loss of their offices.¹⁰⁸ It is very difficult to assess whether they had any success in modifying the government's attitude on the value of the collective bargaining process in bringing labour peace. For the next two years the government made no attempt to force anti-union employers to engage in meaningful collective bargaining. In February 1942 Mackenzie King defended his government's inaction, contradicting its stated policy in P.C.2685, during the Kirkland Lake gold miners' strike, by the argument that he opposed government compulsion against either capital or labour. As an example of the government's refraining from action against workers, he pointed out that: "Although the first principle [of P.C.2685] states that every effort should be made to speed production by war industries, the government did not exercise compulsion on miners involved in the slowdown in Nova Scotia coal mines".¹⁰⁹ This limp argument shows the miners' slowdown had not influenced King to regard union organization as helpful to stable productivity. In fact, the policies pursued by the government through 1939, 1940 and 1941 with respect to the UMW had much to do with the coming of the slowdown and the disruption of production it entailed. If these policies were aimed at securing and increasing the production of coal during the war, they failed dismally. The government would certainly have achieved this end much more successfully by putting real pressure on Dosco to pay decent wage increases to its miners, providing subsidies if necessary. This would probably have been a less expensive policy than the policy that failed, since the coal company was given more and more subsidies during the war, with little increase in the production of coal. By the end of 1942 the government proclaimed a "grave emergency" in national coal production; in June 1943, by Order in Council, miners were "frozen" on their jobs and former miners forced to return to the pits; and in October 1943 P.C. 8021 expressly prohibited coal strikes for the duration of the war.¹¹⁰

All of this availed little. Canadian coal production fell steadily behind the increase in consumption during the war and the deficit was made up by heavier imports from the United States. While production increased somewhat in the West, in Nova Scotia the production of coal fell throughout the war years, after a temporary rise in 1940.¹¹¹ In Alberta a district-wide strike in 1943 was able to win increases exceeding the government's limits.¹¹² In Nova Scotia the repression

108 MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, pp. 237, 282-5. The defeated officers did not fare too badly: Morrison was appointed a special representative by John L. Lewis, Barrett continued to hold important CCL office, and A.A. MacKay was appointed Chairman of the Domco-UMW Joint Adjustment Board.

109 Quoted in MacDowell, '*Remember Kirkland Lake*', p. 208.

110 *Labour Gazette*, 42 (December 1942), p. 1404; Jamieson, *Times of Trouble*, p. 290.

111 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Coal Statistics for Canada*, 1945, Table 42, p. 38.

112 Jamieson, *Times of Trouble*, p. 290.

and defeat of the miners' collective militancy in the early war years only led to an increase of individual behaviour expressive of the miners' extreme dissatisfaction. Absenteeism increased, and so did the shift of younger men to better paying jobs elsewhere, and productivity in the mines fell sharply. The policies of the government and the coal company, and the collaboration of UMW leaders with these policies in the early war years, were in large part responsible for this failure. In Nova Scotia the District officers in the early war years had, in effect, become agents of state policy in attempts to discipline the men and force them to accept poor settlements with the coal company, and this at a time when the wages of workers in other war industries were on the rise.

The experience of District 26 in the 1939-1941 period showed both the strength and the limitations of union bureaucracy in controlling a dissatisfied and militant work force. The miners' "illegal" strikes and the long slowdown foreshadowed the wave of wildcat strikes throughout the well established Canadian labour movement in the 1960s.¹¹³ As the new industrial unionism came to central Canada, the theoreticians of business unionism spoke of introducing democracy to the workplace. Unquestionably unionization led to advances for the workers in wages and conditions, and in some freedom from arbitrary treatment by management. But, as the struggle within the UMW revealed, the concept of union democracy held by many of the leaders of the labour movement was limited mainly to forms legitimizing the authority of union bureaucrats. Indeed, much of the intervention of state regulation in industrial relations was directly aimed at ensuring only unionism of this type could legally exist. The system of labour relations and the trade union movement that emerged achieved much for Canadian workers, but they could never satisfy workers' aspirations for more control over the labour process, bringing at best a badly flawed democracy to the workplace.

113 See *ibid.*, pp. 401-3.