

The Nova Scotia Coal Strikes of 1922 to 1925

Background

The Nova Scotia coal strikes of 1922 to 1925 are a pivotal episode in the history of the Canadian labour movement. They were remarkable for the tenacity of the miners, particularly in Cape Breton, who drew on shared work, ethnic and community backgrounds and “stood the gaff” during confrontations with the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) in spite of pressure from provincial and company police and the military. The miners’ perseverance inspired pride and a distinct sense of identity in Cape Breton, but it also attracted national attention, leading both the federal and provincial governments to consider more conciliatory labour policies. Policy changes in Nova Scotia thus formed the basis of a new legal framework for labour relations that would later be emulated elsewhere in Canada. These strikes were also significant for the fate of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in Nova Scotia. By successfully defending itself against Besco, the union consolidated its position as one of the earliest and most influential industrial unions in Canada.

The UMWA and Besco came from very different backgrounds. Based in the United States, the UMWA, which had waged a battle for recognition for more than a dozen years, represented about 12,000 miners in Nova Scotia who lived in desperate economic conditions in company-dominated towns. Besco was the newcomer. Formed in 1920-21, it controlled all of the steel mills and most of the coal mines in the province, but it faced a challenging future, having promised investors unrealistic profits during a time of declining demand for coal. Under the leadership of Montreal financier Roy Wolvin (“Roy the Wolf” to miners), the company was determined to reduce the wages of miners, limit their ability to strike and break the union.

Public officials in Nova Scotia and Ottawa watched the looming conflict with alarm. While they sought to minimize disruptions to coal production by mediating between the two sides when practicable, provincial and county officials were also ready to use force to discourage strikers and protect company property. Government officials, regardless of jurisdiction, tended to be more sympathetic to employers than employees, except for the leaders of the coal towns who identified closely with the people of their communities.

Besco made repeated attempts during these years to reduce wages and limit the right of miners to strike. The miners responded by gravitating to the leadership of the fiery J.B. McLachlan who adopted confrontational tactics. When McLachlan supported a sympathetic strike by miners in support of Besco’s steel workers in 1923, county and provincial officials arranged for troops and provincial police to intervene and the attorney general had him charged with seditious libel. Responding to an outcry against the use of troops, Mackenzie King later introduced federal legislation limiting the situations in which troops could be used for civil purposes.

Besco went for the jugular in 1925. Taking advantage of unemployment and deprivation in the coal towns, the company announced a 20 percent wage reduction and cut off credit at the company stores during the winter in order to crush opposition. The miners replied with a “100 percent” strike, which eventually resulted in violence when company police fired on strikers, killing one. In reprisal, company stores were looted and company buildings set ablaze, resulting in provincial officials once again calling in the military and the provincial police.

The crisis paved the way for a new provincial policy. After negotiating an end to the strike, the province began to encourage labour peace by recognizing the right of miners to unionize for certain limited ends, such as wage gains, while putting limits on radical labour action. This approach was eventually expanded to include most wage earners in Nova Scotia in 1937 and later stood as a model for legislation by other provinces and the federal government in the 1940s.

While Besco was weakened by the strikes and ultimately collapsed, the UMWA survived with a solid financial base derived from dues deducted from miners’ pay checks. The union’s acceptance by the provincial government and by later coal companies marked the successful conclusion of its struggle for union recognition.

- 1) What does Besco stand for?
- 2) How did this strike impact the rest of Canada?
- 3) How did it help the UMWA and what does that acronym stand for?
- 4) How much of the steel industry did Besco control and why was it in financial trouble?
- 5) What did Besco want to do to help itself out of its financial trouble? What did this cause the union to do initially?
- 6) How did authorities respond to McLachlan’s sympathetic strike? Who was Mackenzie King and what was his response?
- 7) What steps did Besco take in 1925 to break the union? What was the result?

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Background

The Nova Scotia coal strikes of 1922 to 1925 were a notable episode in working-class mobilization in Canada. During four successive years of strikes, Cape Breton coal miners demonstrated remarkable tenacity and courage in resisting wage reductions by the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco). The miners drew on shared workplace and community bonds to “stand the gaff,” and their perseverance in the face of desperate living conditions and pressure from company police and military encouraged pride and a distinctive sense of shared identity in the mining communities of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia. Affecting an industry deemed of strategic and economic importance, the strikes brought national attention to Cape Breton and forced the federal and provincial governments to consider more conciliatory labour policies, marking a turning point in Canadian labour.

In early 20th century, the rich coalfields of Sydney in Cape Breton and, to a lesser extent, Pictou and Springhill on the mainland, were a strong economic force in Nova Scotia, supplying the coal required for the province’s burgeoning steel mills. Nova Scotia miners, who by the 1920s were living in desperate conditions in company towns, were represented by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). In previous decades, the union fought for, and finally gained, recognition and the right to collective bargaining from coal operators. BESCO, formed in 1920-21, controlled all of the steel mills and most of the coal mines in the province. Having promised investors unrealistic profits during a time of declining demand for coal, BESCO sought to reduce the wages of miners, limit their ability to disrupt production through sudden strikes, and ultimately break up the UMWA.

The struggle between BESCO and the miners was intense. The corporation made repeated attempts to reduce wages and discourage work stoppages by placing restrictions on the traditional rights of miners to strike. The miners resisted, defending their collective bargaining rights, and gravitated towards the leadership of men such as J.B. McLachlan who advocated for confrontational tactics. In 1925, BESCO announced a 20 percent wage reduction and cut off credit at the company store, in an attempt to take advantage of unemployment and deprivation in the coal towns. The miners replied with a “100 percent” strike, which eventually resulted in violence when company police fired on strikers, killing one. In reprisal, company stores were looted and company buildings set ablaze.

The crisis led to the beginnings of a new provincial policy. After negotiating an end to the strike, the province began to encourage labour peace by recognizing the right of miners to unionize for certain limited ends, such as wage gains, while putting limits on radical labour action. This approach was eventually expanded to include most wage earners in Nova Scotia in 1937 and later stood as a model for legislation by other provinces and the federal government in the 1940s.

- 1) Explain what “stand the gaff” means.
- 2) Add any new information you learn here to the set of questions you previously answered...put this information where it would fit in those answers you just completed.

By Matthew Jessome & the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

In June of 1923, workers at the Sydney steel plant went on strike with hope of gaining union recognition plus better wages and working conditions. On Sunday, July 1st, provincial police went on the offensive and brutally attacked strikers and citizens alike – a day that came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.”

The steel plant in Sydney, Cape Breton, opened in 1901. It promised to be a modern facility with state-of-the-art Coke Ovens and an advanced steel making process. After the First World War, the steel industry experienced a recession, which caused hardship for many plants. In 1920, the Sydney steel plant was acquired by British Empire Steel and Coal Company (BESCO) along with steel and coal companies in Sydney Mines and Newfoundland. BESCO proceeded to lay off workers and cut wages at the Sydney plant. The resulting working conditions were said to be intolerable – shifts up to 24 hours long, few or no days off, and no vacations or holidays. After the governor general, Baron Byng, and his wife visited Sydney in the summer of 1923, Lady Byng recalled that she had never seen “a more wretched lot of hovels or a complete lack of any attempt at social service for the employees.”

The Sydney steel workers tried to unionize, seeking better working conditions and wages. BESCO refused to recognize the union and, fearing retaliation, pleaded with the provincial government for protection. Provincial "special police" were sent from Halifax on March 28th to keep workers in line. Their presence only heightened tensions between the company and its workforce. Negotiations with BESCO broke off, and on June 28th, 1923, the steelworkers called a strike and began to shut down the plant. The strikers blocked strikebreakers from entering the plant, forcibly removed workers from the boiler houses and coke ovens and threw stones when Sydney's police squad came and read them the Riot Act. The radical militancy of the steel workers was believed to be influenced by a prominent communist organizer, J. B. McLachlan, who was a union leader from District 26 (Nova Scotia) of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW). By BESCO's request, soldiers were sent from Halifax on June 30th – a total 350 troops and 74 horses from the Royal 22nd Regiment, according to the *Sydney Report*. The military pitched tents and set up searchlights and machine guns around the steel plant. The provincial "special police" reassembled and joined the soldiers as did Sydney's police squad. In total, there were over 1000 soldiers and police on the scene. The *Maritime Labour Harold* remarked sarcastically, "Such devotion to the BESCO is touching!"

On Sunday evening, July 1st, the provincial police went on the offensive, attempting to drive the strikers away from the plant gates. Finding themselves outmanoeuvred, the police recklessly pursued the fleeing strikers into Whitney Pier along Victoria Road, attacking both pedestrians and strikers along the way and damaging property. The July 7th issue of the *Maritime Labour Harold* described the events as a "reign of terror." According to the newspaper, an insurance agent, Jack Murphy, was leaving his house with his wife just as the police came galloping down the street. Murphy, who had nothing to do with the strike, was struck on the head by one of the police officers, and he was bedridden for four days afterward. The newspaper further reported that a 52-year-old man was hit on the head twice despite telling police he was heading home. His wife was also beaten on her way home from church. A man with one leg and a visually-impaired child were also beaten by the police, knocked over, and left lying on the road. Because of these and other instances of police brutality that day, July 1st, 1923, came to be known as "Bloody Sunday."

Although he was not witness to the "Bloody Sunday" attack, union leader J.B. McLachlan, released an official letter to the UMW, hoping to rally their support for the steelworkers' strike. In it he described the police brutality, including the beating of a 70-year-old woman nearly to death, a nine-year-old boy being trampled, and a pregnant woman bludgeoned, which caused the premature birth and death of her child. McLachlan's letter had the desired effect: beginning July 3rd, coal miners across Cape Breton and Nova Scotia's mainland, plus from one District in Alberta, went on strike in solidarity with the Sydney steelworkers, demanding the military and police withdraw. The union had delivered copies of McLachlan's letter to BESCO and local residents, and on July 6th, arrest warrants were issued for McLachlan and the president of District 26, Dan Livingstone. They were accused of "publishing false tales" that could incite "mischief" amongst the public. Legal battles ensued, which both distracted union organizers and took skillful and radical organizers out of the picture. Without McLachlan or Livingstone out of the picture, the UMW leader, John Lewis, tried to shut down the sympathetic strike. On July 17, all officials from District 26 were removed from office, leaving the union in shambles. The sympathetic strike dissolved, and with it the steelworker's power to achieve their goal. On August 2nd, the steelworkers voted to return to work.

- 1) Why might the steel industry have experienced a recession after WW1?
- 2) What sort of working conditions existed once Besco took over the mines?
- 3) When the union asked Besco for better wages and conditions, what did the company do?
- 4) List the events that unfolded on and after June 28th, 1923. Use point form if you need to.
- 5) Why was July 1st known as "Bloody Sunday"?
- 6) What was the outcome of "Bloody Sunday"?
- 7) List the steps taken by Besco and the government to dissolve the sympathetic strike. Were they successful?