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Steven Penfold

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STEVEN PENFOLD

“Have You No Manhood In You?”: Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926

WHEN CANADIAN SOLDIERS were sent into the Cape Breton coalfields in the summer of 1922 to protect company property, they met little resistance from the striking coal miners. Instead, the soldiers encountered extensive ridicule from the women of the coal towns. The wives of striking miners brought their children to the military encampments to see “the men who were sworn to murder at the command of the ruling class of Canada”. When a group of First World War veterans marched in support of the miners, the women held the soldiers guarding the collieries up to ridicule by suggesting that, by comparison, they were not “real” soldiers or “real” men — they had not fought for King and country in the trenches of France but wore their uniforms instead in the name of the Canadian capitalist.¹ This confrontation was a relatively minor occurrence in the pervasive industrial unrest in the Cape Breton coalfields in the first half of the 1920s. However, it highlights the ways that gender was woven into the fabric of class in the region and coloured the battle between the miners and their employers. The women’s actions, and the gendered images they invoked, drew upon prevailing conceptions of the appropriate behaviour of men and women in the working-class community of Cape Breton. Although the women were most explicitly expressing a commitment to the politics of class, the language of gender and class overlapped, and class loyalty became a test of manhood.

Such an incident was hardly the only example of women expressing their commitment to their class community. Indeed, women organized support activities, participated in crowd actions and stretched the dole to meet their family’s needs during strikes. Yet the dominant historiographical view of women in Canadian coal-mining communities has placed them at home and dependent on men, if they are mentioned at all. Although scholars have illuminated important dimensions of the lives of miners in Cape Breton, including the labour process, standards of living, class identity and politics, little attention has been paid to how gender was reflected in these experiences.² David Frank has, in a short article, recognized the

1 The incident is described in the *Maritime Labor Herald* [MLH], 23 September 1922. For their comments and support at various stages of this project, I would like to thank Rob Kristofferson, Gerry O’Donnell, Adele Perry, Diane Swartz and the *Acadiensis* readers. At the very beginning, Adrian Shubert saved my sanity with timely advice. Since then, Craig Heron has been supportive beyond the call of duty. These interventions merit special mention.

2 For otherwise excellent studies which nevertheless ignore women, see David Frank, “Coal Masters and Coal Miners: The 1922 Strike and the Roots of Class Conflict in the Cape Breton Coal Industry”, M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1974; Frank, “Class Conflict in the Coal Industry: Cape Breton 1922”, in G.S. Kealey and P. Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working-Class*

important role of the miner's wife as family financier, but he has not given any detailed examination of the important public role which women played.³ Other studies have examined the role of women in British and American mining communities, but the public activities of Canadian mining women have thus far attracted relatively little attention.⁴ Nevertheless, some historians have begun to recognize that even the efforts of non-waged women represent an important part of strike narratives.⁵ In addition, it is also becoming clear that a second historiographical silence concerns the male coal miners themselves, who have not been the subject of much interest from historians exploring the gendered dimensions of men's lives.⁶

History (Toronto, 1976), pp. 161-84; Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979; Ian McKay, "Industry, Work, and Community in the Cumberland Coalfields, 1848-1927", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1983; and Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto, 1976).

- 3 David Frank, "The Miner's Financier: Women in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1917", *Atlantis*, VIII, 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 137-43. Women occasionally appear in John Mellor's narrative history *The Company Store* (Toronto, 1983), but their presence is peripheral. Robert McIntosh and Ian McKay also discuss women, but largely in the context of the family: see McIntosh, "'Grotesque Faces and Figures': Boy Labour in the Canadian Coalfields", Ph.D. thesis, Carleton University, 1990, esp. pp. 91-125; and Ian McKay, "'The Realm of Uncertainty': The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927", *Acadiensis*, XVI, 1 (Autumn 1986), pp. 23-25. Michael Earle's work touches on the auxiliary efforts of radical women: see his "The Coal Miners and Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936", *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), p. 103.
- 4 In an American context, see Elizabeth Jameson, "Imperfect Unions: Class and Gender in Cripple Creek, 1894-1904", in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Conn., 1977), pp. 166-202; Ann Schofield, "An 'Army of Amazons': The Language of Protest in a Kansas Mining Community, 1921-1922", *American Quarterly*, XXXVII (Winter 1985), pp. 686-701; and Priscilla Long, "The Women of the Colorado Iron and Fuel Strike, 1913-14", in Ruth Milkman, ed., *Women, Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History* (New York, 1985), pp. 62-85. Angela John, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Women Workers in Victorian Coal Mines* (London, 1980) discusses women in British coal communities. The pioneering Canadian work on women in mining towns is Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto, 1980).
- 5 See, for example, Mary Horodyski, "Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919", *Manitoba History*, XI (Spring 1986), pp. 28-37; and Linda Kealey, "'No Special Protection, No Sympathy': Women's Activism in the Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919", in Dean Hopkin and Gregory Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (St. John's, 1989), pp. 134-59. See also Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, 1991).
- 6 Some examples of recent work on working-class masculinity can be found in Baron, ed., *Work Engendered*, esp. essays by Baron, Blewett, Boris and Hewitt; Elizabeth Faue, "'The Dynamo of Change': Gender and Solidarity in the American Labor Movement of the 1930s", *Gender and History*, I, 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 138-58; Ava Baron, "Acquiring Manly Competence: The Demise of Apprenticeship and the Remasculinization of Printers' Work", in Mark Carnes and Clyde Griffin, eds., *Meanings For Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago, 1990), pp. 152-63; and Mary Blewett, "Masculinity and Mobility: The Dilemma of Lancashire Weavers and Spinners in Late-Nineteenth-Century Fall River, Massachusetts", also in *Meanings For Manhood*, pp. 164-78. In a Canadian context, see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Men, Women and Change in Two Industrial Towns* (Toronto, 1990); Shirley Tillotson, "'We may all soon be first class men': Gender and Skill in Canada's Early Twentieth Century Urban Telegraph Industry", *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), pp. 97-125; Mark Rosenfeld, "'It Was a Hard Life': Class and Gender in the Work and Family Rhythms of a Railway Town, 1920-1950", *Communications historiques/Historical Papers* (1988), pp. 237-78; Christina Burr, "'Defending the

This study is an effort to integrate the analysis of gender dynamics and class conflict in the coalfields of Cape Breton in the 1920s. An "enlarged" view of strike activity is adopted in order to better integrate the actions of non-waged working-class women. Strike activity is viewed not as centred primarily in the workplace, but as a process of community mobilization. There is ample reason to adopt such a definition of strike activities in the case of the Cape Breton coalfields, since it was not just the workplace but the entire community that was, in Don Macgillivray's term, "besieged" by wage cuts, the presence of troops and company and provincial police.⁷ Class drove the rhythm not just of the workplace, but of the whole community. With the establishment of the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) in 1921, the Cape Breton coalfield came under the control of a single corporation. The trend toward monopolization did not bring stability, however, but only served to heighten the crisis of "underdevelopment" which characterized the region. It was no surprise, given the labour-intensive nature of coal mining in the 1920s, that Besco should target wages in its efforts to rescue the consortium from financial oblivion.⁸ The company's survival plan, however, met with stiff resistance from the miners, and the miners were supported by the women who lived in the coalfields. None of these women worked in the coal mines themselves.⁹ Yet, working-class women engaged in a wide array of supportive class activities. Women's Labour Clubs constituted the most organized expression of women's commitment to class action, but women also played an important role in crowd actions, and the domestic labour of women itself constituted a hidden form of strike support. This study is concerned to map the discourses of gender, mainly as they relate to class and labour militancy in the working-class community, and in doing so to write women back into the well-established narrative of class conflict in the coalfields.¹⁰

Until recently, paying attention to gender meant nothing more than discussing women. But under the influence of postmodern theorists, historians (even those who would reject much of postmodern philosophy) have begun to advance a more complex understanding of gender which focuses on the interplay of ideals of femininity and masculinity. Joan Scott has been particularly vocal in her call for a more creative use of the concept of gender, demonstrating how it was often used to give a "natural" appearance to the construction of differences based on class, ethnicity or citizenship.¹¹ Gender biases penetrated the core of Cape Breton's class

Art Preservative': Class and Gender Relations in the Printing Trades Unions, 1850-1914", *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), pp. 47-73.

7 Don Macgillivray, "Cape Breton in the 1920s: A Community Besieged", in B.D. Tennyson, ed., *Essays in Cape Breton History* (Windsor, N.S., 1973), pp. 49-67.

8 On the "underdevelopment" of the coal industry and creation of Besco and its financial problems, see Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation", *Acadiensis*, VII, 1 (Autumn 1977), pp. 3-34.

9 For a discussion of women's waged labour in Sydney Mines and other communities, see Del Muise, "The Industrial Context of Inequality: Female Participation in Nova Scotia's Paid Labour Force, 1871-1921", *Acadiensis*, XX, 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 3-31.

10 For a detailed study of the operation of gender in one Maritime working-class community, see Suzanne Morton, "Men and Women in a Halifax Working-Class Neighborhood in the 1920s", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1986.

11 See Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988).

ideology, which depended on the discursive opposition of masculine and feminine to legitimize the opposition of worker to capitalist. But masculinity was not linked only to class. Indeed, it played itself out across a wide range of practices, only a few of which are discussed here. For analytical purposes, notions of manhood adopted by the miners will be grouped into three broad categories: one tied to work, one to family and one to class.¹² Obviously, the distinctions are to some degree false, as the different aspects of masculinity were lived simultaneously, and conflicting discourses intersected within each of those categories. Masculinity and femininity were not, after all, neat categories, but were practices often involving conflicting and contradictory ideas.¹³

Certainly the work culture of the mine was deeply imbued with gendered images. The mine itself was often referred to as a “she”, and while officials were called “officials” and non-miners referred to as “citizens”, the miners were referred to (and referred to themselves) as simply “the men”.¹⁴ Not all mine workers were seen as “men”, however. The mines contained a variety of boy labourers in this period, who were socialized into manhood as they moved through the hierarchy of jobs underground. As Robert McIntosh has pointed out, the hierarchy of tasks in the 19th-century coal industry depended not so much on acquiring skill as acquiring certain gender traits: “The pit boy could expect to become a miner on reaching physical maturity. If most boys’ work in the mine did not contribute directly to the acquisition of the technical skills of the miner, it did constitute...a process of ‘pit-hardening’, the development of qualities of ‘toughness, manhood and fatalism’ associated with the collier”.¹⁵ It was not just skills that were taught, then, but manhood — which in the case of the miner included courage and stoicism in the face of constant danger and a sense of independence derived from being a tradesman. Completing the process of moving up through this gender hierarchy meant reaching “a man’s estate”. This socialization process included not just work-related education but initiation rituals as well. Pit boys complained of being the butt of practical jokes and the targets of spitting by tobacco-chewing adult miners. Key to this process of going up through the ranks was often the supervision of work by kin. Indeed, many boys were originally brought into the mine as helpers for their father.¹⁶ By the turn of the century, mechanization of the cutting of coal had compromised the traditional place of boy labour in Nova Scotia mines by pushing mining toward what McIntosh describes as a “uniform semiskilled workforce of machine operators”. At the outbreak of the First World War, only six per cent of Nova Scotia mine workers were boys, down from 20 per cent in the late-19th

12 The scope of this paper does not allow a discussion of manhood as it relates to sexuality.

13 My thinking in this area was influenced greatly by Blye Frank, “Masculinity: Challenging Ourselves”, paper presented to Halifax Men For Change, Dalhousie University, 24 March 1993.

14 See, for example, Province of Nova Scotia, Royal Commission To Inquire Into the Coal Mining Industry, “Minutes of Evidence” [Duncan Commission], pp. 833, 883, 1749.

15 McIntosh, “Grotesque Faces”, p. 158.

16 Duncan Commission, pp. 72-3, 441. The question of kin socialization was complex by the 1920s. Although it continued to have important resonance in the community, it was the company that was loudest in its calls for this type of recruitment. For Besco, this process of kin socialization ensured an ample supply of local labourers.

century.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the sense of independence gained from this procession to manhood was a vital part of the gender identity of adult miners, and as late as the 1920s, the miners' sense of independence retained a structural basis. The physical conditions of the workplace made supervision difficult and placed a premium on the initiative and judgement of the individual miner in the "bords". While some miners guarded their independence, the physical conditions of the mine also led to a feeling of cooperation and common interest with fellow miners. A sense of mutual respect was even extended to underground foremen, whose judgement was preferred over the "checkers" brought in by Besco.¹⁸

The image of the male breadwinner was another important aspect of manhood, and it was often invoked for the ends of working-class struggle. "The first duty of a worker is to his family", a *Maritime Labor Herald* headline proclaimed in 1923.¹⁹ The statement crystallized a common theme in the rhetoric of the Glace Bay labour newspaper, as well as that of union leaders and the miners themselves. Indeed, working-class grievances on a whole array of issues were defined in terms of the miner's concern for family and his role in it as sole breadwinner. The image of the male breadwinner was most forcefully expressed, logically enough, on the issue of wages. Miners consistently blamed the strife in the region on the fact that "we are not making enough money to live on, to support our families". The miners claimed a right to a "living wage", which, as David Frank has pointed out, entailed a level of comfort above mere subsistence.²⁰ The living wage was also based on the idea that the man's wage would constitute the only income for a family. As such, Alex Stewart told a royal commission in 1925, it "must...allow Canadian citizens, hardworking, honest heads of families, to live in peace and comfort and to have happy and well fed and well clothed children to comfort them in the hours after their day of toil". The living wage, then, had to be enough to prevent the necessity of a wife working to supplement the husband's income. Stewart was annoyed by the fact that his wife had to work while he was off at war: "the wife was forced and compelled to take a job...That was the recompense I got for it [going to war]. She had to get out and labour too".²¹

But the living wage was not just an abstract definition or ideal, it was a concrete measure of a standard of living. As such, the union was quick to invoke this notion during periods of wage negotiation. When Besco argued before the Gillen Conciliation Board in 1922 that wage cuts were necessary because of the pressures of international competition, union leader J.B. McLachlan produced

17 McIntosh, "Grotesque Faces", pp. 156, 162, 44, 12, 78.

18 For examples, see Duncan Commission, pp. 270-6, 403, 411, 575. For the labour process of coal mining in this period, see David Frank, "Contested Terrain: Workers' Control in the Cape Breton Coal Mines in the 1920s", in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston/Montreal, 1986), pp. 102-123.

19 *MLH*, 17 March 1923.

20 See, for example, Duncan Commission, pp. 140, 315, 390, 434; Frank, "Coal Masters and Coal Miners", pp. 91-6.

21 Duncan Commission, p. 595.

several wage slips “that did not allow a miner to support his family”.²² That the union would produce wage slips to support its demands for a living wage is instructive. The living wage was, after all, primarily a monetary standard, and it did not fully integrate the important role of the wife’s labour to family support. Certainly miners recognized that without women’s labour, they could never support the family — McLachlan, after all, had called the working-class woman the “best financier in the world”. But McLachlan made the statement before a conciliation board, and he was really making a point about the level of men’s wages, not the significance of women’s domestic labour to the working class.

The male breadwinner ideal was not the exclusive property of the working class. The image could also be used in the rhetoric of anti-strike or pro-capitalist forces. During idle times, it was the advertised policy of the company to provide employment for married men if possible (it is not clear if they actually did so), a claim the company was quick to exploit during strikes. In 1922 the *Sydney Post* attributed the very existence of strikes to the lack of “domestic responsibilities” on the part of the strike leaders. The *Post* also appealed to the miners’ breadwinner identity to try to convince them to stay on the job. In one case the paper argued that preparations for a strike constituted a “conspiracy to deprive 12,000 breadwinners of the opportunity of supporting their families”. The *Sydney Record* echoed such appeals to male breadwinner ideology by editorializing during the 1925 strike that although the union executive had caused the work stoppage, it was “the miners’ families...who will suffer”.²³

Because manhood was tied to the mine, to the labour process and to wages, a propensity to act in class ways was an important test of manhood for miners.²⁴ In this context “real men” were defined as those who maintained solidarity with their fellow workmen. “Real men”, argued the *Maritime Labor Herald*, were not afraid “to oppose Besco at all times without slavish regard for the legal taboos set up to make the hearts of cowards quail”. On another occasion, the *Labor Herald* suggested that weak or timid leaders ought to be replaced so that “men” were doing the “job of men”. The rank and file apparently adopted this type of language as well. In 1923 picketers taunted a truck driver who was crossing picket lines, urging him to join their strike against Besco: “Jump out. You’re a working man. These fellows have no hold on you. Be a man”.²⁵ Ideals of manhood were used not only against union men, but could be used also to appeal to a wider definition of justice. Nova Scotia Premier George Murray was rhetorically asked “Have you no manhood in you?...Will you stand by the people of this province or will you stand

22 *MLH*, 13 May 1922. See Frank, “The Miner’s Financier”, and Wally Seccombe, “Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth Century Britain”, *Social History*, XI (January 1986), p. 64.

23 *Sydney Post* [*Post*], 16 August 1922, *Post*, 29 July 1922, *Sydney Record*, 4 June 1925.

24 Many recent studies have linked class ideology to masculinity. See, for example, Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 1991); and Michael Yarrow, “The Gender-Specific Class Consciousness of Appalachian Coal Miners: Structure and Change”, in Scott McNall, Rhonda Levine, and Rick Fantasia, eds., *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (Boulder, Col., 1991), pp. 285-310.

25 *MLH*, 12 May 1923, 12 August 1922, *Record*, 15 February 1923.

by the stock gamblers of Montreal?"²⁶ Provincial policemen were ridiculed as unworthy of female affections, while class conscious miners were described as worthier mates than princes.²⁷ The importance of courage in the face of legal and company sanctions was articulated neatly in a letter to the *Labor Herald* from a miner who placed labour militancy in opposition to cowardice: "We workers are all Red, not yellow".²⁸

The other side of this class definition of manhood was the use of feminine images to describe class enemies. A miner who was complaining about his small pay packet but admitted not voting for the Independent Labour Party was told by his mates to give his wife "the pants, and you go home with the children and wear the skirt".²⁹ The strongest use of feminine symbols was reserved for scabs. J.W. MacLeod, president of District 26 of the United Mine Workers of America in 1925, told the *Post* that picketers would prevent any "weak sisters members of the UMW from going to work".³⁰ In a particularly dramatic style, scabs were described as being victims of "feminine domination", a circumstance which was bad enough in the home, but inexcusable in matters of class: "Where symptoms of feminine domination prevail and 'Eve' takes charge of the garden, mi-lord and master is deserving of pity, but when the feminine gender assumes the dictatorship in matters of industrial struggles, mere man becomes a worm". In such cases the assumption always existed that "a real man is never a scab".³¹

Opponents of working-class militancy also used gendered symbols to describe class behaviour. In this case, however, a disposition toward class cooperation was the important test. The general line of anti-strike newspapers was that strikes were caused by red agitators who stirred up trouble to benefit themselves. If the rank and file followed these leaders they were said to be displaying the "moral cowardice which compels people to follow the crowd, even when they know the crowd to be blatantly wrong". Strikes caused by the manipulations of these agitators were considered "unmanly".³² Alexander MacNeil, general superintendent of coal mines for Besco, argued that it was precisely those positive gender traits of Cape Breton miners that allowed "weak leadership" to manipulate them: "The Nova Scotia miner is highly intelligent, courageous and independent. If left to himself he will play the game with his employer, but under weak leadership he is apt to go astray. His very fidelity to his leader causes him to follow where reason often forbids". MacNeil went on to contrast the sorry state of labour relations under the U.M.W. with the "gentlemanly" relations which existed under the Provincial Workmen's Association.³³

26 *MLH*, 16 September 1922.

27 *MLH*, 11 October 1924, 17 May 1924, *Post*, 13 June 1925.

28 *MLH*, 19 May 1923.

29 The incident is described in the *MLH*, 15 April 1922.

30 *Post*, 1 May 1925.

31 *MLH*, 26 July 1924.

32 *Post*, 17 February 1923, 29 July 1922.

33 Duncan Commission, p. 2453.

Masculinity was clearly linked to class ideology, but there was no automatic relationship between manhood and class. Indeed, gender definitions and their implications were highly contextual, and different conclusions could be drawn from similar premises. Masculinity, after all, was not a rigid set of categories, but a practice. It is important, then, to examine the ways various definitions could collide and overlap in specific situations. While it is impossible in this space to explore the entire range of conflicting masculinities, two examples can help us understand how masculine norms were played out in practice.

In March 1922 Cape Breton miners overwhelmingly rejected a new agreement negotiated by the officers of District 26. The next step was not clear, but it was obvious that a strike was unrealistic. Indeed, the president of District 26, Robert Baxter, had recommended acceptance of the agreement partly because there was no money available for a strike. On the other hand secretary-treasurer J.B. McLachlan recommended a "strike on the job", where miners would work and collect pay, but restrict their output.³⁴ A debate ensued over whether this was the proper course. Part of the conflict was over tactical questions, but disagreements also revolved around the moral question of the propriety of the tactic, a debate which hinged on gender definitions.

Three basic positions emerged. Robert Baxter took essentially a tactical position, arguing that the strike on the job would not work and would probably lead to dismissal or a lockout. But he also expressed his opposition to striking on the job in gendered terms. Baxter argued that the miners should ignore McLachlan's "rantings" and that they should have the courage to admit they were not strong enough to win and that a strike would make it even harder to support their families. Admitting these were the facts, Baxter believed, would lead the miners to accept an "honourable retreat". McLachlan responded that there was no honour in giving in: the choice was between the organized miners who were "fighting for a living for your wife and family" while the "stock gamblers are fighting for profits on watered stock". Both Baxter and McLachlan tried to invoke the breadwinner role of miners, and both tried to argue that they had staked out the "honourable" position. This points to the third position, that of Minister of Labour James Murdock, who appealed to ethnic and gender definitions of "honour". Murdock sent a telegram to McLachlan which argued that the tactic was "unBritish, unCanadian and cowardly", because it was "in effect declaring to the world that only partial, grudging service will be given". The "strength of labour", he argued, was not to be found in such "underhanded dealings", but in "straight and honest dealings, each worker giving the best that is in him for the wages agreed upon". He preferred that "men quit like men and walk off the job when unwilling to work for wage rates or conditions offered". McLachlan responded angrily to Murdock's charges, telling a meeting of the unemployed that many of the miners who were striking on the job learned such tricks while serving their

34 The tactic appears to have originated often among boy labourers in the mine, most likely because of their strategic position within the system of underground haulage. See McIntosh, "Grotesque Faces", p. 174.

country in France.³⁵ Competing and overlapping definitions of manhood, then, were crucial to this debate.

Three years later, when Besco vice-president J.E. McLurg flippantly told a Canadian Press reporter that the miners would eventually come crawling back to the company because “they can’t stand the gaff”, he uttered what became probably the single most (in)famous line in Maritime labour history.³⁶ The statement became something of a rallying point, with miners greeting each other with the question “how are you standing the gaff?” The statement retains a resonance even today, and is typically portrayed as a symbol of the heartlessness of the company. The statement also had resonance because it spoke to important gender definitions in the community, and the reaction to the statement was expressed in gendered ways. A letter to the *Post* from a New Waterford miner objected in these terms: “The miners can stand the gaff far better than their wives and little children can”.³⁷ Within this discourse women and children appeared as victims, while the statement also asserts that the miners are courageous enough to withstand the misery of a prolonged strike — that they can in fact “stand the gaff”. When read in light of the connection between class solidarity and manhood, it becomes clear that McLurg had effectively closed off competing discourses of manhood (and ethnicity) that were typically invoked by the government and the company as resources in class struggle (breadwinner ideology, honouring a contract, communist agitators as unmanly, union organizers as outsiders). McLurg had in effect questioned the miners’ courage and, by extension, their manhood. By explicitly tying the success of the strike to the miners’ courage and resolve, he reinforced the masculinist definitions of solidarity adopted by the miners.

The enforcement of such masculinist ideals of solidarity was in part dependent on the activities of women. Women often violently confronted scabs, policemen and soldiers. They had, however, something of an ambiguous relationship to class ideology. The miners were generally proud when women acted in class ways, and several examples of positive portrayals of the activities of working-class women can be found in the statements of labour leaders. But even in these cases, a class-conscious woman was never considered as valuable as a class-conscious man. Even then, women’s class action was seen as something of a bonus, and recognition of it was usually an afterthought. The *Maritime Labor Herald*, for example, celebrated the fundraising efforts of radical women in 1924, but used gendered language which suggested that men ought to “speak in a louder voice”.³⁸

Yet many images of femininity warned against the dangers women posed to class solidarity. The image of woman-as-seductress, for example, was used to show

35 *Post*, 15, 18, 22 March 1922, *Record*, 13 March 1922, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 5 April 1922, *Halifax Evening Mail*, 3 April 1922.

36 McLurg later insisted that the statement had been off the record, and that he had been referring to the union executive, not the mass of miners and their families. Even if this qualification were true, by this time the statement had taken on a life of its own. For McLurg’s explanation, see Duncan Commission, p. 3350.

37 *Post*, 4 April 1925.

38 *MLH*, 18 October 1924. For other examples of positive portrayals of class-conscious women, see *MLH*, 3 March, 21 July 1923, 9 February, 14 June, 8 November 1924.

how capitalists could use prostitutes and alcohol to corrupt class-conscious men. The *Maritime Labor Herald* warned miners that the capitalists had learned this trick from the Germans, who employed women as “spies”: “The sirens would use their charms to get British officers drunk and babbling. Then the information given in drunkenness was used against the allies”. Besco used similar tricks, the article warned, employing women in booze joints to seduce careless miners. The article warned miners to “beware of women who want to take you for a drink”.³⁹ Another working-class image of womanhood was that of the “nagging wife”. “If you cannot get a labor man through himself”, the *Maritime Labor Herald* warned, “get him through his wife”. If capitalists were unable to corrupt the radical labour leader, the article continued, they would attempt to corrupt his wife by inviting her to exclusive affairs and parties. Once the wife became accustomed to her new social circle, she would be told that “her husband is making too many enemies” and then — “The nagging then begins at home”. The solution to this problem was to “educate the working-class women in the facts of the class struggle”.⁴⁰

Such images of women in working-class discourse point to the gendered hierarchy of class ideology which existed in the coal towns. Masculinity was thought to dispose one naturally toward loyalty to the working class, and no one with the attributes of true manhood was thought to be a threat to working-class solidarity. This was not the case with femininity. Though women were recognized as potentially class-conscious, many attributes associated with femininity were thought to constitute a threat to working-class solidarity. A man who was not class-conscious was acting in a way unnatural to his gender, while a woman behaving the same way was not. It is clear, then, that the miners did not fully integrate the radical efforts of women into their view of class militancy. This was no doubt because of the importance of discourses of masculinity to the waging of class conflict in the region and the fact that the “naturalness” of viewing women as either conservative influences or passive victims of distress had already been constructed.

Chronic insecurity of income was a distinguishing feature of the Cape Breton mining communities, and the situation was especially severe during the industrial conflict of the 1920s. The combination of low wages and idle times increased the importance of careful budget management for the family. Although each family had different arrangements for domestic work, the responsibility for budget management fell most often on the women. Many of the miners who testified before the Duncan Commission in 1925 professed ignorance of the household accounts, and one even suggested that the union ought to call miners’ wives to testify to the inadequacy of the wages paid by Besco.⁴¹ J.B. McLachlan recognized women’s role when he told the Gillen Conciliation Board that “the ordinary working man’s wife is the best financier in the world — honest financier — I do not mean the other kind”. McLachlan went on to note that the task was nevertheless impossible to

39 *MLH*, 6 May 1922.

40 *MLH*, 3 February 1923.

41 Duncan Commission, pp. 240, 470-2, 489, 513, 520, 548. The suggestion that women be invited to testify was made by Arthur Petrie (p. 513). The union did not follow through on his suggestion.

fulfill under the present rate of wages.⁴² Women obviously had a sense of the impossibility of the task they faced. When requested, they produced elaborate family budgets, and noted how the existing wages could not possibly cover all the expenses. One woman described her role as trying to “make one dollar do the work of two”.⁴³

But careful budget management could not make up for the fact that there was often no money to manage, and part of the woman’s role as financier and consumer consisted of waiting in line for relief. Although men did visit the relief stations, women appeared to predominate in relief lines. Observers noted that the relief provisions were not sufficient to feed the entire family and often provided only one or two meals a day. Relief was often unavailable as well, especially between the end of a strike and the first payday.⁴⁴ In this context, an extra burden was placed on women to make ends meet. Of course, making ends meet during strikes was a family affair, with men taking up fishing and digging coal for family use. Some families were fortunate enough to have a son or daughter working, which provided extra cash during difficult times. But many of the duties associated with making ends meet fell on the woman. Some of the company homes had small plots, and a few families took advantage of this land to garden. Many women raised chickens as a source of eggs and meat. Some families kept cows and pigs as well. Families also had to rely on careful preparation to stretch the food dollar, often reusing staples such as soup bones over several successive days.⁴⁵ Clothing was expensive and always in short supply, especially during strikes. Women used considerable inventiveness in improvising items. The sleeves of old sweaters, for example, were converted into stockings for children. Bedding supplies were improvised from old potato sacks, and one report even mentioned that children were wearing clothes fashioned from discarded cement bags.⁴⁶

When a strike or lockout was the cause of shortages, “making ends meet” became an important aspect of labour militancy. The U.M.W. required the district offices to finance relief for the first 30 days of a strike, but the international union could delay providing relief considerably longer. This was the case in 1925, when international president John L. Lewis made District 26 wait almost two full months before he promised any money for relief. Even then, the funds Lewis forwarded were inadequate to the task at hand, amounting to less than one dollar per week for each man on strike.⁴⁷ The fact that District 26 was so often at odds with the international office made Lewis’s control of strike funds especially

42 *Post*, 20 January 1922. As pointed out above, McLachlan’s statement was as much a claim about men’s wages as it was a recognition of women’s work.

43 *MLH*, 3 May 1924. For examples of women’s budgets, see Frank, “The Miner’s Financier”.

44 *Post*, 23 March, 8 April 1925, *MLH*, 1 March 1924.

45 Duncan Commission, pp. 97, 449; *Record*, 26 March 1925; Frank, “Cape Breton Coal Miners”, pp. 324-6; Interview with Katie Flora MacKenzie, Tape 2386, Beaton Institute of Cape Breton Studies, Sydney; *Post*, 3 March 1925.

46 *Post*, 23 January 1925, *Record*, 5 March 1925. A miner admitted before the royal commission that his children wore cement bags as clothing; Duncan Commission, p. 174.

47 See *Post*, 23 April 1925, and MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, p. 137.

pernicious and concurrently made women's survival strategies that much more important.

Crowd actions were another example of the working class defending its interests against the actions of the company and its allies in government, and these were another important arena of women's activities. Crowds looted company stores during times of dearth, attacked and harassed scabs during strikes, and battled the police and soldiers who were sent to the area to protect the company's property. Both men and women participated actively in these types of crowd violence, though each gender seemed to have its own specific role in certain aspects of the working-class "repertoire of collective violence".⁴⁸

In his classic study of English food riots, E.P. Thompson has identified the basic tenets of what he called the "moral economy of the poor". First, the plebeians believed that the link between consumer and producer ought to be as direct as possible. They also believed that in times of dearth, hoarding should be avoided, since this represented an illegitimate attempt to "profiteer" rather than a legitimate attempt to "profit". If local authorities turned a blind eye to such practices, the plebeian moral economy deemed it legitimate for the people themselves to suspend the market imperative and to enforce a "fair price". Crowds often compelled producers to sell their goods at what was considered a reasonable price, a level which was based mainly on custom.⁴⁹

Food riots in Cape Breton also displayed a commitment to such a "moral economy", although it was adapted to the specific consumer experience in the district, which was defined to a large extent by the inequities of the company store credit system. The company store piled one humiliation on another. Not only did it force families into debt, but the system allowed the company to control both how much and which items each family purchased in a given week. The latter power was especially pernicious, since it allowed the store manager to refuse what he considered "luxury" goods in favor of cheaper and less desirable "necessities". Staples such as milk, butter, fruits and vegetables were often refused (or sold in tiny quantities), while cornmeal and molasses were considered appropriate for credit customers. Such decisions operated within a cultural nexus where, in Thompson's words, food "involved feelings of status over and above their dietary value".⁵⁰ In 1922 the *Maritime Labor Herald* contrasted items sold on credit to an expectant mother to the rations handed out to the troops who came to the area to keep the peace:

48 The phrase is taken from Charles Tilly, "European Violence and Collective Action Since 1700", *Social Research*, LIII (Spring 1986), p. 176.

49 E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", *Past and Present*, L (February 1971), pp. 79, 85-87, 98, 100-104.

50 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1980 [1963]), p. 349. To circumvent the credit system, women were encouraged to shop at cash stores, especially the British Canadian Cooperative. Many families dealt with private merchants and resorted to the company store only when their debt to other merchants had reached an intolerable level. Chronic insecurity of income made it impossible for all miners to completely reject the company store. See Duncan Commission, pp. 130, 149, 162-3. For an example of an organized objection to the credit system, see *MLH*, 7 March 1925.

The manager of the store dictated to her what the coal company would let her have, just like the slave masters of the Southern slaves used to dictate what the slaves should eat...Cornmeal and molasses, that was fitting food for the mother of one of Canada's future citizens....To the mothers of Canada's working-class children, hunger and want or cornmeal and molasses, flung at them in scorn; to the soldiers protecting the legalized stealings of the Wolvin's and MacDougall's, choice chicken and lamb, bread and condensed milk, so plentiful that they throw the surplus out of the car windows.⁵¹

To be denied goods, then, was considered a degradation, and because it occurred in the company store, the humiliation was interpreted in a class manner. But the account is also replete with gender and ethnic (or nationalistic) language. Most strikingly, the victims in this account were a woman and her unborn child, not the miners themselves. But the symbolic role of the mother and the child was not identical. The account presents the woman's claim to justice as derived mainly from her role as a mother, while the child's claim is derived from its status as a (future) citizen.

Within the local moral economy, it was considered unacceptable for the corporation to withhold credit at its stores during periods of widespread idleness, a demand that U.M.W. vice-president Joseph Nearing at least did not feel should be extended to private merchants:

if it is a cause of unemployment, and a man has given all his earnings to a store, that is to the Corporation who he is working for, when that man is out of work he should not be turned down. Any man that works for a living should have food while there is work and if there is no work he should be protected...

Question: Would you expect a private individual to go on giving credit?

Answer: No, Mr. Chairman, I put a private concern altogether in a different category.

Question: You think a company store should be on a different footing?

Answer: Yes...⁵²

Following such logic, crowd actions typically occurred after Besco had cut off credit at its stores, and company stores were the specific targets. On 22 January 1922, three riots occurred at a single company store. Between 11 June and 22 June 1925, there were a total of 16 raids on company stores and warehouses. During the same period, five or six privately owned stores were sacked, and most of these raids

51 *MLH*, 26 August 1922. The *Record*, a notoriously pro-company paper, denied that the troops had been issued anything but standard military rations: *Record*, 23 August 1922. The disagreement between the two accounts does not nullify the point about the cultural importance of food. A miner told a similar story before the Duncan Commission, although he alleged his pregnant wife was denied clothes for their children: Duncan Commission, p. 253.

52 Duncan Commission, p. 1492.

occurred after the first three days of looting, by which time the company stores had been completely cleaned out.⁵³

The press reported the presence of men, women and boys in the crowds which looted stores in 1922 and 1925.⁵⁴ Often men and women rioted side by side. During the raid on the Scotia company store on 11 June 1925 “women helped their male accomplices in rolling out the goods, and worked just as hard as the latter”. In other instances, however, the crowds adopted an interesting division of labour. The men would enter the store, remove the goods and haul them to a nearby vacant lot (during one raid, a skating rink was used). The female participants would then carry the loot away from the improvised depot.⁵⁵ This division of labour seemed to build on idealized gender roles in the community. The men performed the “rough” work of breaking into the store, while the women played the role of “consumer”, waiting outside to select whatever goods were needed in their own household. In the first food riot in 1925, which was presumably the most spontaneous (the crowd having had little time to plan specific roles for its members), men and women acted in similar ways. Both the men and women entered the store and apparently carried off the goods together. Subsequent riots, however, displayed the gendered division of labour, where women did not enter the store, but remained outside to carry off the goods.⁵⁶

The “repertoire of collective violence” also extended to the use of violence to enforce solidarity during strikes. Women participated by harassing scabs in the streets and participated in other actions as well. During the strike of 1923, a crowd of women, men and children stood in front of a troop train as it entered the mining district. The train was searched, and the crowd dispersed when no scabs were found on board. In both 1922 and 1925, women gathered alongside the railway tracks to greet the arriving soldiers with a barrage of rocks. In 1925 the crowd which burned

- 53 *MLH*, 28 January 1923, *Post*, 23 January 1922, *Post*, 12-17 June 1925; *Record*, 13-23 June 1925. The *Record* provided a detailed summary of each night’s raids.
- 54 *Post*, 23 January 1922, 15 June 1925; *Record*, 23 January 1922, 13 June 1925. Thompson assumed the crowd existed as a single entity and shared a community of values, and he did not attempt any detailed examination of gender dynamics within food riots. For an intelligent discussion of this point, see Suzanne Desan, “Crowds, Community, and Ritual in the Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis”, in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (California, 1989), pp. 47-71. For women in crowds, see John Bohstedt, “Gender, Household Economy and Community Politics: Women in English Riots, 1790-1810”, *Past and Present*, CXX (August 1988), pp. 88-112.
- 55 *Post*, 15 June 1925, *Record*, 13, 14 June 1925.
- 56 Dana Frank has described in detail organized food boycotts in New York which relied on violent activities of women for enforcement. In a Canadian context, Ruth Frager has uncovered evidence of similar actions by women in Toronto. But these were crowd actions of a different sort and appeared to be tied more closely to a new type of consumerism than an older community-wide definition of a moral economy. Meat boycotts tended to be exclusively female and were conducted under the rubric of organized boycotts of specific products or merchants. In the case of Cape Breton, the riots were more spontaneous and less organized, although some type of informal of planning was clearly involved. Another important distinction was the specific targeting of company stores. See Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests”, *Feminist Studies*, XI, 2 (Summer 1985), pp. 255-85; Ruth Frager, “Housewives in the Jewish Communist Movement” in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto, 1989), pp. 258-75.

the barn and house of Dan McNeil, a Besco stableman, contained several women.⁵⁷ On another occasion, a crowd of men and women surrounded Charlie Campbell, a maintenance man at No. 11 colliery who was “scabbing” at the mine. The crowd “hooted and jeered and endeavored to induce Campbell not to go back to work”. Before Campbell could be physically assaulted, however, two mounted policemen came to his rescue. The crowd then turned its fury on the policemen, who were stoned until four other officers arrived on horseback to disperse the crowd. The men and women continued to jeer the policemen from the back yards of houses.⁵⁸

Women also played a prominent role in the violence which followed the killing of William Davis in 1925. The incident occurred after a crowd of miners marched to the New Waterford power plant to attempt to reinforce the union’s pickets. The company police anticipated the crowd’s arrival, however, and were “formed up awaiting them”. Before a spokesman for the miners had a chance to talk, the police charged, shooting randomly into the crowd. Davis was shot through the heart and killed. The crowd overwhelmed the policemen, however, who were dragged off their horses and severely beaten. The crowd then turned on the power plant, beating policemen and removing carloads of food that had been brought in by the police. The miners then returned to the beaten policemen, dragging them back to the town of New Waterford. The captured police were laid down in the street, where several women “belaboured them with their fists and sticks and other weapons”. The women were so “vicious” in their attacks that the company police were eventually held in the town jail for their own protection.⁵⁹

Violent activities on the part of women were largely ignored by local authorities and newspapers. Following the food riot in 1922, for example, 12 men, perceived to be the “ring leaders” were arrested, tried and convicted of theft in a case that attracted a great deal of public attention. Despite the sensationalist reports splashed across the front pages of the Sydney newspapers, the only mention of women’s participation in the crowd appeared in the initial report. Indeed, the only time women entered the later story at all was when one of the defendants appealed for clemency on the grounds that he was a breadwinner with a family to support.⁶⁰ The lack of attention afforded to women in crowds was repeated in June 1925. Although almost 200 men were arrested during the two weeks of violence, there were no reports of women being charged with offences. Women were not, however, totally immune from prosecution. “Mrs. Madigan”, the head of the Women’s Auxiliary of the steelworkers’ union became, in the words of the *Post*, the “first English-speaking woman” arrested on a charge of assault, apparently after a picket line confrontation with James MacNeil during the 1923 steel strike in Sydney. This report sheds some light on the gender and ethnic prejudices behind the apathy of authorities to women’s violence.⁶¹ The notion that women could be violent class

57 J.S. Woodsworth, “Echoes of the Miners’ Strike in Nova Scotia”, *Canadian Forum* (January 1923), p. 107, *Post*, 15-19 August 1922, 16 June 1925, *Record*, 12 June 1925.

58 *Post*, 21 July 1923.

59 *Record*, 16 June 1925; *Post*, 12 June 1925; *Halifax Herald*, 13 June 1925.

60 *Halifax Mail Star*, 13 March 1922.

61 *Post*, 26 July 1923. Contrast this with Ann Schofield, “An ‘Army of Amazons’”.

fighters was largely absent from mainstream political and journalistic discourses about the coalfields. Indeed, working-class women were most often coupled with children and portrayed as passive victims of injustice, either at the hands of an uncaring company and an impotent government or of misguided communist labour leaders.

When used this way, gender could become an important resource in the arena of traditional politics. In 1925, for example, the discourse of women-as-victims was used by the Conservatives against the Liberal government. Key to this strategy was linking images of the victimized women and children with images of a heartless company and apathetic government. The *Halifax Herald* splashed dramatic headlines across its front page: "Women and Children Are Starving", "Women and Children Are Destitute", "Mothers and Children are Facing Starvation" and "Government Defeats Motion To Send Relief to Hungry Women and Children". The *Herald* and the *Post*, both associated with the Conservative Party, described in great detail the deplorable conditions in the colliery districts, and women and children featured prominently in these descriptions. Graphic illustrations and pictures were also used to convey images of women suffering at the hands of a vicious company and apathetic government. In one drawing, the figure of "hunger" was shown reaching out to scoop up fleeing women and children.⁶² The triad of victimized women, heartless corporation and apathetic government was expressed most clearly on the front page of the 18 March 1925 edition of the *Herald*. Between the captions "They Can't Stand the Gaff" and "Nothing to Say: Why is There no Action from the Provincial Government" was a drawing of a weather-beaten woman clutching a baby in one arm and holding a blanket over herself with the other (See Figure One).

This women-company-government triad could be so powerful because it was essentially a distancing discourse. The intention of the images was not to promote a genuine understanding of the issues of the dispute, nor to advance the miners' cause. Rather, by using such images, the opposition was attempting to take advantage of the existence of distress and strife in the coalfields without fully addressing the issues which had caused it.⁶³ Women and children were key to this strategy because focusing on the miners' plight would have allowed the government to use the history of labour militancy in the coal industry and undercut criticism by using red-baiting rhetoric. Opposition attacks were even phrased in a way so as to distance themselves from the miners' grievances. The *Herald* editorialized under the headline "The Government Duty" that "no matter who is right or who is wrong, women and children should not be allowed to suffer". Responsibility was placed on the Liberal government: "it is the duty and responsibility of the government to make adequate provision at once for these helpless people". Conservative politicians also adopted this approach: "leaving aside the merits of the dispute between the corporation and the men, should the government permit women and children to suffer the pangs of hunger?". Disarmed by the use of women and

62 *Herald*, 7 March 1925, and other issues of this month.

63 I am indebted to Gerry O'Donnell for pointing out how reports can be manipulated to give the impression of concern while actually distancing the reader from the issues in a dispute.

children as images of distress, the government was never able to mount an effective counter-strategy. Instead it fluctuated between saying the reports of starvation were exaggerated and pointing out that the opposition was merely using the existence of distress to its own partisan advantage.⁶⁴



Figure One: Donald McRitchie in the *Halifax Herald*, 18 March 1925

64 *Herald*, 2, 28 March 1925, *Halifax Chronicle*, 20 March 1925.

The silence of the authorities should not blind us to the important role women played in the crowd actions which defended the interests of the working-class community. They helped to enforce solidarity during strikes and to provision families in times of deprivation. While important to the class struggle, such actions did not necessarily reflect a long-term and coherent commitment to the politics of class. A smaller group of women did display such a commitment, and pursued more organized efforts in the name of their class community. By early 1924 Women's Labour Leagues appeared in the colliery communities. It is likely that the first leagues were organized in New Aberdeen and New Waterford, but chapters were soon added in Dominion No. 4, Dominion No. 6 and other communities.⁶⁵

The formation of the Women's Labour Leagues across Canada was linked to the activities of the Canadian Labour Party and to Florence Custance's work in the Women's Department of the Communist Party of Canada. The Cape Breton Leagues obviously had ties to the Canadian Labour Party, but their educational efforts and the activities of their most vocal member, Annie Whitfield, suggest a strong Communist influence.⁶⁶ In addition, the mining women were probably at least partly inspired by the earlier organization of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the steelworkers' union, which was formed in Sydney in March 1923.⁶⁷

The Labour Leagues could be seen as little more than organized extensions of the traditional strike activities of working-class women in the region, but organization not only formalized the women's activities, but also expanded them. Unlike the earlier sporadic and spontaneous efforts, women in the Leagues began to take a more ongoing role in class and union politics, focusing their efforts on four broad areas: social events, fundraising, educational work and union politics.⁶⁸ The women of the district engaged in important activities in the name of the organized branch of their class community. They operated much like Women's Labour Leagues in other areas, concentrating on union support work, self-education and

65 *MLH*, 14 April 1924. The *Labor Herald* always referred to the organizations as Women's Labor Clubs. Because the women themselves appeared in public with Labour League on their banners, I have in most cases used this name. For a description of such a banner, see Duncan Commission, p. 3223. The League had originally existed as extensions of sewing circles among Finnish socialist women before the First World War. Leagues inspired by the WLLs of the British Independent Labour Party had also been active before the war in Toronto, Winnipeg and Port Arthur. Thanks to efforts of the Women's Department of the Communist Party, the inaugural meeting of the reborn Toronto League was held in 1923, and a federal umbrella organization was formed in September of the following year. On the formation of the WLLs, see Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto, 1989), ch. 2; and Sangster, "The Communist Party and the Woman Question, 1922-1929", *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), pp. 25-56.

66 *MLH*, 31 May 1924, 7 February 1925.

67 *MLH*, 7, 14 April 1923, *Record*, 20 June 1923. It is possible that the Women's Labour Leagues were organized before the spring of 1924, but this is the first mention of them located in the sources. It is unlikely that the Leagues were organized before the 1923 strike, however, since they do not appear in accounts of the strike, while the steelworkers' auxiliaries do. For more detail on the links between the steelworkers' and miners' organizations, see Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto, 1988), ch. 4.

68 These broad areas of concern were similar to those of WLLs in other mining areas, such as the Crowsnest Pass region of the West. See Sangster, *Dreams of Equality*, p. 48.

fundraising, but they also availed themselves of a degree of autonomy to map out areas of particular local concern. Following the ideology of the Communist Party, they identified the owners of Besco as their primary enemy, and they worked in the name of their community against the company's wage policies. These were activist women, and as such, they obviously had a more coherent and stable allegiance to class than the majority of women in the region.

The Leagues organized a wide array of socials, including dances, concerts, bake sales and box dinners. The gatherings usually had educational motives, but often were no more than an opportunity for working-class women to "get to know each other" and to have a welcome respite "from the eternal grind that is the usual thing in the life of the ordinary working class wife and mother". Such social gatherings were extensions of the "kitchen talk" networks which had formed in the region, where women gossiped, traded recipes and techniques to make ends meet and discussed the various "goings on" in the community.⁶⁹ But the social events were rarely used for purely social purposes. They also carried out fundraising and educational work. By organizing socials, the Leagues raised considerable sums of money to aid other class institutions, such as the Canadian Labour Defence League (C.L.D.L.) and working-class relief organizations. Such activities should not be trivialized. Entertainment functions constituted the primary source of income for the Nova Scotia branch of the C.L.D.L. Women's organizational energy was particularly important in the context of declining wages and employment, when steady incomes could not be counted upon to fill the coffers of working-class organizations. The clubs were especially generous toward the cash-starved *Maritime Labor Herald*. Between April and October 1924, the New Aberdeen League donated more than \$300 to the paper. Not to be outdone, the Dominion No. 4 League collected \$105 in one week.⁷⁰ The labour press often received more financial support from the clubs than from the union locals, and the paper used this fact to urge the miners to do more for the paper: "What are the Miners' Unions going to do about it?...This paper is your paper, if you want us to live let us hear from you, in the same kind of language that the women have spoken, only in a stronger voice as becomes men".⁷¹

Social events also overlapped with the educational work performed by the Women's Labour Leagues. Most of the Leagues met once a week, with one evening per month devoted to education. On this evening, an active member of the labour movement would lecture on some subject connected with organizing and maintaining the labour movement. The Leagues often invited prominent women to speak at their meetings. The New Aberdeen Club, for example, hosted a lecture by Communist Party activist Annie Buller of Toronto in May 1924. On other occasions, two or more Leagues would pool their resources to secure a speaker to address a joint meeting. The speakers, or at least those reported on in the *Labor Herald*, often discussed the position of women in society, although they tended to privilege class analysis over any discussion of the special place of women in

69 *MLH*, 15 April, 17 May 1924.

70 *MLH*, 15 April 1924, 12 July 1924, 18 October 1924, 13 February, 10 April 1926.

71 *MLH*, 18 October 1924.

working-class communities. One speaker, Mrs. William MacKinnon, for example, gave an address on how the evolution of capitalist industry was forcing women to work outside the home and was making it imperative that women educate themselves “to grasp the real meaning of the class nature that had developed in society...”.⁷²

If such educational efforts privileged class over gender, the tendency corresponded to public expressions of allegiance on the part of working-class women in the coalfields. Indeed, many of the women in the mining communities eloquently expressed their commitment to the working-class community through letters and statements to the press. Most often, women’s statements related to issues of close proximity to the experience of women in the community. Wages and household budgets, for example, were common themes in women’s statements. In 1923 a reporter for the *Sydney Post* was unable to find any women in the coalfields who were willing to admit that “the men folks were not justified in going out on strike. Invariably, the hardships of the past two winters are cited...”. A letter signed “Red sister” attacked Besco for “paying a wage that looks like telling our children to go and eat grass, while the children of Besco bosses live on the best”. A letter signed only “A Miner’s Wife” complained that her husband “will go to work five days a week” but will not “make one decent day’s wage out of the five”. Mrs. Burt Boone of New Aberdeen urged women to organize “to help our men get a better and higher living wage”. Housing conditions were another common theme. League member Annie Whitfield was a frequent correspondent to Communist Party publications, writing to the editor of *The Woman Worker* that the company houses were “so old and broken down that it would cost as much to repair them as it would to build new ones”.⁷³

Activist women did not confine their activities to extensions of their domestic role. The Leagues played prominent roles in marches, demonstrations and meetings. They sent delegates to the annual meeting of the Canadian Labour Party, as well as attending the regular local meetings. Delegates from the Leagues also attended the 1924 District 26 Rank and File Convention, where they sponsored their own resolution.⁷⁴ The Leagues were also prominent in May Day celebrations. The women marched with the men, and worked energetically behind the scenes as well, training the children’s choir, preparing and serving the food, selling tickets, cleaning up and washing dishes. “On the labours of these miners’ wives was this day of joy built”, the *Labor Herald* noted following the 1924 May Day celebrations.⁷⁵

The Leagues also became involved in activities relating to wages and unemployment in the coalfields. According to the *Labor Herald*, the Leagues were cautious in these areas, however, since they conspicuously sought to avoid

72 *MLH*, 23, 31 May 1924.

73 *Post*, 22 August 1923, *MLH*, 1 March, 3 May 1924, *The Woman Worker* (July 1926), p. 6. For another example of Whitfield’s correspondence, see Sangster, “The Communist Party and the Woman Question”, p. 45.

74 *MLH*, 31 May, 28 June 1924; *Post*, 4 February 1924, *Proceedings of the Special Rank and File Convention of District No. 26, UMWA, New Glasgow, May 15-16, 1924* (Glace Bay, 1924).

75 *MLH*, 3 May 1924. See also *MLH*, 18 April 1925.

interfering with the efforts of the district executive and the various union locals: "the women want to do their part, but it is sometimes hard for them to find the proper part to play. They try to avoid running counter to anything done by the local union, and this carefulness very often keeps them back". In late 1924, after "several weeks" of trying to decide what kind of role they could play in bringing the unemployment question "before the powers that be" without interfering in union affairs, the New Aberdeen Club decided to circulate a petition among people who were "not in any way connected with organized labor, asking them to get after the government to do something for the idle miners".⁷⁶

It is possible that the *Labor Herald's* account of the women's caution was exaggerated, since the Women's Labour Leagues intervened vigorously in alerting British miners to local conditions. In the summer of 1924, Besco had placed advertisements in several British newspapers and had contacted several British employment agencies, promising steady work and high wages to any British miners willing to make the trip to Cape Breton. The promises were empty, since several collieries had been idle for long periods in the previous few months. In the face of union inaction, the Women's Labour League of New Aberdeen organized a letter-writing campaign to British labour newspapers to edify unemployed miners as to the real conditions in Cape Breton and to warn the miners that the transatlantic journey would be unprofitable. The Leagues picked up the issue with a vengeance, introducing resolutions on the subject at the conventions of both the Canadian Labour Party and the district union. The resolutions condemned Besco's false promises and urged the governments of Canada and Great Britain to take immediate action to remedy the situation.⁷⁷

The Women's Leagues engaged in other activities of importance to the working-class community. In the early spring of 1925, for example, the Leagues participated in the operation of soup kitchens. Conditions in the area were already dire before Besco cut off credit to unemployed miners at its company stores at the beginning of March. Starvation and want quickly grew to crisis proportions. Relief came from a variety of sources, including the Salvation Army, the Anglican and Catholic churches, and a Citizens' Committee formed specifically to meet the tremendous need. An early relief effort, however, was a soup kitchen organized as a joint venture of the New Aberdeen Women's Club, the British Canadian Cooperative and the Phalen local of the U.M.W. The soup kitchen provided one meal per day to children so that they might attend school properly nourished. The efforts of the women were particularly important, since they were responsible for preparing and serving the food.⁷⁸

A relief controversy erupted in 1925 when the Moscow-based Red International of Labour Unions (R.I.L.U.) attempted to donate \$5,000 to the Glace Bay Citizens' Committee. The Citizens' Committee, made up of merchants, clergymen, professionals and businessmen, rejected the money, arguing that accepting the

76 *MLH*, 27 December 1924.

77 *MLH*, 7, 14 June 1924, 5 July 1924; *Proceedings of Rank and File Convention*, pp. 6-7.

78 See the *Post* and the *Record*, March-June 1925; Interview with Katie MacKenzie, Beaton Institute; *MLH*, 14 March 1925, *Post*, 5 March 1925.

donation would “be construed in certain quarters as Russian propaganda”.⁷⁹ The New Aberdeen Women’s Labour Club immediately condemned the action, arguing that the Citizens’ Committee had declined to accept the donation because it was “real working class money”. In the opinion of the New Aberdeen women, there was something wrong with a group of well-fed, middle-class philanthropists refusing relief money on the basis of their own political prejudices regarding its source: “only those who are neither miners nor the wives of miners, and therefore have no right to speak in the name of mine workers, have tried to block acceptance of this relief money”. The precise wording of the protest was significant, as it implied that, at least on this issue, the wives of miners had some legitimate right to speak for the mine workers. The Leagues continued to take great interest in this issue. One week later, the Club at Dominion No. 4 appealed to J.B. McLachlan, the influential former secretary-treasurer of District 26, to ensure that the donation was used to buy flour for their impoverished families. Significantly, the Club hoped to control the actual distribution of the flour.⁸⁰

The episode brought into clear focus the line that divided activist working-class women from their middle-class counterparts and thus points to the influence of class identity among organized women in the coalfields. Although both middle-class and working-class women were confined by a patriarchal ideal which stressed their domesticity, the women in the Leagues felt the pull of class over that of gender. In addition, the R.I.L.U. controversy demonstrated that women were considerably more confrontational in approaching the issue of relief than on other issues of importance to the working-class community, and the *Labor Herald* was more accepting of their militancy in this area as well. Although the paper had earlier stressed the caution of the Leagues vis à vis the union locals, it fully reported the demands of the women on this issue. There is no doubt the women felt they were speaking with a special authority in this area, since the distribution of relief touched directly on their primary function as family financier and consumer in the working-class family. It is significant in this regard that the women made reference not to the shortage of flour in the community as a whole, but to its scarcity in their own households: “we do not get enough flour with our rations to bake with”.⁸¹

The close attachment to the relief issue manifested itself again in 1926. When it was reported that the family of William Davis, the miner shot and killed by company police a year before, was suffering from “dire poverty”, the Women’s Leagues energetically seized on the issue. The New Aberdeen League took the district executive to task for its inaction, who they believed had “stated publicly in convention and elsewhere that his family was to be properly provided for”. The League reminded the district executive of its promise that no contract would be accepted unless it provided for the maintenance of the Davis family. If the union could not compel Besco to take responsibility for its actions, the women suggested

79 *Post*, 23 March 1925. On the composition of the Citizens’ Committee, see *Post*, 6 March 1923.

80 *MLH*, 4, 11 April 1925.

81 *MLH*, 11 April 1925. For other relief activity, see *Post*, 5, 6, 9 March 1925, *Record*, 24 March, 4 April 1925.

that "a levy be put on every member of the UMW of A for the benefit of this family".⁸² Since women in the Cape Breton coal communities rarely worked for wages outside the home, they could not be sure of a secure income in the event of the death of their "breadwinner" (whether husband, father or son). They were understandably incensed at the fact that the widow of a class martyr was not being supported by the union. But while their concerns were based on the particular position of women, they did not explicitly frame the issue in gendered terms. Indeed, the language they used made reference to the male union leaders' lack of class militancy, rather than their insufficient attention to gender: "It appears to us by your inactivity in this case...that you are at least willing to cooperate with Besco in watching this family suffer instead of coming and cooperating with the workers for their protection".⁸³

Scholars have expended a great deal of time and energy trying to locate women's unpaid domestic labour in its proper place within capitalist productive (and reproductive) relations. This project, referred to as the "domestic labour debate", is too nuanced to summarize in a few sentences. At its most basic level, women's domestic labour has been characterized as providing capitalism with an important support mechanism.⁸⁴ Jane Humphries has attempted to reframe the debate by pointing out that the family as an institution was functional to the working class, not capitalism, by providing a way both to support unwaged kin and to regulate the labour supply through male breadwinner ideology.⁸⁵ What is seldom mentioned is that unions, like capitalists, have relied on the domestic labour of women to pursue their class goals. Since household goods were particularly scarce during strike periods, the labour of women in the home became an important element in working-class survival. In this sense it can be said that the union movement relied on the domestic labour power of the woman to "produce and reproduce the picketer". From this perspective women's domestic labour constituted an important, but hidden, support mechanism for the union movement in Cape Breton.⁸⁶

82 *MLH*, 17 April, 19 June 1926.

83 *MLH*, 19 June 1926.

84 Some of the major articles in the domestic labour debate are collected in Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Marxism, Feminism and Nationalism* (Montreal, 1987).

85 See Jane Humphries, "The Working Class Family, Women's Liberation, and Class Struggle: The Case of Nineteenth Century British History", *Review of Radical Political Economics*, IX, 3 (Fall 1977), pp. 25-41. For more on domestic labour and its relationship to family and class, see Veronica Strong-Boag, "Keeping House in God's Country", in Heron and Storey, eds., *On the Job*, pp. 126-8; Meg Luxton, *More Than A Labour of Love*; Batya Weinbaum and Amy Bridges, "The Other Side of the Paycheck: Monopoly Capital and the Structure of Consumption", in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York, 1979), pp. 190-205; Zillah Eisenstein, "Some Notes on the Relations of Capitalist Patriarchy" in Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy*, pp. 48-52; Bonnie Fox, ed., *Hidden in the Household* (Toronto, 1980); and Wally Seccombe, "Patriarchy Stabilized", pp. 56-9.

86 For a fuller discussion on women's unpaid labour in the home, see McIntosh, "Grotesque Faces", pp. 99-116 and (for a different mining town), Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love*, pp. 81-160.

The domestic labour of women constituted one of the foundations of class struggle in the coal communities, and working-class women raised both their voices and their fists in the name of their class community. Since most women in the coal towns were economically dependent on men, the gendered division of labour in the community forced women to tie their material security to class battles over men's wages and men's employment. But the actions of women in the coalfields in the 1920s demonstrated that they did not simply adapt themselves to male categories, as they rejected mainstream and radical constructions of women as passive victims or conservative influences. Ultimately men controlled the production of class discourses in the region, and the discourse of class struggle continued to privilege the masculine class actor over the feminine. Masculinity and femininity were used as resources to legitimize class distinctions. But gender was also a lived experience, and it was therefore embedded in such diverse spheres as the workplace, the union and the home. The story of class in the Cape Breton coal towns in this important period of Maritime labour history was intimately connected to overlapping and conflicting gender discourses and experiences, and while much still needs to be learned it is clear that our understanding will be enriched by increased attention to the role of gender in the Maritime working-class experience.