

“Join the Union or you’ll Die”: Songs Relating to the Labour Union Movement in Canada’s Coal Mining Communities

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Article abstract

This article reflects some of the results of my research into the songs of Canada’s coal mining communities. In particular, it is a study of songs which emerged as a result of the Labour Union Movement on this continent. The hardships and sacrifices endured by Canadian coal miners, beginning with the earliest attempts to unionize in 1879 through the great strikes of the early twentieth century, have been well-documented in song. Although not all the songs are traditional in the sense of having been transmitted orally from generation to generation, they do offer a valuable insight into the traditions which nurtured the growth of unionism in this country.

“JOIN THE UNION OR YOU’LL DIE”: SONGS RELATING TO THE LABOUR UNION MOVEMENT IN CANADA’S COAL MINING COMMUNITIES¹

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The union movement among Canadian coal miners had its birth on mainland Nova Scotia. In the spring of 1879, motivated by a series of wage cuts and other injustices, miners in Cumberland County began to gather in small groups in the woods around Springhill. As a result of these meetings, the foundations for the first Canadian labour union were laid on August 29, 1879. This pioneer Canadian labour union, the Provincial Miners’ Association, or Provincial Workmen’s Association as it was renamed the following year, was formed only six years after trade unions ceased to be conspiracies in the eyes of federal law.² In the following song, George W. Scott, a retired coalminer, recalled the frustrations that led to the formation of that first union:

ON CUMBERLAND’S RUGGED MOUNTAIN

Collected by John C. O’Donnell
from the singing of George W. Scott

On Cumberland’s rugged mountain
Where the pine and hemlock grow,
There are crystal streams and fountains
Where the cold northwind do blow.
For all nations there’s no pleasure

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1. As a result of my experience as musical director of Cape Breton’s coal miners chorus, the Men of the Deeps, over the past 25 years, I have compiled a substantial collection of songs reflecting various aspects of life in Canada’s coal mining communities. The collection emerged out of my efforts to provide singing material for this group, which to the best of my knowledge is North America’s only coal miners’ choir. One of the most substantial chapters in my collection deals with the Labour Union Movement on this continent in which coal mining communities in Nova Scotia and throughout Canada played an important part. This article has been drawn from that chapter. I am indebted to several notable collectors and researchers for their contribution to this chapter in my collection, but particularly to Phil Thomas of British Columbia for his own excellent collection *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* and to Edith Fowke, whose enormous research output contributed greatly to my own efforts.
 2. Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, Toronto, Samuel Stevens and Co., 1976, p. 9.

Working men just like poor asses,
 'Neath the damp carbolic acids
 Miners labour underground

Our ore has built the steamers
 That do on the ocean sail.
 It likewise built the engines
 That do run upon the rail.
 It has filled this town with splendor,
 It has caused the world to wonder,
 Then they still oppress the miner
 While he labours underground.

The miners are united,
 On your branches we are bent;
 They have dropped the miners' wages
 Till it's full fifteen percent.
 Now the truth to you I'm telling:
 They accused us of rebelling
 And refused us tent or dwelling
 While we labored underground.

Our miners have joined the union
 To protect us in distress.
 And we ask not but for justice
 In this dreary wilderness.
 So let George Hardy's power perish
 Then fair wages we will cherish,
 And Londonderry will flourish
 While we labour underground.

The Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) was never a strong union, and under the leadership of grand secretary John Moffatt ("Crooked Red John" in the following song) it had become completely subservient to the coal companies. "A Miner's Cry", contributed to the *United Mine Workers' Journal* by an anonymous writer from New Aberdeen (Glace Bay), Cape Breton, using the pen name "Teddy, the Tiler", was inspired by that

The PWA was formed four years before Canada Trades and Labour Congress (1883), two years before the Canadian Assembly of the Knights of Labour (1881), eleven years before the United Mine Workers of America (1890) and sixteen years before the first coal miners' union in central or western Canada (B.C. Miners' Union, Rossland, B.C.).

period in history when the Provincial Workmen's Association was losing support as the sole bargaining agent for workers in Cape Breton. Toward the end of 1908 the Provincial Workmen's Association split into two separate factions: those wishing to remain loyal to the PWA (led by John Moffatt) and those who sought to replace the ineffectual PWA with the stronger, more militant, United Mine Workers of America (led by J. B. McLachlan, a young Scottish immigrant who had been active in the socialist movement in his native Britain). Even at Springhill, the birthplace of the PWA, miners had already disbanded their local PWA lodge and replaced it with the first Nova Scotia Branch of the United Mine Workers of America.

Cape Breton supporters of the movement to bring in the UMWA were also inspired by events in western Canada, where the famous international union had already shown its worth by winning two strikes in 1906, at Lethbridge in Alberta and Fernie in British Columbia.³

"Peter Patterson", who is pitted against "Red John" Moffatt in the following song, was a Scottish immigrant who had worked in the coal fields of Nova Scotia before moving to western Canada. He was eventually appointed international board member for the United Mine Workers of America, District 18, covering the western provinces. It was through Patterson's influence as an emissary for the international union that UMWA delegates throughout Nova Scotia gave birth to District 27 in March 1909.

A MINER'S CRY

by 'Teddy, the Tiler'

United Mine Workers' Journal, April 1, 1909.

I am a jolly collier lad, as blithe as blithe can be,
For let the times be good or bad, it's all the same to me;
I always worked so stiff and hard and nothing could I save,
Till I began to think at last that I must be a slave.

CHORUS

Oh, crooked Red John, what do you mean to do?
You want to teach us the lesson the company taught to you.
Mind what you're about, old man! For Patterson today
Will turn you out and send you to rout - with our UMWA.

3. John Mellor, *The Company Store*, Toronto, Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1983, p. 20.

Then I began to study the labour question here
 And it didn't take me long to find that things were mighty queer,
 For if you were a boss's friend you always got a show,
 And if it wasn't a good suck, 'twas best for you to go.

When this I did discover, I began to agitate;
 I say things are crooked here, why can't we make them straight?
 I then took up the question in the good PWA;
 The committee said they'd see to it upon that very day.

They came next night of meeting and reported "things all right",
 The report it being accepted and 'twas written down so bright;
 I still worked on quite satisfied until comes ticket day,
 My rate was cut, some three shifts short, and it's tail was torn away.
 I went to see the manager and I began to show
 That this was not the contract that we signed a month ago;
 That instead of a reduction it should be an increase.
 He said the bosses underground had all to do with these.

When skipper Tom came up that night, his lip was hanging low.
 I modestly saluted him and he returns, "Well, Joe!"
 I state there my grievance and he squeezed his eyes so tight,
 He says, "Just wait until pay and things will be all right."
 Two weeks rolled on and pay day came, I expected all my lot,
 But when I gazed upon my sheet, it made my temper hot;
 Instead of giving what I lost, took more of which I had,
 And this was no unusual game, it didn't drive me mad.

This thing was always going on, and fast becoming worse
 And we had no protection from any known resource;
 But now we miners stuck a blow, our freedom to obtain,
 For we know well we've taugt to lose except the horrid chain.

Come all ye jolly collier lads, while this to you I say,
 Come band together and unite upon this very day,
 That we may stand up and say, "A slave no more I'll be,
 Remember I was born a man and you must set me free."

Now 'goo-goo' red John, keep away - we're on to all your games;
 You turned a traitor to your class and you disgraced our names
 And when our freedom is declared, we'll march in bright array
 And we'll sing one thousand cheers for the U M W A.

The song is a parody on "Down In A Coal Mine", a nineteenth-century British stage song by J. B. Geoghegan. There was no tune published with "A Miners Cry" when it appeared in the *U.M.W. Journal*. That the song was patterned on Geoghegan's stage song, however, is obvious from the first verse, which borrows the first two lines almost verbatim:

I am a jovial collier lad and blithe as blithe can be
 For let the times be good or bad, they're all the same to me.
 'Tis little of the world I know and careless for its ways,
 For where the dog star never glows, I wear away my days.

In their struggle to have the major mine owners accept their right to form a union, coal miners in Vancouver Island, British Columbia, suffered great injustices. "Are You From Bevan?" was apparently written by a member of the miners' Gas Committee who had been fired and blacklisted by the dominant Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd. for his beliefs.⁴

Phil Thomas, in an article published in the *Canadian Folk Bulletin*, explains that on Vancouver Island in 1912, four coal companies employed 3 500 men. Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd., which had been bought two years earlier by the railway promoters William MacKenzie and Donald Mann, pursued the anti-union policies of the former Dunsmuir owners. The other three companies, although operating "company unions", supported the Canadian Collieries opposition to bona fide unions. Believing that only the backing of a large union could overcome the adamant opposition of the coal owners, and inspired by the successes of fellow workers in Alberta and Nova Scotia, miners from Cumberland, Nanaimo and Ladysmith invited organizers from the mighty United Mine Workers of America to the island.⁵

The dispute in September 1912 over the blacklisting of one man quickly became a major issue. In a show of support, fellow miners staged a "holiday" walkout, only to find themselves locked out by Canadian Collieries. After seven months, at the encouragement of union organizers, they were joined by miners from the other three companies seeking union recognition. By mid- August 1913, the entire scene erupted in a riot in which company houses and mine buildings were burned and looted. The following song tells the story from the perspective of one who suffered the indignity of being blacklisted:

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4. This version of the song was collected by Phil Thomas and was published in his *Songs of the Pacific Northwest*, Saanichton, British Columbia, Hancock House Publications Ltd., 1979, p. 131. The song was also collected by George Korson and appears in *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*, 2nd Printing, Hatboro, Pennsylvania, Folklore Associates Inc., 1965.
 5. Philip J Thomas, "Are You From Bevan?" *Canadian Folk Bulletin*, 2:3 (1979), p. 29.

ARE YOU FROM BEVAN?

Collected by P.J. Thomas

Tune: "Are You From Dixie?"

Hello, stranger, how do you do?
 There's something I'd like to say to you.
 You seem surprised I recognize;
 I'm no company stool but I just surmise
 You're from the place I'm longing to be.
 Your smiling face seems to say to me
 You're from the island, your land and my land,
 So tell me can it be -

CHORUS

Are you from Bevan? I said from Bevan!
 Where those fields of stumps they beckon to me
 I'm glad to see you! Tell me how be you
 And those friends I'm longing to see?
 If you're from Union Bay or Courtenay or Cumberland
 Anyplace below that Bevan second dam -
 Are you from Bevan? I said from Bevan!
 'Cause I'm from Bevan, too!

It was way back in 19 and 12
 Our gas committee was put on the shelf,
 First we walked out, then we were locked out -
 Then by a foul we were all but knocked out.
 Our union miners faced guns and jail,
 Hundreds of us were held without bail.
 But by August 1914 our labour they were courting,
 But they blacklisted me -

The "foul" referred to in the song is the collusion of the provincial government of McBride and Bowser with Canadian Collieries Ltd. To quell the riots, Attorney General Bowser sent in Colonel Hall with 300 men from the Seventy-Second Division of the Seaforth Militia to restore law and order. They arrested 256 men, which inspired the strikers to write several songs. The best known of these, "Bowser's Seventy-Twa", first appeared in the labour paper *B.C. Federationist* on November 7, 1913, without a chorus, and on April 24, 1914, it was reprinted in this form⁶:

6. Edith Fowke, "Labour and Industrial Protest Songs in Canada," *Journal of American Folklore*, 82 (1969), p. 37. In his *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (p. 136), P. J. Thomas prints a melody with the song which he collected from the singing of Dick Morgan in 1962.

BOWSER'S SEVENTY-TWA

by R.W. Smith

Oh, did you see the kiltie boys?
Well, laugh, 'twould nearly kilt you, boys,
That day they came to kill both great and small
With bayonet, shot and shell, to blow you all to hell.
A dandy squad was Bowser's Seventy-twa.

CHORUS

Then Hurrah boys, Hurrah, for the Bowser's seventy-twa,
The handy dandy candy seventy-twa,
They'll make the world look small, led on by Colonel Hall;
Hurrah boys, hurrah, for Bowser's seventy-twa.

They stood some curious shapes these boys;
They must have sprung from apes these boys,
Dressed up in kilts to represent the law.
My conscience it was grand, hurrah for old Scotland,
And Bowser with his gallant seventy-twa.

They could not stand at ease, these boys;
They had no strength, believe me, boys;
Some had to stand upon their guns or fall,
And many a mother's son had never seen a gun,
But mind you, they were Bowser's seventy-twa.

It beat the band to see them land
And make that grand heroic stand,
The emblem of the government and the law.
And we will not forget the day they stormed Departure Bay
Did Bowser and his gallant seventy-twa.

In British Columbia, the song is often associated with William J. Willis, who popularized it through his singing. Indeed, so successful was Willis in promoting the song that he was arrested for singing it.⁷

Two lesser known songs to emerge from the happenings in that summer of 1913 appeared in the October 31, 1913, and May 29, 1914, issues of the B.C. Federationist respectively: "Bowser's Penitents" and "The Czar of B.C."⁸

7. Thomas, *Songs of the Pacific Northwest*, p. 137.

8. Fowke, p. 38.

BOWSER'S PENITENTS

B.C. Federationist

Tune: "Just Before The Battle, Mother"

Onward then my brother toiler
 Pass the battle to the gate,
 Dare to fight till victory cometh
 O'er the tyranny of state.
 All the efforts of a Bowser
 All the hirelings of his fold
 Cannot quench the miners' spirit;
 We are one both young and old.

CHORUS

In the state's man-trap called prison,
 Bowser's cottage by the sea,
 There our comrades are made suffer,
 Many boys who should be free.

Homes and wives robbed of daddy,
 Fed like swine instead of men,
 Bolts and bars around erected,
 Thrust into the lions' den.
 They are Daniels don't mistake it,
 And the lion's mouth will shut
 For the government must answer
 Why the jails our brothers glut.

They do not support the toilers
 But they seek him to enslave;
 Don't forget your ballot, brother,
 If your brother you will save.
 Don't be fooled by the old line parties;
 Vote the ticket of your class.
 Don't forget the men imprisoned;
 Let their sufferings never pass.

Recognition is our watchword-
 Nothing else can satisfy.
 Let us stand as men together;
 Naught can then our cause defy.
 We shall win by standing solid;
 Stand ye firm then, every man.
 Don't forsake your prison brother;
 You his brother and I am.

THE CZAR OF B.C.

by J. Lawrence

Tune: "The Wearing of the Green"

In the province of B.C. there reigns a Czar of glorious fame.
He's known by all the working men, Czar Bowser is his name.
He's noted for the way in which he runs this glorious west
And Bill and Dan are certain that for them he does his best.

When the boots over on the island went on strike for a great cause
Czar Bowser wasn't slow in sending over his "Seventy-Twa's".
The courage of those cursed slaves at all costs he must break,
So the gallant Seventy Twa's with them two Maxim guns did take.

Honest men were thrown in filthy cells and remanded without bail,
And one, a faithful union lad, did not live to tell the tale.
Of all things that happened it would take too long to tell,
But if Colonel Hall could have his way, he'd shoot us all to — Well.

But I think we've learnt our lesson, boys, so don't let us forget
When we mark our ballot slips, then we'll have no regret,
For in the legislature now, to represent our millions,
We've only got two workers strong, Jack Place and Parker
Williams.

According to Edith Fowke, "Bill and Dan" are probably the same William MacKenzie and Donald Mann mentioned in connection with "Are You From Bevan?" The "faithful union lad" was Joseph Maris, who died in prison from lack of medical attention. Fowke doesn't offer any explanation for this seeming ill-treatment; however, the fact that he was considered a martyr by those who knew him would seem to indicate a lack of sympathy on the part of prison and/or hospital administration. Maris was buried at Nanaimo, where a monument to him bears the inscription: "A martyr to the noble cause — the emancipation of his fellow men. Erected by his brothers of District 28, UMW of A". "Jack Place and Parker Williams" were Social Democratic Party members in the provincial legislature.⁹

Phil Thomas records the following postscript to that fateful summer in British Columbia. Thomas doesn't indicate from whom he recorded the following verse, stating only that it was composed by one of the many jailed miners; it forecasts the fall of the Bowser government in the election of 1916.¹⁰

9. Fowke, p. 39.

10. Thomas, p. 139.

RUN, BOWSER, RUN!

Collected by P. J. Thomas

Run, Bowser, run! We will beat you at the poll!
 Run, Bowser, run! We will beat you to your hole!
 You thought you could break our spirit
 But you have only hastened the day
 When we will make the companies recognize the UMWA.

The United Mine Workers of America eventually took firm hold in British Columbia. The following song emerged from a later period in B.C. mining history when James "Shakey" Robertson, a strong union man, had been local president of the Mine Workers Union of Canada before its amalgamation with the UMWA in 1936.¹¹ He sang it for George Korson at a UMW convention in Columbus, Ohio, February 1, 1940.¹²

ROLL ALONG, UNITED MINERS

by Harry Buchanan

Tune: "Roll Along Covered Wagons, Roll Along"

Roll along, United Miners,
 Roll along, roll along,
 To the tune of the pans we'll sing our song,
 For a union we must get;
 All the rest of them are wet.
 Roll along, United Miners, Roll along.

CHORUS

Hurry up there, old timer;
 Come, join our union today.
 Hurry up there, old timer;
 We'll give the boss less to say.

Roll along, United Miners,
 Roll along, roll along
 To the tune of our organizing song,

11. Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle*, Lantzville, British Columbia, Oolichan Books, 1982, p. 248.

12. Korson, *Coal Dust On The Fiddle*, p. 304.

For our union it is fine;
Old Bill Green we will outshine.
Roll along, United Miners, roll along.

The Communist Party of Canada flourished in the early days of unionism in this country. Formed in 1921 as the Workers' Party of Canada, it even attracted Jim McLachlan, the Scottish immigrant labour leader who had been instrumental in leading the fight against John Moffatt's ineffectual PWA. Twenty years of suppression and unsuccessful attempts to obtain decent wages and working conditions made the 1920's ripe for Communist recruitment among Canadian miners. "Arise Ye Nova Scotia Slaves" was collected by George Korson from Bob Stewart of Glace Bay, Cape Breton.¹³ It served as a call to arms in a movement which would eventually see the United Mine workers of America take firm root in the coal fields of Nova Scotia.

ARISE YE NOVA SCOTIA SLAVES

Collected by George Korson
from the singing of Bob Stewart
Tune: "The Wearing of the Green"

It is time for the coal miners to rise up on their feet
And crush the opposition wherever they will meet.
Too long the capitalist party has kept the miners down,
With their mansions full and plenty - on the miners they do frown.

Through years past the coal companies have trodden down the poor,
But now comes the crisis - the miners' votes galore.
The capitalists do shudder, they now must turn aside,
To the miner's class in power, and may we ever abide.

And how often have we spoken about the miners of this land,
Crushed by heavy burden and that on every hand.
They have no voice whatever; the miners were kept down,
With the corporations in power, poor subjects for a Crown.

13. Korson, p. 424. Collected at the UMWA Convention in Columbus, Ohio, February 1, 1940. The song was published in the UMW Journal, May 5, 1910, which credited P. J. Lynch with making it.

Fathers, husbands, sons and brothers they have driven from their homes,
 By their unfair, unjust methods in this little Glace Bay town;
 And their shame they may try to flaunt, for the poor slaves pay them well,
 And by their filthy money they have sent their souls to hell.

But the day is fast a-coming when the miners will be free
 And the U.M.W. colors flying on the plains for all to see,
 And the name of E.S. McCullough we never will forget,
 A man who fights for freedom and he fights for honor yet.

And when the strike is over, we'll march in grand array,
 And we'll ring ten thousand cheers for the U.M.W.A.
 And the scab will go under like the man before the gun,
 And the miners they will flourish when the dreary strike is won.

An important arm of the Communist Party of Canada was the Workers' Unity League — active in both eastern and western Canada. Its purpose was to organize unions amongst miners, loggers, longshoremen and the unemployed.¹⁴ The following song introduces Jim (J. B.) McLachlan, one of the driving forces behind the Workers' Unity League and one of Cape Breton Island's foremost union organizers.

JIM MCLACHLAN SONG

by Peter Flosznick

Comrades, come and gather round and sing of a communist renowned,
 A hero of the working class,
 His name was Jim McLachlan,
 He came from Scotland the Brave, he came o'er the Atlantic wave,
 To make his home here in this land,
 Upon Cape Breton Island.

CHORUS

Comrades, workers, we must rise!
 Comrades we must mobilize
 Like Jim McLachlan, organize,
 For socialist revolution!

14. Bowen, p. 243.

It was in 1922, the workers' scarlet banner flew
In many a little mining town in the island of Cape Breton,
They'd had enough of slavery, the workers wanted to be free,
They struck in strike around the isle,
Like a raging forest fire!

McLachlan, he led many strikes, fought against the boss and cops alike,
He and the workers even fought
Against the boss's army,
For in their hearts a hope did glow
Of freedom when they'd overthrow
The bourgeoisie and then construct a socialist republic.

The bosses did throw him in jail
For two long years, but they did fail
To break the rebel spirit of McLachlan and the miners.
In '24 they let him go, and back to Glace Bay he did go
And thousands cheered him when he spoke there
At the railway station.

McLachlan was a communist and he did raise his iron fist
Against the scabs and Bureaucrats
Who sabotaged the struggle
He and the Party organized a labour centre workers prized,
The Workers' Unity League, born in the dark depression.

The League the country quickly swept,
In strike the stance is swiftly let;
For five short years, 'twas labour's hope,
Until Tim Buck dissolved it.
McLachlan fought it to maintain, but all his efforts were in vain;
He left the Party and soon died
On Cape Breton Island.

James Bryson McLachlan was born on February 9, 1870, in the Scottish village of Ecclefechan (his tombstone records the date as 1869).¹⁵ McLachlan came to Canada in 1902 following a strike which had closed the pits in his area and resulted in his being blacklisted against any other employment. Desperate to improve his lot for himself and his family, he responded to overtures from the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company and emigrated to Cape Breton, where the coal industry was undergoing frenzied expansion.

15. MacEwan, p. 15.

Before leaving Britain, McLachlan had been influenced by the activities of J. Kier Hardie, the pioneer British Labour M. P. This attraction to the socialist movement was to come to full fruition in his newly adopted homeland of Canada, where he was destined to have a radical influence on the political and labour history of North America.

In his search for justice for his fellow miners, Jim McLachlan was drawn to the ideals of the Communist Party and served as its Atlantic Provinces representative from its beginnings in 1921. With the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1933, J. B., as he preferred to be called, began to see many of the aims for which he had struggled take shape. Because he had always advocated replacing the capitalist system with a new social order through political action, rather than through violence and revolution, he resigned from the Communist Party of Canada in 1936 and endorsed the milder forms of socialism which the CCF represented. The following song by Charlie MacKinnon, a popular singer and balladeer (now deceased) from Portage, Cape Breton, tells the story of J. B. McLachlan:

THE BALLAD OF J. B. MCLACHLAN

by Charlie MacKinnon

Born in old Scotland in eighteen sixty-nine,
 In a little comp'ny house down by a dark coal mine;
 Started work at the age of twelve, then sailed across the sea,
 And landed in this mining land at the age of thirty-three.

CHORUS

Jim B. McLachlan, the leader of men;
 J.B. McLachlan united them and then
 Held high the torch of freedom for all,
 And asked his fellow miners to never let it fall.

A tried and true champion of the working man;
 The coal boss couldn't bind him or shackle his hands.
 From the great strike out in Winnipeg and all across this land
 They came to seek the leadership of this humble miner man.

He formed a local branch of the U.M.W.
 And asked the miners to stand for the Union that was true.
 The coal boss had to silence him, into Dorchester to jail;
 They said: "Seditious liable", and none could go his bail.

Blacklisted by the comp'ny boss, he turned to the land
On a little farm on Steel's Hill, this great miner man;
His health did fail from his years in jail, his banner he held
high,
And left behind a legend that will never die.

The actual beginnings of unionism on this continent preceded the Springhill, Nova Scotia, founding of the Provincial Workmen's Association by thirty years. It was in 1849 that an English miner, John Bates (who had been active in the British Chartist movement) formed the first American miners' union in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. The Bates union was to be short lived, however, for it held its first and last strike in 1849 and was dead by 1850.¹⁶ This was still forty years before the United Mine Workers of America would have its birth in Columbus, Ohio.¹⁷

The American Miners' Association, which emerged eleven years after the collapse of the Bates Union, stressed the need for unity of all national groups within the union. The preamble to the constitution of the AMA (see stanza 1 of the following song) has long outlived the union from which it sprang. The Canadian verse was added in 1977 by the reborn Montreal-based Marxist-Leninist group IN STRUGGLE.¹⁸

STEP BY STEP

from IN STRUGGLE

Step by step the longest march
Can be won, can be won
Many stones can form an arch,
Singly none, singly none.
And united what we will

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16. Philip S. Foner, *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1975, p. 193.
 17. American miners made several short-lived attempts to organize before the UMWA succeeded in establishing itself as the voice of organized mine workers in America. Following the collapse of John Bates' union in 1850, the AMA, established in 1861, eventually disappeared and was replaced by the Workingman's Benevolent Association in 1868. When the WBA collapsed in 1875, leadership fell to the Ancient Order of Hibernians, formed by a group of young Irish miners, until the Knights of Labor was formed in 1876. The United Mine Workers of America replaced the Knights of Labor as the official miners' union in 1890.
 18. Supplement to the newspaper, *IN STRUGGLE*, "Sing of Our Struggles, Sing of Revolution", Montreal, April 1989, p. 124.

Shall be accomplished still.
Drops of water turn the mill,
Singly none, singly none.

Each bourgeoisie says stand with us,
We'll be friends, we'll be friends
And the profits of our land
We'll defend, we'll defend.
But worker comrades side by side
Nationalism cast aside,
Levesque nor Trudeau can divide.
We fight as one, fight as one.

Although cited as the "national anthem" of Cape Breton workers by both Stuart McCawley¹⁹ and Alphonse MacDonald,²⁰ the following song is rarely sung in Cape Breton today. The song protests the importation of surplus labour during the summer months. Edith Fowke also collected a version of this song from Patrick Graber of Vancouver.²¹

THE HONEST WORKING MAN

Collected by Ron MacEachern
from the singing of Charlie MacKinnon
Tune: "The Hills of Mallabawn"

I think I'll go meander with my friend the Newfoundlander;
He is the finest fellow to ever grace the land
His name it is John Allie; he's from the Codroy Valley
He works here in the coal mines with the honest working man.

CHORUS

Way down in east Cape Breton, where they knit the sock and mitten
Highlanders represented by the husky black and tan.
May they never be rejected, and home rule be protected
And always be connected with the honest working man.

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19. Stuart McCawley, *Cape Breton Come All Ye*, Glace Bay, Nova Scotia, Brodie, 1929.
20. Alphonse MacDonald, *Cape Breton Songster*, Sydney, Nova Scotia, n.p., 1935.
21. Edith Fowke, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973, p. 80. (The tune is probably derived from one of several songs variously titled "The Boys of Mullaghbawn" or "The Hills of Mullaghbawn" which were inspired by a bloody rebellion in Ireland's South Armagh parish of Mullaghbawn — or "Mallabawn" — in the 1790s.)

When leaves fall in the autumn and fish freeze to the bottom
 They take a three-ton schooner and go 'round the western shore
 They load her with provisions, hard tack and codfish mizzens,
 The like I never heard of since the downfall of Bras d'Or.

They cross the Bay of Fundy, they reach her on a Monday:
 Did you see my brother Angus? Now tell me if you can.
 He was once a C.N.R. greaseman, but now he's a policeman
 And he now earns his living as an honest working man.
 The man who mixes mortar gets a dollar and a quarter,
 The sugar-factory worker, he gets a dollar ten,
 While there's my next-door neighbour who lives on just his labour,
 And in the winter doesn't earn enough to feed a sickly hen.

In order not to offend his many Newfoundland friends, Charlie MacKinnon changed the context of verse one and composed his own words. The original was far less compassionate²²:

What raises high my dander, next door lives a Newfoundlander
 Whose wife you cannot stand her since high living she began,
 Along with the railroad rackers, also the codfish packers,
 Who steal the cheese and crackers from the honest working man.

Surplus labour, whether imported to meet seasonal demands or to fill the gap left by striking workers, was usually non-unionized and as such became the target of contempt and ridicule by the local workforce. A song quoted in Roy Palmer's *Poverty Knock* manifests graphically the disdain with which British coal miners held non-unionized workers in eighteenth century Britain: ²³

O bury now the blackleg nine feet below the dirt,
 And pile up plenty on him of pick and shovel dirt,
 And heap the stones upon him, put all there under seal,
 For fear the devil rises to plague the world to come.²⁴

Songs about "scab labour" are common in mining communities throughout the world. Perhaps the most popular of all such songs emerged in Britain when, in the early nineteenth century, Welsh, Irish and Cornish miners were

22. *Ibid.*

23. Roy Palmer, *Poverty Knock*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 59.

24. Translated from the Gaelic.

imported to Tyneside to help break the strikes that were hampering the coal industry there²⁵:

Oh, early in the evening, just after dark,
The blackleg miners creep out and go to work,
With their moleskin trousers and dirty old shirt
Go the dirty blackleg miners.

In the early part of this century, George Korson collected “black-leg” songs in Pennsylvania’s Schuylkill County.²⁶ In West Virginia he discovered that they rode on “A Little Black Train”:²⁷

There’s a little black train a-coming -
The conductor he’s a crab,
The engineer a Progressive
Get on, if you’re a scab.

Throughout the nineteenth century, while labour problems were plaguing the British coal industry, the ever-expanding industry in North America welcomed large numbers of immigrant workers from England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales and other European countries. Many of the singers recorded by Korson and his contemporaries were direct descendants of these immigrant workers, and through their songs they formed a link in the industrial heritage of Europe and North America.

During the mid-1800s, the coal industry on Cape Breton Island underwent its greatest expansion. Scores of new mines were opened and, to meet demands for labour, workers were imported from Great Britain and Ireland. By far the largest group of immigrants came from Northeast England and Scotland, so it is not surprising that songs modeled on the British blackleg theme would appear in Cape Breton.

“The Yahie Miners”, printed below, first appeared in Stuart McCawley’s *Cape Breton Come-All-Ye*, although McCawley’s version, which was also published by George Korson, omitted verse eight.²⁸ The term “Yahie” is sometimes taken as a corruption of “Yankee” — referring to seasonal workers from the U.S.A.; but a more acceptable explanation, popular in Cape Breton, is that the word “Yahie” actually derives from the Scottish

25. A. L. Lloyd, *Come All Ye Bold Miners*, London, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., 1952, p. 99.

26. George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*, 3rd Printing, Hatboro, Pennsylvania, Folklore Associates Inc., 1964, p. 204-239.

27. Korson, *Coal Dust On The Fiddle*, p. 328.

28. Korson, *Coal Dust On The Fiddle*, p. 334-335.

Gaelic word for homeward: *dhachaidh* (home = *dachaidh*), pronounced (g)ackey -the "g" being softened to somewhat guttural "y"! Because many of the immigrants constantly spoke of home and the better life there, they were castigated as the "(g)ackey" miners - or "Yahie" miners.

THE YAHIE MINERS

Collected by Alphonse MacDonald

Tune: "The Blackleg Miners"

Early in the month of May
When all ice is gone away,
The Yahies, they come down to work
With their white bags and dirty shirts
The dirty Yahie Miners.

CHORUS

Bonnie Boys, oh won't you gang,
Bonnie Boys, oh won't you gang,
Bonnie Boys, oh won't you gang,
To beat the Yahie miners.

They take their picks and they do down
A-digging coal on underground,
For board and lodging can't be found
For dirty Yahie miners.

Into Mitchell's they do deal,
Nothing there but Injun meal;
Sour molasses will make them squeal,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Join the union right away
Don't you wait till after pay.
Join the union right away,
You dirty Yahie miners.
Mrs. McNabb, she keeps the Hall
Where the Yahies they do call;
You'll see them flock around the Hall,
The dirty Yahie miners.

Don't go near MacDonald's door
 Else the bully will have you sure,
 For he goes 'round from door to door
 Converting Yahie miners.
 Jimmie Brinick he jumped in,
 Caught MacKeigan by the chin,
 "Give me Maggie though she's thin
 For I'm no Yahie miner."

Donald McAulay's got a nose
 Where the boarders hang their clothes,
 And if you go there I suppose
 You'll see some Yahie miners.

From Rocky Boston they do come,
 The damndest Yahies ever found;
 Around the office they do crowd
 The dirty Yahie miners.

The Lorway Road it is now clear;
 There are no Yahies on the beer.
 The reason why they are not here,
 They're frightened of the miners.

The following song is a variant of "The Yahie Miners".²⁹

KELLY'S COVE

by Mrs. D. J. MacDonald

Tune: "The Blackleg Miners"

When Kelly's Cover began to work
 The happy miners came like dirt,
 White backs and dirty shirts,
 The yappy, happy miners.

29. "Kelly's Cove" came to me as the result of the search conducted by the Cape Breton Miners' Folk Society in 1966. See John O'Donnell, *The Men of the Deeps*, Waterloo, Waterloo Music Co., 1975. Kelly's Cove is today known as New Campbellton and is located near the foot of Kelly's Mountain in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

CHORUS

So join the union or you'll die
Join the union or you'll die
Join the union or you'll die
Among the happy miners.

And when a vessel will come in,
Burchell will be on a pin;
He will make the miners spin,
The yappy, happy miners.

Big Flora, she keeps a hall
Where the miners always call,
When they're coming in the fall,
The yappy, happy miners.

Young Charlie Sutherland went 'round
Hauling coal from underground;
He swore he'd never haul a pound
For the yappy, happy miners.

The striking similarities of both "The Yahie Miners" and "Kelly's Cove" with the British "Blackleg Miners" would seem to indicate that the Cape Breton composers were familiar with the British version.³⁰

BLACKLEG MINERS

Oh it's in the evening after dark
The blackleg miners gan to work,
With their moleskin trousers and their dirty shirt
There go the blackleg miners.

They take their picks and down they go
To hew the coal that lies below
And there's not a woman in this townrow
Will look at a blackleg miner.

On Delavel is a terrible place
They rub wet clay in a blackleg's face,

30. Karl Dallas, *One Hundred Songs of Work and Toil*, London, Wolfe Publishing Limited, 1974, p. 227.

And round the pitheaps they run a foot race
To catch the blackleg miners.

Oh divn't gan near the Seghill mine,
Across the way they hang a line
To catch the throat and break the spine
Of the dirty blackleg miners.

So join the union while you may
And don't wait till your dying day
For that may not be very far away,
You dirty blackleg miners.

Like the British version, both Cape Breton songs sing of “dirty shirts”, but the moleskin trousers of Britain’s “Blackleg Miners” (*cf.* verse one) have become “white Bags” or “white backs”. Many a retired coal miner in Cape Breton today will speak of the shiny black skin of their fathers and uncles. It was not all that long ago that coal miners were forced to work shifts of fifteen to eighteen hours a day in order to earn enough to pay off the company store and to support their families. The men barely had time to wash properly; consequently, their skin took on an ebony-like sheen. So imbedded was the black that even their clothing remained unaffected by the dirt when they donned their street clothes at the end of a shift. Foreign workers, not having toiled long or hard enough to have acquired that protective black aura, were noticeably different with their “white backs and dirty shirts”.

Like “Down In A Coal Mine”, the final song in this article, “A Miner’s Life”, is a favourite in coal mining communities throughout the world. And like “Down In A Coal Mine,” it has a strong Welsh connection. The tune is derived from the Welsh hymn “Calon lan”. The text, though virtually unknown in most of Wales, was collected by A. L. Lloyd from George Evans of Aberaman in South Wales and published in his *Come All Ye Bold Miners*.³¹ Lloyd suggests that it was the creation of Welsh immigrants in America.

Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer point out that in the United States the tune was used for a nineteenth century sacred song called “Life’s Railway to Heaven”, and that the union song probably began as a parody of this:³²

31. Lloyd, p. 122.

32. Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, *Songs of Work and Protest*, New York, Dover Publication, 1973, p. 67.

Round the bend and through the tunnel,
Never falter, never fail;
Keep your hand upon the throttle,
And your eye upon the rail.

In his *One Hundred Songs of Work and Toil*, Karl Dallas suggests a gospel-influence when he likens the song to "Life is like a mountain railway, sometimes up and sometimes down".³³

Whatever its origin, it serves as a strong rallying song for miners' gatherings throughout Canada and the United States.

A MINER'S LIFE

Collected by George Korson
From the singing of Mrs. Luigi Gugliotta

Miner's life is like a sailor's
'Board a ship to cross the wave;
Every day his life's in danger,
Still he ventures being brave.
Watch the rocks, they're falling daily,
Careless miners always fail;
Keep your hand upon the dollar
And your eyes upon the scales.

CHORUS

Union miners, stand together,
Heed no operator's tale;
Keep your hand upon the dollar
And your eyes upon the scales.

Soon this trouble will be ended,
Union men will have their rights,
After many years of bondage,
Digging days and digging nights,
Then by honest weight we labor,
Union workers never fail;
Keep your hand upon the dollar
And your eyes upon the scales.

33. Dallas, p. 226.

Let no union man be weakened
 By newspapers' false reports;
 Be like sailors on the ocean,
 Trusting in their safe lifeboats.
 Let your lifeboat be Jehovah;
 Those who trust Him never fail.
 Keep your hand upon the dollar
 And your eyes upon the scales.

You've been docked and docked, my boys,
 You've been loading two for one;
 What have you to show for working
 Since this mining has begun?
 Overalls, and cans for rockers,
 In your shanties sleep on rails.
 Keep your hand upon the dollar
 And your eyes upon the scales.

In conclusion, bear in memory,
 Keep the password in your mind;
 God provides for every nation,
 When in union they combine.
 Stand like men and linked together,
 Victory for you will prevail.
 Keep your hand upon the dollar
 And your eyes upon the scales.

It is probably clear that most of the songs which have been presented here are not truly traditional folksongs, that is, in the sense of having been transmitted orally from generation to generation. With the possible exception of those songs with roots in Great Britain and Ireland, most of them are composed songs and have survived chiefly in literary form. If, however, we interpret the term "traditional" in the broader sense of the word as referring to creative output and behaviour that is customary and continuous in society, then our perception of what is traditional becomes much broader.³⁴

The songs here have been created by folks who lived through the turmoil and stress associated with the birth of organized labour on this continent. As such, they offer a grassroots look at behaviour patterns and customs which molded the union mentality of Canada's mining communities. Thanks to the creative efforts of the individuals responsible for these songs, we can have a deeper appreciation of the traditions which nurtured the growth of unionism in this country.

34. Archie Green, *Only A Miner*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1972, p. 5.