

# The Personal Touch Mackenzie King, Harriett Reid, and the Springhill Strike, 1909-1911

William M. Baker

Volume 13, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt13dc01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Baker, W. M. (1984). The Personal Touch: Mackenzie King, Harriett Reid, and the Springhill Strike, 1909-1911. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 13, 159–176.

# DOCUMENT

## The Personal Touch:

### Mackenzie King, Harriett Reid, and the Springhill Strike, 1909-1911

William M. Baker

OVER THE YEARS the 1909 strikes of Nova Scotian coal miners have attracted a certain amount of attention from historians.<sup>1</sup> Such interest has been well placed for the disputes shed light on many aspects of concern to labour historians, from working conditions to the impact of government intervention in industrial relations. The longest of the several strikes was in Springhill.<sup>2</sup> Its causes were varied, including an intransigent management and a militant work force which had battled with each other for years; a changing economic

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviated accounts are found in S.M. Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66*, Canada, Task Force on Labour Relations, Study No. 22 (Ottawa 1968), 102-4; R.H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto 1974), 122-3; and D. Morton, with T. Copp, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Ottawa 1980), 96-8. The coverage in E. Forsey, *Economic and Social Aspects of the Nova Scotia Coal Industry* (Toronto 1926), 21-9; and P. MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976), 19-38, is more extensive. The most detailed analysis to date is the unpublished essay by D. Moore, "The 1909 Strike in the Nova Scotia Coal Fields," Carleton University, 1977. A fine survey of pre-World War I strikes on the east coast is I. McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914," *Acadiensis*, 13 (1983). I am grateful to Ian McKay not only for his written works relating to Springhill but also for his helpful suggestions on this documentary article.

<sup>2</sup> On the coal miners of Springhill see I. McKay's very fine "Workers' Control in Springhill, 1882-1927," unpublished paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, Halifax, June, 1981; and C.W. Lunn (introduction by Ian McKay), "From Trapper Boy to General Manager: A Story of Brotherly Love and Perseverance," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 211-40. On the strike itself the most detailed account is undoubtedly H.S. Goodwin, "Community, Class and Conflict: The 1910-11 Springhill Coal Strike," Honours B.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1980. Useful and accessible primary sources on the Springhill strike are printed in the *Labour Gazette* and in Canada, *Sessional Papers*.

W.M. Baker, "The Personal Touch: Mackenzie King, Harriett Reid, and the Springhill Strike, 1909-1911," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 159-176.

structure in the coal and steel industry in Nova Scotia; and a conflict between the home-grown Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA), which had represented the Springhill miners and with which management was willing to deal, and the powerful United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), which had won the almost unanimous support of Springhill miners by 1909 but with which management absolutely refused to negotiate. The issues in dispute were examined by a Board under the terms of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act but its findings on the issue of the company dealing with the UMWA were unsatisfactory to the miners and consequently a strike commenced on 10 August.<sup>3</sup> In one sense the strikers were highly successful in that the unanimity and militance of the strikers and the financial support provided them by the UMWA enabled them to maintain the strike for twenty-one and a half months. The company was unable to resume operations for some six months after the strike began and at no time was able to produce more than one-third of normal capacity. But by the spring of 1911 two factors had changed: the company had been taken over by the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation, resulting in a strengthening of the position of the employer in the conflict (if some softening in abrasiveness); and the UMWA had weakened in its resolve and ability to continue its extensive financial support. On 27 May 1911, the Springhill miners called off the strike. The Springhill defeat, coupled with the earlier failure in Cape Breton, virtually eradicated the UMWA in Nova Scotia for a few years.

At the time the UMWA was the largest and probably the wealthiest union in North America. While it wielded immense power it had accumulated its share of defeats. Moreover, it was not without its internal weaknesses. Partly because of its very size and wealth it became bureaucratized and attracted fierce internal competition for the highly desirable and potentially lucrative leadership positions.<sup>4</sup> At the time of the Springhill strike, Thomas L. Lewis (no relation to John L. Lewis) was president.<sup>5</sup> Prior to becoming president in 1908 he had

<sup>3</sup> Since the introduction of the IDIA in 1907 no fewer than five boards had grappled with industrial conflict in the mines at Springhill — but had failed to provide a solution. See McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes."

<sup>4</sup> John Mitchell, UMWA president from 1899 to 1908, managed to accumulate a tidy sum while in office; see J.O. Morris, "The Acquisitive Spirit of John Mitchell, UMW President (1899-1908)," *Labor History*, 20 (1979), 5-43. On the development of the labour bureaucracy see W.R. Van Tine, *The Making of the Labor Bureaucrat: Union Leadership in the United States, 1870-1920* (Amherst, MA 1973). I am indebted to Professor Van Tine for biographical information on individuals connected to the UMWA and mentioned in the letters.

<sup>5</sup> T.L. Lewis was a founder of the UMWA, was international vice-president during Mitchell's presidency, was president from 1908 to 1911 and built a strong personal political machine within the Mine Workers which enabled him to resist challenges to his leadership until White ousted him. Following his defeat he does not appear to have wielded much influence within the UMWA especially after he became an advisor for an anti-union West Virginian operators' association.

worked incessantly to undermine then-President John Mitchell.<sup>6</sup> Lewis in turn had numerous opponents, including John White who defeated Lewis for the presidency in 1911. The documents which follow demonstrate that this internal conflict was a factor in the UMWA's dealings with Nova Scotian miners.

The UMWA had become embroiled in 1908 in a power struggle with the PWA for the right to represent the coal miners of Nova Scotia.<sup>7</sup> The features of the UMWA that appealed to Nova Scotian miners were its power and reputed militance. Representation by the UMWA, the miners reasoned, would improve their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* management. Certainly the Springhill miners, with a long record of industrial struggle, felt that they would be better off with the UMWA than with the PWA, which was gaining a reputation for being too cosy with management, and favoured the Mine Workers almost to a worker.<sup>8</sup> But both the PWA and management, whether in Springhill specifically or in Nova Scotia in general, contested the workers' verdict and opposed the UMWA. The UMWA and the PWA thus became locked in a struggle for survival in Nova Scotia, a contest which the UMWA lost in the short run but won in the longer term.

While the series of letters<sup>9</sup> which follow are not crucial to an understanding of the Springhill strike, they were occasioned by the strike and provide some information about it. Of more direct importance, however, is the light they shed upon the two correspondents, William Lyon Mackenzie King and Harriett Reid. At the time, of course, King was Minister of Labour. Miss Reid was a secretary for the Mining Investigation Commission of Illinois, one of the many American bodies on which capital, labour, and the public were represented. They had met in November, 1906, when Reid was working in the office of the United Mine Workers in Indianapolis and King had come to visit Mitchell on official business as Deputy Minister of Labour. Evidently they made a favourable impression on one another and afterwards corresponded occasionally and passed along greetings through mutual acquaintances.<sup>10</sup> Little is known about

<sup>6</sup> On Mitchell see E. Gluck, *John Mitchell, Miner: Labor's Bargain with the Gilded Age* (New York 1969, reprint of 1929 edition); and J.M. Gowaskie, "John Mitchell: A Study in Leadership," unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Lunn, "From Trapper Boy," especially McKay's introduction and footnotes 3 and 4, provides a good overview of historical writings about and interpretations of the PWA including recent re-evaluations. On the UMWA-PWA struggle see items cited in note 1.

<sup>8</sup> Evidently the 1909-11 union minutes of the Springhill miners are located in the Angus L. Macdonald Library of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish (see McKay, "Workers' Control in Springhill," fn. 15).

<sup>9</sup> These are located in Public Archives of Canada, MG26, J, William Lyon Mackenzie King Papers, part 1, vol. 15, 14190-200 and vol. 18, 16645-49 and 16651-55.

<sup>10</sup> P. Craven, *'An Impartial Umpire': Industrial Relations and the Canadian State 1900-1911* (Toronto 1980), 269; Public Archives of Canada, MG26, J, William Lyon Mackenzie King Papers, part 1, vol. 7, 6246-51, King to Lewis, 31 May 1907, and Lewis to King, 7 June 1907, vol. 7, 6634, J. Sharp to King, 3 August 1907; vol. 15,

Reid. By 1903 she was working for the UMWA, a position she held until at least 1907. It seems likely that she sided with the Mitchell forces within the Mine Workers, that she was on poor terms with T.L. Lewis after he became president, and that therefore, sometime between 1908 and 1910, she went to work for the Mining Investigation Commission of Illinois whose secretary was John Walker, a UMWA executive member and opponent of Lewis. She seems to have been a dynamic, opinionated woman. According to Joseph Sharp, a UMWA organizer, Reid relished controversy: "Her and I have our political debates every time we meet. She is a great admirer of President Roosevelt and a thorough Republican — I a Democrat, so you see there is all kinds of room for argument."<sup>11</sup> The correspondence which is here reprinted demonstrates that Reid retained influence within the UMWA. Her knowledge of personalities, of bureaucratic structures and procedures, and her command of information provided her with an effective base of power. Her personality dictated that she was willing to use it. Thus this woman can be seen playing an important role in what has often been viewed as an essentially male occupation.<sup>12</sup> Of course, in reality Reid was hardly a lone female influence. In every strike in the coal fields, for example, the attitudes and actions of women were key factors. Even at UMWA headquarters Reid was not the first woman of note. Elizabeth Catherine Morris, John Mitchell's private secretary, had played an enormous role behind the scenes.<sup>13</sup>

As for King, his relationship with the UMWA and its officials had begun badly as a result of his intervention in the Nanaimo dispute of 1905. However, it had improved markedly with his involvement in the Lethbridge strike of 1906 and the Crow's Nest Pass strike of 1907.<sup>14</sup> Both King and UMWA spokespeople had a relatively high regard for one another by 1907 and although the ardour may have waned somewhat by 1910 there appears to have been little animosity between the two parties by that date. For King the UMWA was a respectable trade union. It seems, however, that he always had qualms about American-based organizations. He probably sympathized, therefore, with the 1909 Cape Breton Board of Investigation majority report which stated that: "Foreign officials sitting at Indianapolis, should not have the power to decree that Nova Scotia miners, even when without a grievance, must stop working, and thereby

---

14185-6 and 14188-9, Reid to King, 3 October 1910, and King to Reid, 15 October 1910; and part 13, "Memorandum re. Industrial Disputes in Crow's Nest Pass and Albertan Coal Fields," G2012.

<sup>11</sup> King Papers, part 1, vol. 7, 6634, Sharp to King, 3 August 1907.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, P.N. Stearns, *Be A Man! Males in Modern Society* (New York 1979), 39. Zola's classic *Germinal* gives women a much more fundamental role in coal mines.

<sup>13</sup> See Gluck, *John Mitchell*, *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> On King and the UMWA see Craven, 'An Impartial Umpire', 241-70. On King's activities in the Lethbridge strike see W.M. Baker, "The Miners and the Mediator: The 1906 Lethbridge Strike and Mackenzie King," *L&T*, 11 (1983), 89-117.

cripple a great Nova Scotia industry."<sup>15</sup> Certainly King had no preference for the UMWA over the PWA. King probably also thought that capital's refusal to deal with the UMWA was legitimate though he recognized that the bare-knuckle manager of the Springhill mine was exceptionally unskilled in dealing with his workers even considering the financial pressure being placed on the company by declining markets and changing economic structures. But however King assessed rights and wrongs in the Springhill conflict, it was a situation that was intensely embarrassing to him. It raised searching questions about the efficacy and fairness of his Industrial Disputes Investigation Act and it brought political criticism both to him personally and to the government of which he was a member. Thus King was hardly a *disinterested observer of the Springhill strike*, however he might attempt to present himself in his letters. In fact, his emphasis on the intransigence of the mine manager and on the "rabid fanatics" among the strikers may be seen as a rationalization which enabled him to believe that exceptional personalities had made a mockery of his scheme for industrial peace.

The documents which follow can be interpreted in various ways depending on the perspective of the reader. They may be seen to illustrate King and Reid selling out the Springhill miners. They may be taken to show the pair's concern for the welfare of working-class families irrespective of the question of the power and prestige of particular organizations. And so forth. But whatever else, the documents demonstrate that even in an age of increasing collectivism the personal touch was still important. The precise influence of the initiatives taken by King and Reid are difficult to determine. On the one hand there were powerful reasons, particularly financial, for the UMWA to call off the strike. *On the other hand, it was only with a new president, one with whom Miss Reid had at least indirect influence, that UMWA support for the Springhill strikers became threatened.* More importantly, the activities of Reid and King, taken together with the examples provided by other persons referred to in the letters, demonstrate the general argument that however potent the "great forces" are in industrial relations, individuals retain a significance that should not be underestimated.

*Personal*

Ottawa, November 1, 1910.

My dear Miss Reid:

I have had it in mind for some time past to write to someone whom I thought might be in a position to take up confidentially with Mr. Lewis or the Executive of the United Mine Workers' Association the situation at Springhill N.S., but have refrained doing so lest my purpose in so doing might not be wholly

<sup>15</sup> *Labour Gazette*, 9 (1909), 1231.

understood. Happily [sic] you have come into my mind, and I have felt that I could write you without any fear of misunderstanding, and that you would know what it was most in the interests of all parties concerned to do.

The situation in brief is this: over a year ago — to be precise, thirteen months<sup>16</sup> — the United mine workers at Springhill, N.S. went on strike. A strike was declared about the same time at Glace Bay.<sup>17</sup> This latter strike lasted some five or six months, but was practically settled at the end of last year. The strike at Springhill, however, has continued ever since, and I believe at the moment there are a thousand or more miners still out. We are approaching another winter, and the condition of these men and their families is one which appeals strongly to me. They have gone through one winter of privation and thirteen months of idleness. You will not need any words from me to explain what this must mean to home life and to the future of the lives of all concerned.

The Springhill Mines are owned by the Cumberland Railway and Coal Company, of which Mr. J.R. Cowans<sup>18</sup> is the manager. Mr. Cowans, unfortunately, owns a controlling interest in the stock of the company. But for this circumstance a different manager might have been appointed some years ago. Cowans is a man of the type of which fortunately there are not many in this world. He is prepared to be generous at times and has been so on many occasions in the past, in dealing with his men, but he is full of obstinacy and once he becomes set in a particular position, would be prepared to ruin himself financially rather than yield. He is so prepared in the matter of granting recognition to the United Mine Workers, or in meeting the demand that is at present made upon him. This I think you may take to be the case beyond any possibility of doubt, and it is something which I think the United Mine Workers' organization ought to take carefully into account. I have no love for Cowans, in fact I have a wholesome contempt for him in many things, but in the situation as it is at Springhill his personality is a factor which in justice to all concerned should be considered.

The position as I see it, resolves itself clearly into this: the United Mine Workers can never hope to win at Springhill. If the strike is kept up for five years they will not win. In the meantime the nature of many of the men concerned in the difficulty is undergoing a very serious change. Some of the men have become rabid fanatics, having lost all peace of mind so far as they themselves are concerned and the capacity of giving happiness to the members

<sup>16</sup> In fact it was closer to fifteen months.

<sup>17</sup> The Glace Bay strike commenced one month prior to the one at Springhill.

<sup>18</sup> According to H.J. Morgan's *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto 1912), 268, John R. Cowans had been Managing Director of Cumberland Coal and Railway Company since 1889, he was a great patron of the turf and formerly an owner of many fast horses, he was a Presbyterian, and in 1910 he moved from Springhill to Montreal, where he was a member of the St. James Club. Evidence of Cowans' talent for exciting labour unrest is found in many of the primary sources and in McKay's introduction to Lunn "From Trapper Boy," pp. 220-1, and in McKay, "Workers' Control in Springhill," 27-30 *et passim*.

of their families. The latter are becoming hardened and depressed in spirit. I can see in the whole situation only great injustice to the women and children concerned to say nothing of the men as well.

I know that from this point of view the situation will appeal to you, and I think it will appeal greatly to Mr. Lewis and other thoughtful members of the Executive. My purpose in writing you is that if you think it wise to do so, you should let these facts be known, and see, unless there are strong reasons why such a course should not be taken, whether some way cannot be found to terminate the difficulty. I am afraid it is just possible, in the vain hope of ultimately succeeding, reports have been sent in to the executive which would lead its members to believe that there was an ultimate chance of winning if the fight could be kept up, and possibly this point of view has gained strength from the endorsement of the position of the United Mine Workers by some of the labour organizations of the Dominion. Any one, however, who knows the personnel of the company and the present situation in Nova Scotia will, I think, be able to assure you that what I am now saying is quite correct.

Mr. P.M. Draper,<sup>19</sup> secretary of the Dominion Trades and Labour Congress, who, at the last congress was among the number of those who endorsed the action of the United Mine Workers, will be visiting the States shortly, and will probably be seeing Mr. Lewis. Draper is a man in whose judgment I place great confidence. I would like Mr. Lewis to talk over the situation privately with him. Whatever position some of the organizations have publicly taken, Mr. Draper will, I think, be able to assure you that their members will be among the first to privately admit that it would be much in the interests of all concerned to have the difficulty at Springhill brought to a close, and that if this is to be done it will have to be done through the United Mine Workers, and that nothing can be hoped for from the Company's standpoint.

Let me add that I think there are strong reasons why the United Mine Workers' Executive, in its own interests, should look carefully into the situation. The struggle at Springhill is doing the Mine Workers no good. It is only helping to convey to the people of Eastern Canada an entirely wrong impression as to its nature and purpose. The organization owes it to itself to see that its standing in Canada is not permanently embarrassed through a situation which in the end it cannot hope to come out of successfully.

This letter, you understand, is both personal and private. So far as the Government is concerned, we have long since regarded the dispute as one between two parties, with which we are no longer concerned. Neither the Provincial nor the Dominion Government intends to take any steps toward further interference one way or the other, so that this letter is in no way written

<sup>19</sup> P.M. (Paddy) Draper, employee of Government Printing Bureau in Ottawa, President, local 102, International Typographical Union, 1893-1920 and 1928-1943; Secretary-Treasurer, Trades and Labour Congress, 1900-1935; and President, TLC, 1935-1939 (see M. Lazarus, *Up From the Ranks: Trade Union VIPs Past and Present* [n.p. 1977], 38).



with a view of relieving either Government of any responsibility. A stand has been publicly taken and will continue to be publicly adhered to. If I could be helpful in the situation privately, either directly or indirectly through members of the Nova Scotia Government or otherwise, I would of course be only too glad to do so, but candidly I must confess that it seems to me the United Mine Workers alone can deal with the situation, and that so far as the good offices of third parties are concerned, even exerted privately, they can do but little one way or the other.

Will you not, if you think well of it, talk over this matter with Mr. Lewis, at the same time assuring Mr. Lewis that I do not wish, either directly or indirectly, to influence his judgment one way or the other. I am only anxious that he should see the situation as it is, having little doubt in my own mind as to what, under the circumstances it will seem reasonable for him to do. All I desire is to make one appeal before the approach of winter, on behalf of the men, women and children whose voices may be, perhaps, unheard, to save them, if they can be saved, from all that may be involved through a prolongation of the present struggle, through having to endure through another winter, in addition to its hardships, what in agony of mind and soul, to say nothing of physical discomfort, they may be further forced to endure through a prolongation of the dispute.<sup>20</sup>

With kind regards.  
Yours sincerely,  
(S'G'D.) W.L. MACKENZIE KING.

Miss Harriet [sic] Reid  
c/o Mining Investigation Commission of Illinois,  
317 Fisher Building,  
Chicago, Ill.

---

*Personal & Private*

Chicago, November 5, 1910.

My dear Mr. King:

Your letter of the 1st instant received and read with the closest interest. I have believed from the first that the strike at Springhill was a most grievous mistake, and this opinion is shared by many of the officials of the Mine Workers.<sup>21</sup> At

<sup>20</sup> The inference that might be drawn from King's words is that support for the strike was weakening. In fact the evidence suggests that the men, their families and the community were all solidly behind the strike.

<sup>21</sup> As early as August 1909, John Mitchell wrote to Miss Reid expressing doubt about the wisdom of the UMWA policy in Nova Scotia (see Mitchell Papers, Mitchell to Reid, 9 August 1909, in reel 16 of the microfilm edition). I am indebted to Ian McKay for drawing this item to my attention.

the special convention held in Indianapolis, Aug. 11-20th, the Nova Scotia situation was brought up and very bitterly discussed. Several district officials in speeches to the convention brought out the fact that over a million dollars had been expended in Nova Scotia where there was already a labor organization, the PWA, and that since April 1st, 1910 to that date, August, \$236,000 had been sent there, while men, women and children in Illinois, Pennsylvania and the Southwest (these districts were on strike since April 1st) went hungry because the district treasuries were exhausted and the national treasury almost exhausted. Mr. Lewis' policy in carrying on a strike in Nova Scotia under these circumstances was much criticised. In reply, Mr. McCullough,<sup>22</sup> who was in Nova Scotia for months carrying on an investigation, spoke of the "brotherhood of man" which should recognize no boundaries, declared that it would be a monumental blunder to give up the fight after these long months, and that if the Mine Workers could get a foothold there, the victory for unionism was won. The delegates from Nova Scotia spoke in the same strain, bringing out the fact of the tyranny of the Superintendent. Inasmuch as the International Executive Board, acting on reports of investigations made, had endorsed the strike some time previous, and no motion was made concerning the Nova Scotia situation, no action was taken by the convention, but matters were left as before: the strike still to be carried on, the National to furnish financial assistance.

You suggest that I talk this matter over with Mr. Lewis. Mr. Lewis has absolutely no use for me, and I frankly confess that I regard him as that most dangerous type of man — a self-deluded labor demagogue. Even were I on the friendliest terms with him, it would be useless to endeavor to change his opinion about the wisdom of carrying on a strike not only sanctioned but investigated by himself (he visited Nova Scotia in June, 1909 — prior to the Springhill strike, but he was probably told of the situation there). Take for example this: Two years ago, the miners went on strike at Leyden, a little camp about 10 miles from Denver. I was in Denver during the convention of the American Federation of Labor, and one Saturday afternoon boarded a car for a ride, going to the end of the line, which turned out to be Leyden. Immediately upon getting off, I was accosted by a deputy sheriff. I replied honestly enough that I was out for a ride and would now walk up the foot-hill just beyond. Halfway up, I discovered that I could look right down into the coal shaft. I walked about, I counted the men who came out, I talked to the deputies, and when I returned to Denver I was able to tell accurately how many men were working, how many tons of coal were gotten out — even giving the number of loaded cars I saw on the track — in fact, such information as would convince any reasonable person that the strike was hopelessly lost. (This in view of the

<sup>22</sup> Edward S. McCullough, elected International Vice President of the UMWA in 1909. "Politically though not a member of the socialist party, he has strong leanings toward its principles" (*UMW Journal*, 11 February 1909, 4).

unorganized condition of Colorado.) I told this to Mr. Lewis and the Colorado officials, who, of course, were not permitted near Leyden and consequently could obtain no direct information, but Mr. Lewis replied that he had been carrying on strikes for years and that defeat wasn't in his vocabulary. Consequently, that strike was carried on while the Company got out its normal production, the union men were supported for months, and then the strike declared off. The men were worse off, because the Company was now more arrogant than ever, and the National was out thousands of dollars most unwisely expended.

Because the organization was not firmly established in Canada during Mr. Mitchell's term of office, Mr. Lewis considers that he failed. For him to succeed there would prove, he reasons, that he excelled in executive ability and as a labor leader. Mr. Lewis desires, of course, to receive favorable reports from Nova Scotia.

Do you recall the letter you wrote Mr. Mitchell relative to Mr. Gibson?<sup>23</sup> You made a statement akin to this: "I was amazed when I saw the type of man sent as your representative to direct any body of men in so important a crisis as a strike." Had you been at Glace Bay when the investigators were there, Mr. King, you would have been further amazed. It is this sending of unworthy men to take charge of affairs — these trucklers, these spineless jelly-fish who will not make a careful report or who will report as they are wanted to report — that is one of the crying shames of labor unions!

It may do some good for Mr. Draper to have a personal conversation with Mr. Lewis. I doubt it very much, but it is worth the effort. I am going to do this: Frank Farrington,<sup>24</sup> Board Member from Illinois, whom I have known well for several years, has just been assigned by the Int'l Ex. Board (which met last week) to Nova Scotia to make an investigation of conditions there. He is not the man who should have been sent there, but I shall write him and do what I can to have him make a thorough investigation based on hard facts.

I presume you now regret that you wrote me, in view of my inability to take the matter up with Mr. Lewis. It is my honest opinion, however, that the chances are equally as good for my being able to do something. It is altogether probable that in the near future a combination of circumstances will develop

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Gibson, a UMWA organizer, had been involved in the Nanaimo strike of 1905, had attempted to thwart King's mediation of that strike, had written to UMWA headquarters castigating King, and had thereby created an anti-King attitude in the minds of John Mitchell, then UMWA president, and other executive members. King was able to overcome the hostility of Mitchell *et al.* in 1906. See Craven, 'An Impartial Umpire', 256-64; and Baker, "The Miners and the Mediator," *passim*.

<sup>24</sup> Frank Farrington's rise within the UMWA had been in alliance with and had been promoted by John Mitchell. After World War I he was a powerful but unsuccessful opponent of John L. Lewis within the UMWA. See Van Tine, *The Making of the Labor Bureaucrat*, 89; and M. Dubofsky and W. Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York 1977), *passim*.

that will enable this Nova Scotia situation to be understood as it really exists. The moment this happens, I shall take advantage of it.

I fully appreciate the fact that you have no connection with this matter, and I shall consider your letter both personal and private. I shall use the information you sent in such a manner as not to implicate you in the remotest degree.

With kindest regards, believe me,

Very truly yours,  
Harriett Reid.

Mr. W.L. Mackenzie King,  
Ottawa, Canada.

On second thought, I'm sending copy of letter written Mr. Farrington, that you may know just how I've transmitted the information.

*Copy*

Chicago, Nov. 5, 1910.

My dear Mr. Farrington:

I hear that the International Executive Board has assigned you to Nova Scotia to investigate conditions there. (I take it that the climate is too severe for the Siamese Twins<sup>25</sup> or E.S.<sup>26</sup> to make a winter trip there.)

I wonder what instructions were given you and what latitude you're allowed. (Perhaps you realize now that you should have come to Chicago and made a personal report; it would have spared you this letter!) Are you to remain in Glace Bay at the district office, discussing the labor situation and making out the strike envelopes, or are you to proceed to Spring Hill [sic] and make a real, live, honest investigation of conditions, not as they *should* exist (which report has already been turned in by Bousfield<sup>27</sup> and McC.<sup>28</sup>) but as they *do* exist?

You know my opinion of that strike — a great mistake in judgment to begin it, and sinful obstinacy to keep it up. There was much talk during the special convention about the million dollars expended there. Of course your first step will be to ascertain what has actually been accomplished by this vast expenditure. Secondly — oh well, now that I've begun, I might just as well map out your course of procedure. No, don't bother to thank me — I like to do it!

2. Is that mine working full capacity?

(a) Normal capacity. (Figures, please.)

<sup>25</sup> Individuals unknown.

<sup>26</sup> Probably E.S. McCullough rather than Ellis Searles, the editor of the *UMW Journal*.

<sup>27</sup> Henry (perhaps Harry) Bousfield was a member of the International Board, *UMWA*. See Moore, "The 1909 Strike," 96-7; and I. Abella and D. Millar, eds., *The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto 1978), 50.

<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly McCullough.

(b) Number of tons produced now. (Figures again.)

3. Length of time working full or reduced capacity?
4. Attitude of strikers.
5. Attitude of company.
6. Attitude of citizens.

(These last three questions are to be answered — not from information given by the district officials, or the postmaster at Springhill, one preacher, one priest or one of the worthy, reputable citizens, but from the majority of the strikers, the officials of the company and as many other citizens as you can possibly meet. If you will *implicitly* follow this suggestion, you will have the distinction of presenting a *unique* report.)

You many already know that Mr. Cowans is the manager of the Cumberland Railway and Coal Company, operating the Springhill mine. He also controls the majority of the stock, so can go on electing himself manager as long as he likes. I understand he is bitterly opposed to the UMWA, and is so obstinate — a second Alex. Howat,<sup>29</sup> in fact, no further comment needed — that he'd rather go bankrupt than yield. Not a good prospect for winning is it, if, as they say, the mine is working at full capacity? Too bad, I think, that Cowans and Lewis can't personally fight out this contest of obstinacy instead of those 1,000 strikers. The people in that vicinity, I understand, are opposed to the Mine Workers, in all probability regarding the organization as a foreign invader. With this public sentiment, the fight is bound to be uphill. And the striking men themselves — what of them after this year of idleness? The natural loafers must now be ruined for life, while the industrious man will have contracted habits of sloth that will take months to overcome. And the women and children, in the face of the awful winters they have in that country, what of them? What miserable pittance per week is now being paid the strikers? Say, for example, you realized that the strike was hopelessly lost, yet felt that the strikers could not be deserted. (This, I believe you will find to be the truth.) Is there a union camp close by — or rather several of them — to which these men could be transported, as is done here in this country? If so, this would be the wise course to follow, would it not? In the words of Patrick Henry, the time has come when we should no longer stand here idle. Gentlemen may cry "Win, Win" but is there any hope of winning? And that sentiment that is presumedly the chief asset of labor unions, what of it? Is it *crystallized* at all? Whose favor is it in?

What is the reputation of the Provincial Workmen's Association? How strong is it numerically and financially? If the attitude against the UMWA is unfavorable is this due to its being "foreign" or to its presumed purpose to displace the PWA?

Facts, facts, facts, Sir, and "documentary evidence"!

<sup>29</sup> Howat, president of UMWA District 14 (Kansas) has been characterized as "ram-bunctious, argumentative, and tempestuous." See Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 32 *et passim*.

I would wager anything that you proceeded prosaically to Nova Scotia, instead of poetically following in the footsteps of Evangeline. Well, I may be able to forgive you that, but if you bring in a whitewashed report ——— language fails me.

Sincerely yours,  
[Harriett Reid.]

Do you know, if I were investigating conditions at Springhill, I'd live right with one of the union families, on the weekly sum given by the organization? Ye gods, what opportunity for a regular human document of a report!

---

*Personal*

January 25, 1911.

My dear Mr. King:

I write to ask if you have any later information concerning the Springhill strike that you could give me. The miners' annual convention is now in session at Columbus, Ohio, and will consider the strike situations some time next week.

If the convention had more than one side of this Springhill situation, I have no doubt that the delegates would insist that a committee be appointed by the convention to investigate affairs there, action to be based on the findings.

Mr. Farrington, Executive Board member, who went to Nova Scotia in November, was authorized only to ascertain the validity of some financial accounts. He informed me that Mr. Cowans had resigned and gone to Montreal, that the mines were working half-capacity,<sup>30</sup> and that the strikers were better provisioned than in most cases.

Any information that I had would be given out with the understanding that under no circumstances was your name to be connected with it.

This is a good opportunity to have the Springhill situation receive full consideration.

With best wishes, I remain,

Very truly yours,  
Harriett Reid.

Mr. W.L. Mackenzie King,  
Ottawa, Canada.

---

<sup>30</sup> My calculations indicate that this was an overestimate.

*Personal*

Ottawa, Jan. 30, 1911.

My dear Miss Reid, -

I have not had an opportunity of answering your letter of the 25th instant before this, as it was only today that I was able to get into personal communication with Mr. Butler,<sup>31</sup> the new Manager of the Springhill mines. I knew he was coming to Ottawa on other business and thought the occasion would be opportunity to secure the latest information from headquarters.

I might mention that Mr. Butler was Deputy Minister of Railways and Canals while I was Deputy Minister of Labour, and that having been colleagues in this way, we have an intimate friendship of some years standing. Mr. Butler did not hesitate to speak to me very frankly. What he says in brief is that the Dominion Iron and Steel Company<sup>32</sup> has secured a controlling interest in the Mines at Springhill and that he is now the Manager of that concern, Mr. Cowans no longer having any say, one way or the other. Cowans, in fact has left Springhill altogether and is now residing in Montreal.

Mr. Butler says he has at present about 600 men working. Practically all of them have been brought in since the strike commenced. He has recently proposed an arrangement which he thinks will get over what has been one of the main difficulties respecting the allowances to be made for stone and which will mean an increase in the wages of the most poorly paid labour, though it may involve a reduction in some cases of men highly paid. He purposes allowing as many as he can of those who are out on strike to return and take advantage of the new proposal he has submitted provided they are willing to do so. He would not be able for about a month to take on more than 100 men should the strike be immediately declared off this number being necessary to clean up the mine, but later he would be able to add considerable to this number. If the men now out do not take advantage of the situation he proposes sending to Scotland and bringing out miners from that country. As a matter of fact, I think he has already entered into negotiations which have paved the way for something of the kind.

He says that on no condition will he concede recognition to the United Mine Workers; that the fight having lasted as long as it has he and his Company

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Joseph Butler, civil engineer; Deputy Minister and Chief Engineer, Department of Railways and Canals, 1905-1910; member of Rideau Club, Ottawa; Chairman, Board of Management, Canadian Government Railways, 1909-1910; afterwards General Manager, Dominion Steel and Coal Co. According to the *Toronto News*, Butler "possesses keen business instincts, systematic methods of work and all the firmness of the disciplinarian." See Morgan, *Canadian Men*, 180-1.

<sup>32</sup> King was using a slightly outdated name. When the Dominion Iron and Steel Company had amalgamated with (taken over) the Dominion Coal Company at the end of 1909 the name had been changed to the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation. See Moore, "The 1909 Strike," 15.

would close up the mines altogether rather than do that, though they feel they are now in a position to bring in enough men to enable them to work the mines successfully.

There are still at Springhill some thirty members of the Canadian Mounted Rifles who are kept there at the expense of the local authorities. In this country it is the Provincial not the Federal Government which has to assist the municipality in the event of it being found necessary to call in the militia in aid of the civil authorities. He does not think that these men will be required much longer, and expects to have them withdrawn very shortly.

He mentioned to me that a great many of the thousand men at Springhill who are out on strike own their own homes, and that this with the liberal assistance they have received from the United Mine Workers accounts for the reason why so many of them have remained in the town and not moved away.

I spoke to him about Mr. Farrington and asked if he knew of his having been at Springhill. He said that he had and that though he had not met him personally all of the men in the Company who had come in contact with him spoke very highly of him. Mr. Butler seemed to have a high opinion of him and of the evident fairness he displayed when looking into matters some time ago.

I need only add that knowing Mr. Butler as I do, I feel sure that every representation he has made to me is strictly accurate, and that what he has said will be carried out. In other words, I am quite sure that if the United Mine Workers were to decide on continuing the strike at Springhill for another three years they would find themselves as respects the Company's attitude towards the organization in precisely the same position at the end of that time as they are at the present moment. I told Mr. Butler when he was speaking to me that I would probably be questioned in Parliament about the situation at Springhill, and that I, therefore, wished to be accurately informed both as to the present position and the Company's intentions, and what he said to me was given with the understanding that I might repeat his statement as a responsible Minister of the Crown. You have, therefore, I think the most positive assurances that I believe it is possible to give as to the attitude of the Company and the probable outcome of the present dispute.

The other phases of the situation are just as I wrote you in my last letter only that we are now in the middle of winter instead of at the beginning. I really feel that you will be not only doing the United Mine Workers a great service, but will be rendering the working people of Springhill an even greater service, if you can in any way succeed in bringing this unfortunate difficulty to a speedy termination.

With kindest regards,

Believe me, always,  
Yours very sincerely,  
(S'G'D.) W.L. MACKENZIE KING



Miss Harriet [sic] Reid  
Mining Investigation Commission of Illinois,  
317 Fisher Building, Chicago.

P.S. I sent you tonight the following telegram which I now beg to confirm:-

"Have written you today. Situation at S still as described in last letter. Representations made to you by F wholly correct. Outlook for future no different from that already outlined."

*Personal*

February 27, 1911.

My dear Mr. King:

The Committee on Resolutions reported the following substitute for the various resolutions dealing with the several strikes:

"Be it Resolved: That this, the 22nd Annual Convention of the United Mine Workers of America in convention assembled, continue their moral and financial support to the strikes now on in Colorado, Nova Scotia, the Irwin Field, Pennsylvania, and Tuscarawas field, Ohio, realizing that a great struggle is being made by the brave men, women and children in this battle for human rights as well as for better conditions and higher wages."

This resolution was adopted as read.

All the information that I had received concerning the Springhill strike was in the possession of President-elect White<sup>33</sup> at the time this resolution was introduced, but I presume that under the circumstances no other action was feasible.

The International Executive Board held a meeting after the adjournment of the convention, but no action relative to the Springhill strike was taken. I understand that Mr. Lewis will call another board meeting for March 15th, but I anticipate no action on this strike being taken then, inasmuch as Mr. White will take office on April 1st. Therefore, so far as the organization is concerned, the Springhill strike will remain as it is, at least until April 1st.

I have talked the matter over thoroughly with Mr. Farrington, and he tells me that he will have the subject taken up at the board meeting to be held April

<sup>33</sup> John P. White, President, UMWA, 1911-17. He was a regular correspondent of Mitchell. John H. Walker, President of UMWA District 12 (Illinois), member and secretary of the Mining Investigation Commission of Illinois, though not an ally of White (and ran against him for president in 1915) was linked with White in common opposition to T.L. Lewis. Since Miss Reid evidently worked for the Commission she may have used Walker as an additional link to White aside from her connection to Farrington and her own direct association. Walker and White were early patrons of John L. Lewis. See Van Tine, *The Making of the Labor Bureaucrat*, 171-2; and Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 23-5 *et passim*.

1st, using his influence to have a capable committee sent to Springhill to investigate conditions, with the object of bringing about a settlement. Before this meeting takes place, I shall probably have an opportunity to take the matter up personally with Mr. White and the Vice-President, whom I know very well and for whose honesty and fairness I entertain a high regard.

It occurs to me that it might be possible for you to arrange a conference between Mr. Butler and this committee. I am led to hope by the mere fact that Mr. Butler is a friend of yours that he, too, is broad-minded and ready to exert every effort to ascertain the real causes for the trouble at Springhill. I did not suggest this course to Mr. Farrington, because I thought it best to consult you on the subject first. Mr. Butler, of his own inclination or in accord with the outlined policy of the Company, may decline to meet the committee on the ground that this would in a manner be recognizing the union. This position is tenable, but hardly conducive to bringing about peace between the parties affected. This idea of a conference is not prompted by the desire "to save the face" of the organization, but to relieve the situation of the men on strike. Whether right or wrong, the strikers are placed in a peculiarly embarrassing position because of their owning their own homes and therefore being bound down to the place, yet believing themselves aggrieved and persuaded that they must stay out on strike. Between the two mill-stones of the Company and the Union, they are being crushed into a helpless, almost hopeless pulp.

I was discussing with Mr. Farrington the probability, under Mr. White's administration, of reconciling the differences between the Provincial Workmen and the United Mine Workers. The impression is prevalent here that Mr. Moffatt<sup>34</sup> is in league with the operators; but I heard through a friend of Mr. Moffatt's another version which led me to believe that he was misrepresented. In the event a committee is sent to Springhill, its authority should be broadened sufficiently to make a complete investigation of the conflict with the PWA. That controversy, like the Springhill strike, will not adjust itself, and something definite should be done at the earliest possible moment.

[ . . . ]

Very truly yours,  
Harriett Reid.

Hon. W.L. Mackenzie King,  
Minister of Labour,  
Ottawa, Canada.

---

<sup>34</sup> John Moffat succeeded Robert Drummond as Grand Secretary (and leader) of the Provincial Workmen's Association in 1898. Scattered information on Moffat is located in MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*; Moore, "The 1909 Strike"; and Forsey, *Economic and Social Aspects*.

Ottawa, Mar. 9, 1911.

My dear Miss Reid,-

I have delayed replying to your letter of the 27th ultimo until I had opportunity of a further conversation with Mr. Butler. He was expected in Ottawa about the time your letter was received, but, as a matter of fact, arrived here only the day before yesterday. I saw and had a talk with him about the Springhill situation. I did not, of course, mention my correspondence with you, but spoke more particularly about the conference with a committee of the United Mine Workers. Mr. Butler said to me that personally he felt that it was all nonsense not to meet anyone who might wish to see him, either individually or collectively. In the matter, however, of meeting a committee of United Mine Workers, his hands were tied in accordance with the outlined policy of the Company. He agreed that it was a narrow and might prove an expensive policy, but the shareholders had taken a stand on this point which they had maintained for nearly a year and a half in the face of considerable financial loss and he did not see how he could well depart from the policy as given to him at the time he took control. What he said in this connection had reference more particularly to the committee of the men on strike at the present time. I am inclined to think, however, from what he said otherwise, that if any committee of men were to visit Springhill for the purpose of investigating conditions there and came to him with a view of discussing the situation, he would be only too ready to go very fully into the whole situation with them. He entertains, as I had mentioned in a previous letter, a very high opinion for Mr. Farrington, and I think any committee coming with the ostensible purpose of getting at the facts of the situation from all sides might rely on being able to have with Mr. Butler a pretty full discussion of the situation.

As to John Moffat, my own opinion of him is that he is thoroughly honest. I have known him a good many years and know men who have had dealings with him. He has a good deal of Scotch stubbornness in his nature which makes him unyielding in a position that he once takes up, but as to his integrity I do not think there can be any question. Certainly, I do not regard him as in league with the operators in any way.

[ . . . ]

With kind regards,

Believe me,

Yours sincerely,

(S'G'D.) W.L. MACKENZIE KING.

Miss Harriett Reid,  
Mining Investigation Commission of Illinois,  
317 Fisher Building,  
Chicago, Ill.

---

*The author gratefully acknowledges the research support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation.*