

The Coalminers and Their "Red" Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936

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Volume 22, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt22art03>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

The amalgamated mine workers of Nova Scotia (AMW) was a communist led union of coal miners that broke away from the established United Mine Workers of America (UMW) in the early depression years, at a time when only communists called for trade union militance. The new union adopted principles of extreme rank-and-file democracy and radical resistance to company demands for wage cuts. It held the allegiance of the majority of miners in the province for several years, but its rival, the UMW, was supported by the coal company and the government. Moreover, the AMW never carried out its threats of a district strike to win recognition. After several years of the dual union situation, the miners saw the necessity of unity in confrontations with the company. In addition, the UMW was resurgent in the United States and had begun to take a more militant stance. Finally, changes in the policy of the Communist Party caused it to press for reunification. In rejoining the UMW, however, the miners were obliged to surrender many of their aspirations for district autonomy and inner-union democracy.

Cite this article

Earle, M. J. (1988). The Coalminers and Their "Red" Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 22, 99-138.

The Coalminers and Their “Red” Union:

The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936

Michael Earle

Our aim is to accept the full product of our labour. Of course, that will make us “reds”, won’t it, whereas the UMW of A is satisfied with the exploiters paying us as much as they can afford out of the product of labour, just as if it were a divine right for the existence of exploiters.¹

SO WROTE A MILITANT MEMBER of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia (AMW) in a 1932 letter to the *Glace Bay Gazette*. That year the men of this new union were confident of driving the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) out of Nova Scotia, and many of these miners were unashamedly “red.” The preamble to the AMW constitution called on all workers to:

... aim at the abolition of the wage system as their ultimate goal, by taking over the raw material, the machinery of production, and the means of distribution and convert same to render service to all humanity, instead of the present economic system of production for profits only, for the non-producing owning class, and the exploitation of the producing non-owning class. We firmly believe that the capitalist system can no more function efficiently, and that we can expect only intensified exploitation and unemployment, with all the misery and privations that follow in its wake until a new system is ushered in which will economically emancipate the workers from wage slavery which robs them at the point of production.²

It has been argued that the AMW was not really a communist union, since it was “an indigenous movement, with its roots in the conditions of the times, and the leadership provided by the miners themselves.”³ So it was, but this

¹Letter from Wm. Pilling, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 22 December 1932.

²Constitution of the AMW, in UMWA Papers, Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS).

³Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers* (Toronto 1976) p. 170.

Michael J. Earle, “The Coalminers and Their “Red” Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 99-137.

does not mean it was not communist-led. The leaders of the union were miners, but they were miners very much under the influence of communist ideas, and a leading handful were party members. If to be a communist union implies communist "control," and undemocratic domination over the affairs of the union by the party, then the AMW does not fit the stereotype. Yet communists did provide most of the leadership of the AMW throughout its existence and retained the enthusiastic support of the membership. The AMW, in other words, was both "indigenous" and "red."

It is difficult, however, to assess how much of the AMW's support arose out of miners' acceptance of the communist ideology of class struggle as opposed to a desire for district autonomy. The reasons for support certainly varied greatly in the mining communities, with the direct influence of political radicalism being greatest in Glace Bay. The sentiment for independence from outside control was strong throughout the union, so much so that the communists were never able to achieve their aim of affiliating the AMW to the Workers Unity League (WUL), even though J.B. McLachlan was the national president of that organization. Within the AMW itself there was pressure for decentralization, for considerable autonomy of the locals from the district organization, and the union originated in a strong spirit of rebellion against the direction of Nova Scotian affairs by the UMWA international executive. Most of this emphasis on local control, however, appears to have been motivated by a wish for the freedom to engage in greater militancy, rather than representing some abstract form of local patriotism. And in the conditions prevailing at the time, this union militancy could not but lead towards political radicalism.

Radicalism had long had a following in the mining communities with their history of strikes and sharp class conflict, a history which included confrontations with a large and ruthless corporation and direct state intervention in the form of military occupations.⁴ These were experiences that left many ready to accept the view that capitalism was exploitation and the capitalist state an instrument serving only the interests of the exploiting class. There was a strong tradition of union and community solidarity, but also a history of contention between left and right within the union movement. John L. Lewis's deposing of J.B. McLachlan and the 1923 District 26 executive was still felt as a burning injustice by many miners in the early 1930s.

⁴David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners 1917-1926," Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979; "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," *Acadiensis*, 7 (1977), 3-34; "Class Conflict in the Coal Industry; Cape Breton, 1922," in G.S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976); Donald MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s," *Acadiensis*, 3 (1974), 45-64; as well as popular histories: Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*; John Mellor, *The Company Store* (Toronto 1983).

Despite the solidarity displayed in strikes, the miners' living standards, dependent on a declining coal industry, fell throughout the 1920s.⁵ The sufferings endured in the great strike of 1925 did not avert substantial wage cuts, and a sense of defeat and demoralization weakened radical organization and influence in Cape Breton in the years that immediately followed. One party member wrote in March 1928: "I might as well say we have no branch here now. We have not met since Nov. last ... the miners are in a state of apathy like you never seen."⁶ As the miners' conditions deteriorated further, however, there was renewed response to radical and militant ideas. By the beginning of the 1930s the miners and their families were living in desperate circumstances, and the coming of the worldwide depression had destroyed hope for any early improvement in conditions. Even more devastating than the lowered wage rates was the unemployment and under-employment in the mining communities. Unemployment was widespread, particularly among the younger men, and those miners who were employed worked only one, two, or three shifts a week. When, in the first week of September 1933, all the Glace Bay sub-district mines worked a full week, it made front page headline news.⁷ Employed miners, as well as the unemployed, depended most weeks on relief payments to keep their families alive. Struggles over the methods of payment and the amount paid were frequent.⁸ In Glace Bay relief payments were generally at a slightly higher level than in most Nova Scotia towns because of the pressure exerted on the town council by miners' delegations and demonstrations of the unemployed, but at best the relief enabled people to survive at a bare subsistence level. In 1932 the maximum weekly income to which a family could be subsidized in Glace Bay, regardless of family size, was \$10.00.⁹ This maximum was increased slightly in the following years, but malnutrition, poor clothing, and inadequate heating was the lot of many miners and their families, and combined with this material poverty was the humiliation of living on relief and the fear of further cuts in wages, cuts in relief payments, or complete unemployment if mines were closed.

When the Communist Party entered its "left" phase at the beginning of the depression, it saw the coal mining areas of Nova Scotia as prime targets

⁵Based on Dominion Bureau of Statistics figures, C.B. Wade estimated the 1932 real earnings of miners at 58.6 percent of 1921 earnings. C.B. Wade, *History of the UMW of A District 26*, unpublished manuscript, PANS.

⁶Harry Campbell to Annie Buller, 19 March 1928, Communist Party of Canada (CPC) Papers, MG 28 IV4, M 7378, Public Archives of Canada (PAC).

⁷*Glace Bay Gazette*, 17 November 1933.

⁸*Glace Bay Gazette*, 17 November 1932, 21 May 1934; *Sydney Post Record*, 7 April, 7 July 1933.

⁹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 7 November 1932.

for a revitalized appeal to action.¹⁰ An important step was the establishment of a newspaper aimed at the miners, and in December 1929 the first edition of *The Nova Scotia Miner* was printed in Glace Bay. The new paper declared itself the "organ of District 26 Left Wing Committee." Worked into the paper's masthead, on either side of the emblem of a crossed pick and shovel, was the slogan "Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains."¹¹ Even without this slogan it would have been immediately clear to anyone in Glace Bay that this was a communist newspaper because its editor was J.B. McLachlan. Yet it would also have been understood that it represented a substantial grouping of left-wing miners. In that time and place the close alliance of militant unionism and communism was assumed.

This assumption was partly owing to McLachlan's personal following. Certainly no other miners' leader commanded the respect and popularity he did, but throughout the mines there were other militants with leadership experience at various levels of union activity, who within District 26 constituted what can be termed a left opposition to the right-wing executive board and its supporters. Some of these militant miners were Communist Party members, and while the membership was never very large, party influence went far beyond its membership.

This influence grew in the early 1930s, particularly in Glace Bay, where the popular, communist-led movement included many rank-and-file miners, women, and the young unemployed men. Displayed in all their activities was their aspiration to overcome their helplessness in the face of great economic forces, and their repudiation of politicians and union bureaucrats who cared little about their circumstances. A substantial number, facing the desperate conditions of the depression and influenced by communism, reacted not with despair but with struggle. This strong response to communist ideology led the party centre to regard Glace Bay as an important base, and at almost all times during these years there was at least one full-time party organizer stationed there, men such as Sam Scarlett, A.A. MacLeod, and Phil Luck, and there were also frequent visits from leading party figures such as A.E. Smith, Annie Buller, and Tim Buck.

Communist-led activity mainly took the form of meetings, demonstrations, and protests involving the Unemployed Association, the active AMW Women's Auxiliary, and AMW locals on issues such as unemployment, relief, workman's compensation, rents, and evictions. Almost every week

¹⁰The "Third Period" line was adopted in 1928, well before the economic collapse of 1929, and was not a response to the depression, but resulted from internal politics in the Soviet Union, events in China, and other factors. See Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement From Comintern to Cominform* (Harmondsworth 1975). Although this is true, it does not change the fact that for North American communist activists the policy seemed highly appropriate to depression conditions.

¹¹*Nova Scotia Miner*, 14 December 1929.

delegations appeared before the Glace Bay town council.¹² These protests issued outspoken demands and sought confrontations with authority. In May 1933, for example, unemployed demonstrators led by Rankin MacDonald marched into the town jail demanding to be locked up and fed.¹³ The unemployed youth of Glace Bay were invariably active on the picket lines in any local strike. The greatest coup of the AMW Women's Auxiliary was its preparation of a report which, based on the women's own research, claimed the average daily income per person in miners' families was thirteen cents. This gained considerable attention after A.A. Heaps, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) Member of Parliament from Winnipeg, read out portions of the report in the House of Commons. A Women's Auxiliary resolution, which was published in local newspapers, called Prime Minister Bennett a liar, causing the local Conservative M.P., Finlay MacDonald, to make an angry and threatening public reply, which in turn evoked a defiant response from Mrs. Annie Whitfield, the militant leader of the AMW women.¹⁴

The AMW Women's Auxiliary was the most direct form of communist work among women in Glace Bay. It concentrated on the problems of women as wives and mothers, raising such demands as free school books and the elimination of military cadet corps in the schools, as well as relief issues. Women's Auxiliary "fraternal" delegates attended AMW conventions and spoke at length giving the women's views on union issues. At the May 1933 convention a resolution was proposed to give miners' wives a vote in all contract referendums, a week earlier than the men. The argument advanced was that this would inject more militancy into the vote, since women knew better than men how difficult it was to live on the low wages. The delegates tabled this resolution which provoked an angry response from J.B. McLachlan in the *Nova Scotia Miner*.¹⁵ He had long argued that wives should be given "voice and vote" at union meetings.¹⁶

The Glace Bay communists also engaged in education, performing what they termed propaganda work as distinct from agitation. Frequent public meetings were held, such as one in 1933 at which Sam Scarlett spoke on "What is the Workers Unity League?",¹⁷ or another at which the speaker was McLachlan on "Imperialism."¹⁸ In that same year a "School of Class Warfare" was set up on a farm near Glace Bay, conducted by A.A. MacLeod.¹⁹ There were also communist fund-raising and social events. The "Workers

¹²*Glace Bay Gazette*, 17 November, 15 December 1932, 23 February 1933.

¹³*Glace Bay Gazette*, 11 May 1933.

¹⁴*Nova Scotia Miner*, 15 October 1932; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 18 October, 11 November 1932.

¹⁵*Glace Bay Gazette*, 9 May 1933; *Nova Scotia Miner*, 20 May 1933.

¹⁶*Nova Scotia Miner*, 25 January 1930.

¹⁷Advertisement, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 10 June 1933.

¹⁸Advertisement, *Glace Bay Gazette*, 2 December 1933.

¹⁹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 2 April 1933.

Educational Club" held dances on most Saturday nights.²⁰

Communist influence was most dramatically revealed by the large proportion of the vote that J.B. McLachlan won in the 1933 provincial election, and in the 1935 federal election.²¹ In the 1935 election he ran openly as a Communist Party candidate. His election appeal read:

Miners and steelworkers of Cape Breton, Communism is our hope for the future. Surely we have had plenty of capitalism. A few Communists in the gashouse at Ottawa cannot inaugurate a new system, but if there are any concessions to be wrung from this dying capitalism that can be of use to our class, they could at least ensure these.²²

Four parties put forward candidates, and in the full constituency which included Sydney and New Waterford as well as Glace Bay the results were: Hartigan (Liberal) 10,409; MacDonald (Conservative) 7,335; McLachlan (Communist) 5,365; Morrison (Reconstruction) 5,008. McLachlan's third place result was better than any labour candidate had achieved since his campaign in 1921. In Glace Bay, with 28.1 per cent of the vote, he came a close second to the winning Liberal, who received 29.6 per cent.²³ The size of the Communist vote horrified the local middle class, and for weeks following the election the *Glace Bay Gazette* published the full texts of anti-communist sermons in the town's churches.²⁴

In this election the workers of Glace Bay had displayed their sharp disaffection with the traditional political parties, and there was no effective rival to the Communist Party in working class politics. The newly formed Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) received a little support from UMW right wingers in Glace Bay, men such as Silby Barrett,²⁵ and after J.S. Woodsworth visited the area, the labour poet Dawn Fraser ran as a CCF candidate in the 1933 provincial election, but received a negligible vote compared to McLachlan.²⁶ In the 1935 federal election there was no CCF candidate, but UMW President D.W. Morrison ran for the Reconstruction Party, trailing McLachlan in the poll, particularly in Glace Bay.²⁷ The UMW right-wing supported the CCF in 1933, Reconstruction in 1935, and the CCF again in the late 1930s, indicative of its persistent search for a political counter to communism.

²⁰See advertisements in most issues of the *Nova Scotia Miner*, 1932 and 1933.

²¹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 30 August 1933. McLachlan got 18.4 per cent of the vote.

²²*Nova Scotia Miner*, 27 April 1935.

²³*Glace Bay Gazette*, 15 October 1935. William White, "Left Wing Politics and Community: A Study of Glace Bay 1930-1940," M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1978, breaks down the vote showing that McLachlan had substantial majorities in working-class wards in Glace Bay.

²⁴*Glace Bay Gazette*, 21 October, 4, 11, 18, 25 November 1935.

²⁵*Glace Bay Gazette*, 25 February 1933; *Nova Scotia Miner*, 25 February 1933.

²⁶*Glace Bay Gazette*, 30 August 1933.

²⁷*Glace Bay Gazette*, 15 October 1935.

The most effective ideological opposition to communism did not come from another political party, but from the Antigonish Co-operative Movement. Inspired and led by priests, in particular Dr. Moses Coady, the Antigonish Movement was initially active in promoting producer co-operatives among fishermen in eastern Nova Scotia. Its expansion into industrial Cape Breton in the early 1930s represented a concerted effort to counteract the spread of communism among the miners and other workers. In Sydney in early 1932, at the annual Catholic Rural and Industrial Life Conference, sponsored by the Archdiocese of Antigonish, Alex S. MacIntyre gave an influential speech on the alarming spread of communism among the workers and the Church's weak response.²⁸ The first Cape Breton office of the St. Francis Xavier Extension Department was established in Glace Bay in August 1932.²⁹ MacIntyre, an ex-communist and the UMW Vice-President in the deposed 1923 executive, became the principal organizer for the co-operative movement in Cape Breton.

The Antigonish Movement's programme of adult education and the building of credit unions and consumer co-operatives appeared to be very radical on various social issues, but directly contradicted communist ideas on class struggle.³⁰ There were millennial aspects to both the communism of this period and the co-operative movement, each speaking of an imminent and fundamental transformation of the life of the people and the creation of a new and better society. The proletarian revolution, however, was to involve a protracted, bitter, and inevitably violent struggle with dying capitalism, whereas the co-operative movement in its early stage promised adherents an easier and more rapid change to the new Jerusalem. Both communists and co-operators pointed to the failures and the injustice of capitalism and called on the workers themselves to become "masters of their own destiny," but where communists led workers to face the capitalist system with "clenched fists" to "demand a living," the co-operative movement claimed to offer the workers a peaceful, non-confrontational method of self help through their power as consumers. But the co-operative movement, though such a strong ideological opponent to communism, did not intervene directly in electoral politics or the trade union movement in the early 1930s, and there the communists showed remarkable strength.³¹

Communist influence was greatest in Glace Bay, which held the largest concentration of miners in the province, and the general communist strength

²⁸Gregory Baum, "Social Catholicism in Nova Scotia," in Peter Slater, ed., *Religion and Culture in Canada* (Waterloo 1977).

²⁹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 19 August 1932.

³⁰See M.M.Coady, *Masters of Their Own Destiny* (New York 1939).

³¹The St. Francis Xavier Extension Department in later years did begin to play a direct role in the trade union movement with its Labour School. It was not until November 1938, however, that these classes began. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 18 November 1938.

there was indicative of the party's influence in what it undoubtedly considered the main arena, the miners' union movement. The Communist Party's strategy for District 26 had evolved through the years. In the first years of the 1920s, the newly formed Communist Party had called for radical miners to stay within the UMW. This was characteristic of communist trade union policy throughout North America at the time. Following Lenin's precepts in his well known pamphlet "*Left" Wing Communism An Infantile Disorder*, communists were to continue to work within even the most reactionary of unions if that was where most of the workers were to be found. "Red" unionism could lead only to the isolation of the communists and the most militant workers from the bulk of the organized union membership. This policy changed in the later 1920s, however, and by 1929 the Communist Party was calling upon local Cape Breton radicals for an intense effort to replace the UMW in District 26 with a more militant union.³²

The trade union activity of the Communist Party of Canada has recently begun to be examined in detail at the level of the communists' work in specific unions and among different groups of workers, particularly during the 1930s and 1940s when communists had their greatest impact.³³ Historians engaging in such studies, of course, bring differing perspectives to the task, and assessments vary as to the effectiveness of communists as trade union leaders. Communist priorities in union work altered over time, often reflecting changes in the international policies of the communist movement, and at all times the party hoped to influence workers to participate in a class struggle going far beyond the limited aims of a union representing one group of workers. Detailed study of party members' work in unions, however, gives little support to stereotypes of communists as bad trade unionists who damaged workers' immediate interests by adventurism or constantly disrupted union organizations because of their ideological dogmatism.³⁴ And in

³²See article by Jim Barker, Communist Party Organizer, in the first issue of the *Nova Scotia Miner*, 14 December 1929; Trade Union Thesis of the Communist Party of Canada, Sixth National Convention, 31 May-7 June 1929, MG 28 IV4, Vol. 11, File 26, CPC Papers, PAC.

³³For examples see: Jerry Lembcke and William M. Tattam, *One Union in Wood. A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America* (New York 1984); Jim Green, *Against the Tide. The Story of the Canadian Seamen's Union* (Toronto 1986); John Manley, "Communism and the Canadian Working Class During the Great Depression: The Workers Unity League, 1930-1936," Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984; Allen Seager, "A History of the Mine Workers Union of Canada, 1925-1936," M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1977; Douglas Neil Caldwell, "The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers, District Five, Canada, 1937 to 1956," M.A. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1979.

³⁴Two historians who have written defending the role of the American Communist Party in unions are: Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers* (Bloomington 1980) and James Robert Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue in the American Labor Movement, 1920-1950," Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1975. Both

no case has substance been provided to support the most common allegation of the contemporary opponents of the communists, the charge that they used undemocratic methods in their trade union work. Communist trade unionists were rarely in positions enabling them to exercise bureaucratic power in unions, even assuming that they wished to do so; communist influence among workers most frequently arose as they strove to organize new unions or led rank-and-file movements for greater democracy in established unions.

These generalities hold true for the period in the late 1930s when communists were heavily involved in organizing for the new Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) unions, and for the "left" period of the early 1930s. The AMW provides an example of communist leadership in this earlier period, and of the response of Nova Scotian coal miners in a time in which militant action was urged on by their misery, but discouraged by the powerful economic position of their employer, the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (Dosco).

The emphasis on creating a rival union in District 26 in the early 1930s is usually explained as part of the "left" policy adopted by the Communist Party in trade union work in 1928-1929, a policy inspired by the "Third Period" line of the Comintern, namely that capitalism had entered a period of crisis and class struggle, when the potential for revolutionary upsurge was great. Communists should therefore expose and attack any "class collaborationists" such as social democrats, reformers, and right wing union leaders. To implement this line in Canada the Workers Unity League (WUL) was formed in late 1929, as a "revolutionary" trade union centre, which was to strive to organize the unorganized workers as well as to co-ordinate work within the "reactionary" unions affiliated to the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) or the All Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL).³⁵

The "Third Period" is often characterized by historians as a time in which Communist Parties throughout the world injured their own cause through left excesses. The general indictment of the communist trade union policy in this period, in both the United States and Canada, is that it involved a sudden and inappropriate change in strategy, imposed from without by the Soviet Union and the Comintern, and that it was adventurist and sectarian in tactics, with a dual-union policy that seriously weakened the union movement of the time and ultimately lost rather than gained influence for the Communist Party itself.³⁶ In the most recent book published on the Canadian party it is

describe the communists as having made good trade unionists; but Prickett, in distinction to Keeran, argues that they became "bad" or ineffectual communists in the process, losing sight of their aim of spreading revolutionary consciousness among the workers.

³⁵Ivan Avacumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada. A History* (Toronto 1975), p.134.

³⁶For examples of this view of the American communists see: Daniel Bell, *Marxian Socialism in the United States* (Princeton 1967); Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism* (Princeton 1977); Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York

grudgingly admitted that there were a few WUL successes and some growth of the CP membership during this period, but it is argued that these advances were mainly due to the "sheer desperation" of the unemployed and occurred "in spite of" the sectarian tactics imposed by Stalin and the Comintern.³⁷ Some historians of the labour movement, however, do regard the attempts of communist organizers to build industrial unions in the early 1930s as laying the essential foundation for later CIO successes.³⁸ According even this limited amount of credit to the WUL in Canada is sharply attacked in another account of the party. "The WUL retains an aura of romantic militancy, of hard-fought union battles when the going was tough in the depths of the Depression," writes Ian Angus,³⁹ while in reality:

The Workers Unity League constantly combined a readiness to enter all-out combat, regardless of the balance of forces involved, with a total refusal to seek allies beyond its own ranks. This combination of adventurism and sectarianism led to defeat after defeat. The only lasting achievement of the WUL was the isolation of thousands of left-wing labor militants from the mainstream of Canadian labor.⁴⁰

This evaluation of the WUL is less than just. It is true that depression conditions created a balance of forces that generally worked against successful strikes. There was widespread unemployment and demoralization of the workers, and the employers, government officials, newspaper editors, and even most labour leaders united in regarding strikes as irresponsible radicalism. In conditions of industrial collapse, capitalists demanded reduced wages and a smaller work force, claiming that cuts were necessary to prevent business failures. The majority of established union leaders were convinced that any union counter-offensive was suicidal. The communists were almost alone in calling for union resistance to counter the demoralization of workers and to win better conditions. Despite the adverse circumstances not all the struggles led by the communists were defeated. One strength they possessed, based on their leadership of the unemployed movement, was that the un-

1968); Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party* (New York 1957); Philip Jaffe, *The Rise and Fall of American Communism* (New York 1975). For Canada see: Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada*; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks* (Montreal 1981); Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism* (Toronto 1988); William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International* (Toronto 1968). A very different interpretation, of course, is to be found in the Communist Party's own histories and memoirs, such as: Tim Buck, *Thirty Years* (Toronto 1952); Tom McEwen, *The Forge Glows Red* (Toronto 1974); or the official Communist Party history, *Canada's Party of Socialism* (Toronto 1982).

³⁷ Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 97-125.

³⁸ For a Canadian example of this view, see Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1973).

³⁹ Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 273.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

employed often supported strikers' picket lines, rather than crossing them as strike-breakers. As trade unionists, the communists were certainly often sectarian in their name-calling, and perhaps made enemies unnecessarily in their fight against the "class collaborationist" union leaders who opposed their aggressive strategy. It is an exaggeration, however, to declare there was a "total refusal" of the communists to seek allies beyond their own ranks. The quarrels of the radicals with the right-wing union leaders were far from one-sided and it is doubtful if the most sweetly reasoned appeals could have moved the majority of the union bureaucrats of the time to support militant action.

Union officials, who were committed to craft unionism, could discern no tactics to deal with the depression other than an attempt to preserve their organizations and to wait for better times. Craft union leaders, in any case, regarded WUL efforts to organize industrial unions, which cut across craft jurisdictions, as "dual unionism," just as they later would accuse the CIO. Even more fundamental was the commitment of most union leaders, including John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman who later were to be leaders of the CIO, to the concepts of business unionism, unionism based on the premise that there was a basic common interest between workers and employers in a prospering capitalist economy. In contrast the communists saw the economic struggles of unions as part of an irreconcilable class struggle, and the capitalist system as heading towards inevitable collapse. In the early 1930s it was relatively plausible to argue that capitalism was already disintegrating.

The communists brought unconcealed radicalism into the union movement, and referred to the WUL affiliates as "revolutionary" unions. The "revolutionary" nature of these unions, however, was mainly rhetorical. The communists never tried to supplant the unions' economic aims with political aims. There was no necessity to do so since strictly economic strikes and union organizing efforts, fights on bread and butter issues, seemed in themselves politically radical in that time, part of a conscious workers' class struggle. If the capitalist system was unable to pay better wages or provide full employment, this was no reason why suffering workers should restrain their just demands.

In some cases, such as the Glace Bay miners, these communist views were well in tune with the sentiments of a large section of the workers. The policy was certainly divisive, since the communists could never win the support of all the workers, but it probably led to a greater direct communist influence over workers than before or after. Communists in the 1940s held more union offices, and the party membership was larger, but in the WUL period the communists were overtly leading a class struggle. And while the victories were rare in the early 1930s, almost invariably throughout North America it was on the foundation of these struggles and with the leadership of organizers tempered in them that the CIO victories of a few years later

were based. It is quite untrue that the "red" unionism of this period resulted in the long-term isolation of labour militants from the mainstream of Canadian labour. In the late 1930s they provided the bulk of shop floor leadership of the CIO upsurge. They were later purged from the unions, but it is unlikely that this occurred because of enmity stored up against 1930s communist sectarianism. Business unionists had more fundamental reasons for opposing communists.

The ultra-leftism of communist unionists, where it existed, was not uniform throughout the period. Examples of extreme sectarian adventurism can be seen in communist trade union work, but these occurred mostly in the first years of the WUL. It should be recognized that even in the "left" period there was an evolution of tactics. At the enlarged Party Plenum in February 1931 sharp criticism was made of "left" errors in trade union work, and thereafter efforts were made to correct these errors, leading to more organizing successes.⁴¹ "Later in the 1930s," writes Angus, "when the working class began to recover from the blows of the depression, the WUL did organize some unorganized workers into new, if short-lived, unions."⁴² These successes should more properly be attributed to improved WUL tactics.⁴³ In Cape Breton, as we shall see, there was a striking contrast in communist tactics in 1930 and in 1932.

The overemphasis by many historians on dividing communist trade union strategy in the United States into sharply defined periods based on Comintern policies has been criticized by James Pritchett. He points out that the decision to create rival unions among needle trades workers and coalminers was taken in the 1925-1926 period, well before the "Third Period" strategy of the Comintern came into existence.⁴⁴ These were industrial unions in which the communists had substantial followings, and from which communist leaders had been expelled bureaucratically in the early 1920s. The same thing holds true for Canada, where communists broke with the UMW and the needle trades internationals in the mid-1920s, not at the end of the decade. Further, despite the claims that the party or the WUL had a general "dual union" policy, it was exclusively among needle trades workers and coalminers that attempts to destroy and replace existing unions ever took place or were planned, as is noted in a recent study of the WUL.⁴⁵ The very existence of the WUL, of course, was regarded by the TLC as "dual unionism," and the craft unions also regarded any effort to organize even un-unionized workers

⁴¹ Discussion on Trade Unions, Enlarged Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Canada, 7 February 1931, MG28 IV4, M 7380-7381, CPC Papers, PAC.

⁴² Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 282.

⁴³ This is the general position taken by John Manley in his thesis "The Workers Unity League."

⁴⁴ Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue in the American Labor Movement."

⁴⁵ Manley, "The Workers Unity League."

over whom they claimed jurisdiction as "dual unionism."

A very serious attempt to replace an existing union was made in the case of coal miners. Throughout North America communists from 1926 to 1935 supported unions attempting to supplant the UMW: the Progressive Miners Union in Illinois, the Mine Workers Union of Canada (MWUC) in Alberta, and the AMW in Nova Scotia. The reasons why the UMW was a principal target of the communists in the early 1930s was obvious to union radicals at the time. By 1930 UMW International President John L. Lewis had a well earned reputation as the most right wing of major American Federation of Labor (AFL) leaders, as an extreme anti-communist, as the friend of capitalists and Republican politicians. Under his leadership the UMW was noted for its lack of internal democracy, and it had steadily lost membership through the 1920s. In many American coalfields the union was completely destroyed by employer offensives. The decline in the coal industry as other sources of energy grew in importance found the UMW unable to resist effectively the drastic fall in the miners' standard of living. Lewis's strategy was centred on attempts to reach national agreements with the coal operators and Republican administrations to rationalize the chaotic American coal industry. Policies of rationalization of the industry were to be applied by Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, but through the 1920s and the beginning years of the depression UMW calls for action along these lines were ignored, and the coal owners and the government paid less and less attention to the union as its power declined.⁴⁶ Communists therefore saw the UMW as a weak, even dying, union organization, as well as notoriously undemocratic and corrupt, a right wing organization claiming union jurisdiction over miners, workers with an unequalled history of union militance. Many prominent radical leaders had been expelled from the union in the early 1920s, J.B. McLachlan being the best known Canadian example, and the UMW had adopted a policy of declaring communists ineligible for union membership.

In Canada communists in the late 1920s have been described as having a different policy for coalminers in the east and the west. By 1925 the UMW control over its District 18 (Alberta) had collapsed, and communists supported the formation of the MWUC.⁴⁷ But in District 26, it is argued, the party clung to the UMW on principle until the left policy was adopted in 1928-1929, and then made a sudden change to a policy of breaking with the international.⁴⁸ Even the official Communist Party history, *Canada's Party*

⁴⁶ Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis, A Biography* (New York 1977).

⁴⁷ Allen Seager, "The Mine Workers Union of Canada."

⁴⁸ Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 280. Angus describes this as a prime example of the sudden sectarian change of CP policy in 1929. Paul MacEwan in *Miners and Steelworkers* follows Wade, *History* in the erroneous claim that the communists opposed a break with the UMW even in 1932.

of *Socialism*, claims the party combatted all secessionist tendencies within AFL affiliates in Canada in the 1920s, with the single exception of the MWUC in Alberta, where the party supported the MWUC to prevent further splintering of District 18. "In the case of District 26, Communists successfully persuaded the coal miners not to pull out of the United Mine Workers of America."⁴⁹ This interpretation of the party's strategy for District 26 demands modification.

From 1923 to 1925, J.B. McLachlan and the party, although harshly critical of the hated John L. Lewis and the District 26 UMW leadership, did oppose attempts by the One Big Union (OBU) to take the miners out of the UMW.⁵⁰ This opposition, however, was fundamentally against the rival OBU and did not involve any absolute principle of staying with the UMW. McLachlan was later to argue that the communists themselves should have led a breakaway at that time. The miners were ready then, he claimed, and hence lost confidence in the Communist Party when it urged remaining in the UMW.⁵¹

When the break from the UMW took place in Alberta with the support of the communists, it certainly became the long term intention of the party to work for the unification of all Canadian coal miners in the MWUC. By August 1925 Tim Buck was writing to McLachlan that "everything points to the consolidation of our forces in the M.W.U. of Canada" and arguing that McLachlan should consider taking national office in a united miners' union.⁵²

Through 1926 and 1927 only tactical difficulties prevented the CPC from leading a breakaway in District 26. The relative demoralization of the Cape Breton miners after the defeat of the 1925 strike and the stranglehold on the

⁴⁹*Canada's Party of Socialism*, 37. The treatment in this history of the party's role in the coal unions in the 1920s and 1930s is cursory and inaccurate. It certainly does not reflect the attention paid by the party to both Districts 18 and 26 during those decades, a period in which there were no other industrial unions in Canada to compare with the miners' unions in size and militancy. On policy in the 1930s, *Canada's Party of Socialism* (85) states disingenuously: "The WUL set itself the goal of recruiting independent unions into its ranks. When the LWIUC [Lumber Workers Industrial Union of Canada] and the MWUC broke with the reformist ACCL in 1930, they decided to affiliate with the WUL." No mention is made of the hard work communists performed to get the MWUC to break with the ACCL, nor is any mention at all made of the AMW or the situation in District 26 during those years.

⁵⁰Wade, *History*. McLachlan himself was courted by the OBU, which aroused some suspicions concerning what he would do. See Tim Buck letter to J. B. McLachlan and Alex. A. MacKay, 24 April 1925, MG28 IV4, Vol. 8, File 6; and McLachlan letter to Buck, 26 May 1925, MG28 IV4, M 7376, CPC Papers, PAC.

⁵¹Party Plenum, 7 February 1931, MG28 IV4, M7381, CPC Papers, PAC. McLachlan mentions that William Z. Foster argued that District 26 miners should stay in the UMW to co-ordinate with struggles in the U.S. against the John L. Lewis regime.

⁵²Buck to McLachlan, 13 August 1925, MG28 IV4, Vol. 51, File 73, PAC.

district the UMW had through the check-off of union dues made action difficult. In 1927 the party was partly instrumental in having the Westville miners, the one section of Nova Scotian miners who had left the UMW, join the MWUC. It was hoped that this might provide an opening wedge for winning the District 26 miners away from the UMW. Tim Buck wrote to a Westville miner that there were hopes of eventually uniting all Canadian miners, in both coal and metal mines, in the MWUC, but a stumbling block was that the coal company gave the UMW the check-off in Nova Scotia.⁵³

It is not clear exactly when the vision first emerged of a great industrial union, 50,000 or 60,000 strong, embracing all coal and metal miners and also oil and smelter workers in Canada. This aim, however, was a constant, long term union policy of the Communist Party from about 1926 or 1927 until 1935.⁵⁴ Little advance towards this end, however, was achieved in Nova Scotia in the 1920s. In 1928 CP organizer Joe Gilbert was sent to the area and a "Progressive Miners Committee of Nova Scotia" was formed to work for a split with the UMW, but this action only resulted in the expulsion and blacklisting of two militants.⁵⁵

The change that came in communist trade union policy in 1929, partly due to pressure from the Comintern and the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), was not the decision to break with the UMW in District 26, but the formation of a separate "revolutionary" trade union centre, the WUL, and the decision to work to change the affiliation of the MWUC from the ACCL to the WUL.⁵⁶ There was also the new emphasis on "revolutionary" unionism, which led to some "leftist" errors in the style of union work in the years immediately following. In late 1929 Harvey Murphy was sent to Alberta and Jim Barker to Cape Breton to get things moving. Both were later to be criticized severely for their errors, but it seems probable that the policies they followed were at least generally approved by WUL secretary Tom

⁵³Harry B. Rudolph, Westville, to Tim Buck, 8 July 1927, Buck to Rudolph, 15 July 1927, Buck to John Stokaluk (the communist vice-president of MWUC), 15 July 1927, Buck to F. Wheatley, MWUC president, 15 July 1927, H. Campbell, Glace Bay, to Buck, 1 August 1927, MG28 IV4, Vol. 51, File 77, CPC Papers, PAC.

⁵⁴See, for example, Politburo Minutes, 24 August 1931, MG 28 IV4, Vol. 6, File 9, CPC Papers, PAC; Minutes of National Miners Convention, 30 June 1934, Reel 13, UMWA Papers, PANS.

⁵⁵The radicals' only consolation was that at that year's UMW district convention, despite the presence of international vice-president Philip Murray, the delegates voted to reinstate the two expelled men, John Miller and Mickey F. McNeil. Manley, "Workers Unity League," 73-76; Wade, *History*; letters Joseph Gilbert to Annie Buller, 5 June 1928, W. Sydney to Buller, 25 June 1928, MG 28 IV4, M 7378, CPC Papers, PAC.

⁵⁶Undated RILU letter to Central Committee of the CP of Canada, received November 1929, MG28 IV4, Vol. 11, File 29, CPC Papers, PAC.

McEwen and by Buck and other leaders.⁵⁷

The renewed effort under Barker's guidance to overthrow the UMW in Nova Scotia met defeat. When the 1930 contract with Dosco was announced, it included only a small increase of three percent for the datal men and nothing for the contract miners. *The Nova Scotia Miner* immediately published a call for a district convention to set up a new union,⁵⁸ and Tom McEwen, the secretary of the newly formed Workers Unity League, made a special journey to Nova Scotia to attend the convention. The District 26 executive forbade attendance at this "outlaw" convention, and struggles took place in UMW locals all over the district on the question of whether to send representatives. The left was defeated in most locals and few elected official delegations. Nevertheless, under the leadership of the communists, the convention pushed ahead to form the Mineworkers Industrial Union of Nova Scotia (MWIU).⁵⁹ On the charge of promoting a dual union, the six miners who had signed the call for the "outlaw" convention were expelled from the UMW and black-listed by the coal company.⁶⁰ Though *The Miner* tried to present the new union as representative of a large proportion of the miners of the district, the MWIU won little support and soon ceased to exist, its officers remaining on the blacklist.⁶¹ Murdock Clarke, the young secretary of the MWIU, was sent by the party to the Lenin School in the Soviet Union and then was active for some years in the communist movement and the MWUC in Alberta.⁶² Rankin MacDonald, MWIU president, became a principal leader of the Glace Bay organizations of the unemployed.

There was no disguising the fact that this effort of communists and militants to oust the UMW in Nova Scotia had been a total failure. The miners were not yet ready for such drastic action. The left militants were in disarray following this setback, so that after only six months of existence *The Nova Scotia Miner* ceased publication in June 1930. McLachlan and Jim Barker had quarreled bitterly, and McLachlan resigned as editor and refused to run as a candidate in the 1930 Federal Election.⁶³ In the UMW district elections the left made no gains; D.W. Morrison and his right-wing colleagues were returned to office with little apparent difficulty. But the left was still in existence, and it appears that both local radicals and the Communist Party

⁵⁷ Party Plenum, 7 February 1931, MG28 IV4, M 7380-7381, CPC Papers, PAC.

⁵⁸ *Nova Scotia Miner*, 1 March 1930.

⁵⁹ Minutes of Convention, Sydney N.S., 15 March 1930, UMWA Papers, PANS.

⁶⁰ Wade, *History*.

⁶¹ *Nova Scotia Miner*, 22 March 1930.

⁶² Interview with Murdock Clarke, Glace Bay, 11 April 1986; Charles Allen Seager, "A Proletariat in Wild Rose Country: The Alberta Coal Miners, 1905-1945," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1981, 446, 455.

⁶³ Barker telegram to Ewan, 26 May 1930, MG28 IV4, M 7376, Party Plenum, 7 February 1931, MG28 IV4, M7380-7381, CPC Papers, PAC.

centre in Toronto learned lessons from the MWIU fiasco and similar failures elsewhere in 1930, and engaged in considerable internal criticism of the tactics used.⁶⁴ In the future the party determined that its tactics would be guided more by those with a firm knowledge of local conditions, and the party itself would not attempt to take such an open and prominent role in union affairs. Another embarrassment for the communists in the MWIU episode had been that the party appeared to have contradictory policies in Alberta and Nova Scotia. In Alberta the MWUC was torn between ACCL loyalists and the communist-led faction who wanted to affiliate with the WUL. In the one MWUC branch in Nova Scotia at Westville, however, those loyal to ACCL President Mosher were dominant. Therefore the Cape Breton communists at the time of the MWIU convention opposed any talk of joining the MWUC.⁶⁵ Later in 1930 the MWUC in Alberta renounced its affiliation to the ACCL and in 1931 officially joined the WUL. The openly-expressed aim of the communists thereafter was to unite coal miners in the east and west in the MWUC, with the eventual aim of a united national metal and coal miners union.

These aims were expressed in a remarkable politburo resolution on party work in Nova Scotia written sometime in late 1931.⁶⁶ This document is extraordinary for its combination of careful planning based on intimate local knowledge and its flexibility in tactical matters. Much of the plan of action depended on building up the pit committees in each mine, which were to lead the fight on all local grievances, while building support for the district-wide struggle against the UMW. When, as was anticipated, "the company will demand another reduction" and "the District Board of the UMWA will recommend its acceptance," "the miners will resent this and will fight against it." The party must "make sure they will have leadership" so that the fight against the check-off and the break with the UMW could succeed. Efforts were also to be made to involve the Westville miners, since there was a danger they might split off from the MWUC and be reformed as an independent local chartered by the ACCL.⁶⁷ But, the resolution emphasized, "flexibility should

⁶⁴Party Plenum, 7 February 1931, MG28 IV4, M7380-7381, CPC Papers, PAC. John Manley also argues this point in "Red Unionism in Cape Breton," unpublished paper, n.d., Dalhousie University, and in his thesis, "Workers Unity League."

⁶⁵Minutes of Convention, Sydney N.S., 15 March 1930, UMWA Papers, PANS. Westville MWUC delegates, mainly loyal to the ACCL, attended the MWIU of NS convention calling for the Cape Bretoners to join the MWUC. The communists rejected this and put through a decision to affiliate with the WUL.

⁶⁶Resolution of Political Bureau CPC on Party Work in District No. 1 (Nova Scotia), n.d., MG28 IV4, Vol. 6, File 9, CPC Papers, PAC. The document mentions an event occurring in September 1931 and refers to the ending of the Dosco/UMW contract on 31 December as a forthcoming event.

⁶⁷This is in fact what happened. The Westville men never rejoined the other miners in the

be practiced" with regard to the affiliation with the MWUC and WUL and the name of the new union, since the miners showed a preference for "the old name of the 'Amalgamated Miners of Nova Scotia'." If necessary "the miners should be deferred to." "Both the suitable name and the affiliation can be attended to after the change provides the better conditions for their attainment." These plans, and the deference to local sentiment, appear to reflect closely the line taken by J.B. McLachlan regarding the mistakes of 1930.⁶⁸

The emphasis placed on the pit committees was to bear much fruit in the months to follow. The radicals took the initiative in most of the locals of the union, particularly in the Glace Bay sub-district, and won the support of a majority of the rank and file. This strong leadership at the local union level was to lead to the majority support the new breakaway union received. It also was to influence greatly the nature of the union that was formed, with its extreme tendency towards decentralization and local autonomy. These were characteristics that were to be both a strength of the AMW in building a militant base and a weakness in inhibiting united action and consistency of policy.

The Nova Scotia Miner resumed publication in July 1931 under McLachlan's editorship, with its condemnation of John L. Lewis and the International as strong as ever. New grounds, even stronger than expected, for a condemnation of the district officers soon appeared. The UMW district convention in 1931 called for wage increases and improved working conditions, but the district officers felt these demands were unrealistic, and entered negotiations with a proposal to renew the 1930-1931 contract without change. H.J. Kelley, the General Manager of Dosco, rejected the UMW proposals out of hand, and demanded a 10 per cent cut in wages for the datal men, a 14.2 per cent cut for loaders, and cuts averaging 12.5 per cent for contract miners; and worse was to come. Dosco revealed plans which sent waves of shock through the mining communities- a programme of mine closures. The corporation had worked out a strategy for weathering the depression that involved cutting back its operations in both steel and coal production and reducing labour costs through layoffs and wage cuts. In the negotiations it revealed a "reallocation" scheme under which four mines would be closed. Further, Kelley stated that "there would be no available work with the company for the men who would be displaced by the closing of the collieries and the corporation had nothing to keep them with."⁶⁹

These plans for mine closures raised an anguished outcry from all classes

district. They remained in a local directly chartered by ACCL until the ACCL merged with the CIO unions to form the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) in 1940, and even then refused to rejoin the UMW, insisting on having an independent local directly chartered by the CCL and, after 1956, by the Canadian Federation of Labour (CFL).

⁶⁸Party Plenum, February 1931, MG28 IV4, M 7380-7381, CPC Papers, PAC.

⁶⁹Wade, *History*. Wade quotes from now unavailable minutes of the negotiations.

of society in the towns effected, and with the negotiations between the company and the union at an impasse, the Conservative provincial government of Col. G.S. Harrington intervened. Under government pressure Dosco agreed to extend the existing contract to March 1932 while a commission of inquiry was held, chaired by Sir Andrew Rae Duncan, who had headed the major Royal Commission on the Nova Scotia coal industry in 1925-1926. In presenting its brief to the commission, Dosco claimed both shutdowns and wage reductions were necessary for it to continue operating on a sound business footing; and the commissioners were apparently convinced, for when the commission report was published on 20 February 1932 it approved all the company's demands for wage cuts and mine closings.⁷⁰

The district officers found themselves in a difficult position. Dosco was inflexible and had the support of the Duncan Commission's report, yet D.W. Morrison and his colleagues dared not recommend a strike. They had already been told by John L. Lewis that no support money would be forthcoming from UMW headquarters and, with Dosco planning to close down mines in any event, a strike seemed to have little chance of success. The executive also feared "that a strike without financial aid from the International would mean the break-up, the dissolution, of District 26."⁷¹ They therefore sent out a recommendation to the miners to accept the wage cuts, and a pithead referendum was set for 15 March to vote on the contract. McLachlan in *The Miner* thundered: "Kick Fakers Union Out- Tricked, Betrayed and Sold Out."⁷² On 12 March Premier Harrington intervened with a radio announcement of a "million ton" coal order he claimed to have negotiated with the federal government of his fellow Conservative, R.B. Bennett.⁷³ Despite this, the miners rejected the agreement in a vote of 5841 to 4698, the heavy "no" vote in Glace Bay swamping slight "yes" majorities elsewhere.⁷⁴

The district executive made no move to call a strike and ordered the miners to work at the reduced rates, pending the decisions of a special district convention. At this stormy convention the officers again recommended acceptance of the wage cuts, arguing that a strike was impossible and that the men should put all their energies into resisting the closing down of mines.

⁷⁰1932 Duncan Commission Report, PANS. Dosco planned to close No.14 at New Waterford, No.11 in Glace Bay, and the mines at Florence and Thorburn. Public pressure on the company caused a change in plans, and only No.14 was actually shut down at this time.

⁷¹Wade, *History*. Wade reports a personal conversation with D.W.Morrison in 1950.

⁷²*Nova Scotia Miner*, 5 March 1932.

⁷³*Sydney Post, Glace Bay Gazette*, 14 March 1932. "Harrington's Hoax" was well utilized by the Liberals in the next year's election campaign. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 18 July 1933.

⁷⁴*Glace Bay Gazette*, 22 March 1932. This was characteristic of votes on contracts throughout the 1930s, even after the reunification of the AMW and UMW. UMW negotiated contracts were invariably voted against by the Glace Bay miners, and supported by the Springhill and, usually, New Waterford men.

These recommendations were voted down, and the left called for a referendum vote on "whether we stay in the UMW of A or revert to a provincial organization."⁷⁵ This was ruled out of order by President Morrison, and the convention finally voted that the executive resume negotiations with the company on the basis of the wage demands of the 1931 convention. The results of these negotiations were to be presented to the miners in a new referendum, and if this was rejected a strike was to be called. There seems to have been some confusion as to what was being decided, for the left wingers later bitterly denied the convention gave the executive a mandate to hold another referendum, and argued this was just another example of the executive's trickery.⁷⁶ But the officers met with Dosco, received H.J. Kelley's refusal to rescind the wage cuts, and announced a second referendum for 26 May 1932. The ballots on this occasion made it clear the issue was whether or not to strike. They read: "Are you in favour of the proposed wage agreement in preference to a strike?" The results were 5198 in favour of the agreement, 1598 against.⁷⁷ This looked like a substantial victory for the district executive. The majority of the miners, although bitterly resenting the wage cuts, appeared to have accepted the officers' pleas that a strike could not succeed. But underneath this superficial victory, the large-scale revolt against the UMW was beginning. The left was no longer interested in UMW sponsored referendums; some important locals were already on their way out of the UMW.

The first rank-and-file mass actions of this revolt were the decisions of Phalen and No. 11 miners, in pithead votes, that they would no longer agree to the company check-off of union dues. The UMW officers barred these locals from participating in the pithead referendum on the strike issue, and the Dominion 1B local, in protest, refused to vote in the referendum.⁷⁸ The momentum of this revolt against the UMW grew rapidly in the Glace Bay sub-district, and in a 18 June meeting of representatives from Phalen, Reserve, Glace Bay Mechanics, No. 11, Victory, and 1B locals, the delegates decided to break with the UMW and form the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia.⁷⁹

The choice of name was significant. This was the name of the Nova Scotia miners' union that existed between 1917 and 1919 before the vote to affiliate with the UMW. The miners acted as if this 1919 decision could now be reversed by simple majority votes to disaffiliate with the international. The name selected also bowed to the rank-and-file wish for an independent Nova Scotia union. The communists had made clear their aim to have the

⁷⁵ MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 164.

⁷⁶ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 19 September 1932.

⁷⁷ *Sydney Post*, 27 May 1932.

⁷⁸ *Sydney Post*, 3, 27 May, 8 June 1932.

⁷⁹ Wade, *History*. The vote was 32 to 3.

district join the MWUC, which was affiliated with the WUL. The previous month President James Sloan of the MWUC had come from Alberta, and he and McLachlan had toured the district addressing meetings.⁸⁰ There had also been a fierce battle put up at the April convention to seat a Westville MWUC delegation.⁸¹ Yet the communists were careful not to press this issue unduly.

These "flexible" communist tactics markedly differed from those of early 1930 when the MWIU was formed. Communists were predominate in the leadership of the new union, but they did not seek to exclude non-communists from office. All elected leaders were working miners who had records of opposition to the UMW District and International executives. Robert Stewart, a fiery Scot, often rashly outspoken, became the AMW's Secretary-Treasurer and only full-time officer. He was certainly a party member at this time. The President, John Alex MacDonald, had been on the UMW District executive during the 1925 strike, had a militant reputation, and was also a party member. Tom Ling, the principal AMW leader in New Waterford, was never a party member, but was prepared to work very closely with the communists through this period.⁸² The same seems to have been true of many other local AMW men. One AMW leader, however, stands out as having an anti-communist reputation at this time as well as later. This was Clarie Gillis, later to become a CCF M.P., who was for a time the Vice President of the AMW. His inclusion in the AMW executive was to cause difficulties for the more radical leaders, but his presence also enabled the new union to counter claims that it was "dominated by Moscow." The communists would most probably have been able to keep Gillis out of office, if they had striven to do so, but this would have damaged their efforts to draw all the miners into the AMW. For similar reasons the Communist Party and *The Nova Scotia Miner* did not play any open, direct role in working out the details for the new organization. The party relied on its supporters within the left-wing pit committees, and otherwise showed the wisdom to allow the genuine upswelling of rank-and-file revolt against the international to take its own course.

The spread of this revolt in the summer of 1932 was very rapid. Four of the six UMW locals represented at the founding meeting, 1B, No. 11, Phalen, and Reserve, were quickly reorganized as AMW branches,⁸³ and a series of mass meetings began at other locals, leading up to pit-head votes on the question of joining the AMW or staying with the UMW. Even before 15 July,

⁸⁰*Nova Scotia Miner*, 14 May 1932.

⁸¹*Sydney Post*, 30 April 1932.

⁸²Ling was the Nova Scotian member of the "Workers' Jury" set up by the Canadian Labour Defence League to conduct a parallel "trial" when Tim Buck and other Communist Party leaders were sent to prison in 1931. *Nova Scotia Miner*, 28 November 1931. Tom Ling was later Vice President of District 26 UMW from 1942 to 1950. John Alex MacDonald was International Board Member during this same period.

⁸³R. Stewart, Report to AMW Convention, 19 September 1932, UMW Papers, PANS.

when the first of these referendums was held, at Florence, the size and enthusiasm displayed at these meetings showed the swell of favourable sentiment for the new union.⁸⁴

The UMW officers tried to fight back, themselves touring locals to defend the international union, and thumping the anti-communist drum as hard as they could.⁸⁵ In this they were assisted by the local newspaper, *The Glace Bay Gazette*, which editorialized:

J.B. McLachlan in the Nova Scotia Miner paved the way for the new union by attacking Lewis. But why is Lewis being "exposed and weakened?" For no other reason than that he has been fighting the battle of organized labour against subversive forces, both inside and outside his union, who seek control not for the purpose of promoting the interests of the rank and file of the miners, but for reasons which have little to do with the interests of genuine labour.⁸⁶

Such propaganda against the AMW would take its toll over the long term, but in the short term nothing seemed able to prevent the forward surge of the new union. In early August all the large locals in the Glace Bay and the Sydney Mines sub-districts voted by substantial majorities to join the AMW. The new union had less success in the New Waterford sub-district. In this predominantly Catholic area anti-communist attitudes were much more prevalent, and the AMW was always weaker. But by September 1932 the AMW could claim successes even in New Waterford, though controversy surrounded the new union's victories at both No. 16 and No. 12 locals because of low turnouts in the pithead votes, and UMW cries of fraud.⁸⁷ In the mainland sub-districts AMW organizers John Alex MacDonald and Bob Stewart won a sweeping victory in Stellarton, Pictou County, where the miners voted overwhelmingly to join the new union;⁸⁸ but in Springhill they failed to get even a hearing. There the tight UMW organization was able to prevent the holding of any meetings.⁸⁹ Yet when the AMW men held their first convention in September 1932 in Glace Bay, they appeared to be well on the way to taking complete control of the district.

The radicals had called for a new type of union, a union that would give control of its affairs to the rank and file, and that would therefore be much more militant. By far the most common description the AMW men gave their union was that it was a "rank-and-file" union. As one member wrote: "One of the aims of AMW is to have a rank-and-file union. Of course, this is

⁸⁴*Glace Bay Gazette*, 15, 20, 23, 27 July 1932.

⁸⁵*Glace Bay Gazette*, 27 July 1933.

⁸⁶*Glace Bay Gazette*, 1 August 1932.

⁸⁷*New Waterford Times*, 10 September 1932; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 3, 10, 13 September 1932.

⁸⁸*Glace Bay Gazette*, 13, 14 September 1932.

⁸⁹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 15 September 1932.

unexplainable to men like the District 26 executive.”⁹⁰ The miners tried to ensure this rank-and-file control in the constitution adopted at the AMW’s first convention. “Supreme power” was vested in the “referendum vote of the rank and file of the union,” a clause that reflected the miners’ resentment of the occasions when the UMW district officers had overridden referendum votes. The delegates also showed a strong suspicion of having professionals or experts handle union affairs. “Consultation with a lawyer is to be only in purely criminal or legal cases. In all union work such as agreements, settlement of grievances or internal work of the union we shall always rely on the advice, guidance or counsel of members of our own organization.” Officers were to be elected for one year terms, were subject to recall, and were to be paid no more than a working miner; and of the elected officers, it was decided that the union could afford to pay only the Secretary-Treasurer for the time being, others being paid on the basis of the time lost from work. (Bob Stewart, the Secretary-Treasurer, was in fact to be the only full-time officer throughout the life of the AMW, and to receive only a portion of the wages designated for him. A part-time typist was the AMW’s sole additional employee.)⁹¹

There was also almost unanimous agreement that the check-off for union dues should be abolished. “The miners,” said one delegate, “do not want an organization maintained by compulsion.” All miners should pay dues, but should do so consciously, deliberately, not through involuntary automatic deductions. A miner from Sydney Mines said: “Until miners begin to pay dues one hundred percent over the table, then, and not till then, will there be unity among the miners.”⁹² The option of collective withholding of dues was seen as another method of ensuring rank-and-file power in the union. All these democratic, or even ultra-democratic, measures were promoted by the communist leadership. Opposition to the check-off, for example, was the policy of the MWUC and other WUL unions at this time.⁹³ The WUL has been described as tending towards ultra-democracy and being adventuristically militant in its first years, but becoming a little more moderate, its communist leaders more “professional,” from about 1933.⁹⁴ Unlike some of the new WUL unions, led by enthusiastic but inexperienced young communists, the AMW men were experienced trade unionists. Nevertheless the AMW also began with organizational policies of extreme decentralization in the name of democracy, policies that were later modified. The basic tenet put forward by the communist trade unionists throughout this period, however,

⁹⁰Letter from Wm. Pilling, *Glance Bay Gazette*, 22 December 1932.

⁹¹Constitution of the AMW of NS, UMW Papers (Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia).

⁹²*Glance Bay Gazette*, 21 September 1932.

⁹³*N.S. Miner*, 12 March 1932. The UMW in District 26 were the only large union in Canada actually to have the check-off privilege, so the point was mostly academic elsewhere.

⁹⁴Manley, “Workers Unity League.”

was that undemocratic union bosses were sure to be class collaborators, that union democracy and uncompromising struggle against exploiting employers were intrinsically bound together. A miners' organization that was a rank-and-file union would be certain to be a militant fighting organization.

What now was needed, the AMW men knew, was to make their union "one hundred percent," to unite all the men in the pits behind its banner. It was axiomatic to any trade unionist that the miners needed unity in one organization to defend their interests against the company, and the AMW held that since they had won the support of a large majority, all others, if they had any respect for democracy, should join them. But the UMW officers had no intention of surrendering their positions; they defended their stand on the basis of the UMW constitution, and were able to hold the loyalty of a substantial minority of the more moderate miners. The UMW also had other important strengths. It had the contract with Dosco, it had the check-off of union dues, and it was only with the UMW that company officials would agree to negotiate disputes, grievances, or future contracts. AMW appeals to government to arrange a miners' referendum were rejected. "You can hardly expect the government of Nova Scotia ... to select what labour union a man shall join," wrote Premier Harrington,⁹⁵ adding in another letter that the AMW was following "McLachlan's policy, not very successful in the past, and it would be well for you to cut loose from him and his propaganda and decline to follow him further."⁹⁶

With company officials refusing even to meet with them, and carrying on affairs as if the UMW represented all the men, the only option that appeared open to the AMW was a district strike for recognition, a direct assault on the combined forces of the UMW, the company, and the government. But this was a dreadful prospect. Many in the movement remembered 1909-1911, when the UMW fought a strike for recognition against both the company and the old union, the Provincial Workmens' Association. The hardships suffered during this losing strike, and the bitter animosities engendered in the communities by a strike carried out with a divided union movement, set a terrible precedent.

Nevertheless, the AMW had come into being to take militant action to improve the miners' conditions, and many of its radicals pressed for action. In May 1933 an AMW convention passed a resolution threatening a district strike unless Dosco recognized the union's grievance committees in the various mines within ten days.⁹⁷ The company sent no reply, while UMW officers issued a statement that UMW miners would be ordered to work in

⁹⁵Harrington to John A. MacDonald, AMW president, 29 October 1932, printed in *Gloucester Bay Gazette*, 1 November 1932.

⁹⁶Quoted from a letter of Harrington's to J. A. MacDonald, no date given, in *Nova Scotia Miner*, 26 November 1932.

⁹⁷*Gloucester Bay Gazette*, 11 May 1933.

the event of any strike.⁹⁸ The AMW leaders, however, did not send out strike ballots immediately, as the convention had instructed.

The reason for this hesitancy appears to have been doubts the leadership had about the rank-and-file militancy because of divisions that were apparent at the convention. A resolution to affiliate with the MWUC/WUL was tabled without a decision after much heated discussion.⁹⁹ There was also an intense controversy about the observance of May Day as a holiday, as the AMW constitution demanded. On May Day, just a few days earlier, most AMW miners had stayed away from work, and a large rally had been held. But a few AMW men, along with the UMW men, had insisted on working, and the mines had been able to hoist some coal.¹⁰⁰ Some convention delegates wanted the May Day provision dropped from the constitution, while others defended it fiercely. The issue was compromised by leaving the clause in the constitution, but allowing each local to decide whether to work the May Day or not.¹⁰¹

These divisions at the convention reflected a submerged disagreement between those who were ready for militant action and those who were not, now that the situation in the district appeared to be leading towards a major strike. In the discussion of the strike resolution itself there had been a minority of delegates who had argued for a Sub-district No. 1 (Glace Bay) strike only, rather than risk calling a district-wide strike vote in the event of the company refusing the demand for recognition of mine committees. Although all openly attempted to appear militant, the leaders of the union did not dare proceed directly to a strike vote when the ultimatum to the company was ignored. Instead a mass meeting was held in Glace Bay at which a series of meetings at locals was decided upon to "educate" the members on the issues, with a strike referendum to be held sometime following these meetings.¹⁰²

At this point another strike issue emerged, one that seemed to hold the potential for mobilizing rank-and-file UMW miners as well as the AMW men. Dosco, as part of its strategy for weathering the depression, had allowed its subsidiaries, Acadia Coal in Pictou County and "Scotia" in Sydney Mines, to go into receivership. In April the Eastern Trust Company, receivers for Scotia's Princess and Florence mines, demanded the miners accept wage cuts of 25 per cent. "Continuation of operations depends upon the willingness of the employees to make sufficient sacrifices to enable the company to produce

⁹⁸*Glace Bay Gazette*, 16 May 1933.

⁹⁹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 12 May 1933. The motion to table the resolution was passed by the close vote of 28 to 25. This was the last overt attempt to achieve the affiliation with the MWUC and WUL, although this continued to be an aim of the communists until 1935.

¹⁰⁰*Glace Bay Gazette*, 1 May 1933.

¹⁰¹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 13 May 1933.

¹⁰²*Glace Bay Gazette*, 23 May 1933.

coal in keeping with today's prices."¹⁰³ The Sydney Mines pits were the only places where the miners were all AMW, and they were not prepared to accept further cuts to their already low wages. On 31 May 1933 a mass meeting of Princess and Florence miners voted unanimously to strike, and to ask all the miners of the province to come out on a sympathy strike in their support. AMW Secretary Bob Stewart, who was present at the Sydney Mines meeting, thereupon issued a strike call to all locals of both unions throughout the province.¹⁰⁴

Reactions were predictable: Eastern Trust threatened the permanent closure of Princess and Florence mines; the government denied it could help mine company finances; and the local newspapers outdid themselves in denunciations of the AMW's leaders. The strike threat "classes the leaders ... as industrial wreckers ... (who) should be placed in straight [sic] jackets here and turned over to their political advisors in Russia."¹⁰⁵ The UMW issued a statement to all its locals warning members against heeding the strike call: "In our opinion about the worst thing that could happen to the miners of Nova Scotia would be to strike at the present time, violating agreements with the company and giving the company the opportunity to close more mines for all time. Therefore we require our members to remain at work until requested by the UMW of A to do otherwise."¹⁰⁶

Under these pressures, the AMW leadership began to waver and divide on whether to proceed with the strike. AMW Vice President Clarie Gillis opposed the strike, and attacked Stewart for calling it without consulting other officers. Gillis was the only AMW officer who was well-known to hold political views well to the right of the other leaders, but up to this time he had taken a relatively militant stance on union issues. His opposition to the strike was combined with an argument that it would be undemocratic to proceed without a vote of the full membership on the issue. This view prevailed, and the strike was postponed until a vote could be held.¹⁰⁷

The Nova Scotia Miner called Gillis a "double-crosser" and McLachlan's editorial called for a massive vote for a strike:

Failure of the AMW to carry out to the letter the demand of the Sydney Mines men implies the AMW has no faith in the workers, either inside or outside their union, and the workers of Nova Scotia will not fail to accept the AMW at its own valuation This week will see the AMW crown itself with fighting working class glory or bury itself in a coward's grave.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ *Sydney Post Record*, 7 April 1933.

¹⁰⁴ *Gloucester Bay Gazette*, 1 June 1933.

¹⁰⁵ *New Waterford Times*, 5 June 1933.

¹⁰⁶ *Gloucester Bay Gazette*, 3 June 1933.

¹⁰⁷ *Gloucester Bay Gazette*, 3, 5 June 1933.

¹⁰⁸ *Nova Scotia Miner*, 3 June 1933. Gillis soon resigned as AMW Vice President and remained in the union but inactive until the unity movement of 1936.

The vote gave a strong majority for a strike, but no more than a quarter to one third of the AMW membership took part in the voting. It seemed that the miners were understandably nervous about a strike, but were reluctant to vote against a sympathy action in support of the Sydney Mines men. In any case, with the low turnout in the referendum, the AMW executive again postponed the strike.¹⁰⁹ Premier Harrington then announced some government assistance for Scotia, so that the proposed wage cuts could be reduced to approximately 15 rather than 25 per cent. Realizing that no sympathy strike was likely to take place, the Princess and Florence miners voted to return to work on these terms.¹¹⁰ Following this, on 18 June an AMW meeting of representatives from all the locals decided to postpone indefinitely a general strike for recognition.¹¹¹

Thus the AMW's militance had been tested and failed the test, and in retrospect this appears to have been the decisive crisis in the life of the AMW. The UMW executive, the Dosco corporation, and the government were intransigent enemies of the AMW and its "red" leadership, and it seems certain that nothing short of a district strike could have achieved the AMW aim of becoming the union representing all miners. This is not a judgement on the wisdom or folly of carrying out a district strike in the circumstances prevailing at the time, or on whether the strike could have been won. The great hardships a general strike would have brought are apparent, as are the immense difficulties the strikers would have had to overcome to win even partial success. Yet J.B. McLachlan's line on the strike question at this time seems to have been that it was essential for the AMW to "put up or shut up" in the miners' eyes, and that if a united and militant AMW leadership gambled with outward confidence on the willingness of the rank and file to wage a major strike, there was a very good chance of winning at least a partial victory.

One possible interpretation of this is that McLachlan and other communists were for a strike on general principles, caring little about the possibilities of success or failure. This would be consistent with the view that communists of this time were committed to a blind adventuristic militance in which an heroic failure in struggle was to be welcomed almost as much as victory.¹¹² There is little to support such an assessment of the Cape Breton communist leadership's outlook in 1933. The communists were miners or ex-miners themselves, and they shared memories of the bitter experience of hard-fought strikes. They certainly thought of union activity as part of an irreconcilable class struggle, but they were in the union movement to win

¹⁰⁹ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 10, 13 June 1933.

¹¹⁰ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 16, 17 June 1933.

¹¹¹ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 19 June 1933.

¹¹² Angus in *Canadian Bolsheviks*, for example, takes such a view generally of the activities of the WUL.

victories, not to glory in defeats, and they surely had no wild notions that the struggles on union issues could be rapidly transformed into a revolutionary political upheaval. There may well have been doubts and fears on the strike issue even among the Communist Party members and supporters, but McLachlan's line seems clear; and Bob Stewart, from all appearances his most devoted follower among the top AMW leaders, did his best to have this line carried into practice, but failed. The point here is not whether the AMW would have won or lost if it had plunged ahead with a strike, but that McLachlan's and the other radicals' promotion of a strike was calculated, not blind, militance.

Victory for the AMW in replacing the UMW and forcing recognition from Dosco, if possible at all, probably would have required a district strike, and this action was seriously considered only in spring 1933. Less than a year later, in late 1933 and early 1934, the Acadia miners in Stellarton and Thorburn fought a lock-out and a losing strike resisting drastic wage cuts imposed by the Eastern Trust receivers. In this lengthy struggle, involving both AMW and UMW miners, initiative began with the local AMW but soon passed to the UMW executive, in spite of a dramatic incident in which a crowd of Stellarton AMW men forced UMW President D.W. Morrison to board the train out of town.¹¹³ The local AMW leader, Murdoch Wilson, showed himself to be less militant than the rank and file in either camp, even allowing himself to be outflanked on the left by the UMW executive, to J.B. McLachlan's disgust.¹¹⁴ The AMW's policy of local autonomy, however, left the central leadership of the union with little influence over Wilson's actions. The UMW eventually negotiated a face-saving settlement which the AMW denounced as a sell out. But threats by the AMW executive in Cape Breton of a district-wide strike were, by that time, empty bluster.

But if a district strike was not a possibility, what strategy did the AMW leaders have? They sought desperately but unsuccessfully for a reasonable alternative. Through 1934 and 1935 AMW miners showed their militance in numerous short strike actions in various mines. These were on specific local grievances and deliberately aimed at defying the clause in the recently signed UMW/Dosco agreement which forbade any walkouts during the life of the contract. Through these struggles the AMW leaders hoped to force company recognition of the union, and also to win over UMW loyalists in a "united front from below," a communist tactic frequently applied at that time.

One example of these many strikes was the walkout in May 1934 at the Dominion 1B mine. This involved a grievance over the dismissal of miner William Stefura, who was accused of neglect of duty in an incident in which

¹¹³James M. Cameron, *Pictonian Colliers* (Halifax 1974), 158.

¹¹⁴*Nova Scotia Miner*, 25 November 1933. Wilson eventually resigned, denouncing the AMW leaders as reds. *Glace Bay Gazette*, 13 May 1935.

a coal car got loose and killed a horse. The AMW claimed this was victimization and that Stefura's unfair treatment was partly due to his being an immigrant. After a one week strike, with partially effective sympathy stoppages being staged at other mines, the company gave in and reinstated Stefura, pretending the intention had only been to suspend him in any case. This strike was on an unusual issue; most of the stoppages involved such grievances as longwall rates or safety matters. But the Stefura strike was typical in two of its characteristics. First, despite AMW appeals for unity, most of the UMW miners were willing to work, but they could not turn out enough men to run the mine. Second, the company steadfastly refused to meet with any AMW representatives, and a crude "negotiation" took place through statements made by the union and the Dosco officials and published in the newspapers.¹¹⁵

Such small-scale strikes on many, perhaps most, occasions won minor concessions, but they did not advance the AMW's aims of forcing recognition from the company or winning over the UMW loyalists. The likelihood of the AMW attaining its fundamental objective and supplanting the UMW steadily receded. The rival unions contended for control of the district until 1936, but from 1933 UMW strength gradually grew, while the AMW declined, though probably holding the loyalty of a larger proportion of the miners throughout Nova Scotia to the end, and certainly always having the majority in Cape Breton.¹¹⁶

One important development improved the morale of UMW loyalists and the organizational and financial support available to the District 26 executive. In the summer of 1933, taking quick advantage of Roosevelt's "New Deal" legislation, the UMW recovered its position as the largest and most powerful union in the United States. In one of the most remarkable unionizing campaigns in history thousands of American miners, many of whom had never been previously organized, poured into the resurgent UMW.¹¹⁷ From this time, also, John L. Lewis began to acquire a new reputation as an aggressive union leader who was winning concessions for his followers despite the depression. Lewis's own exultant reports of these triumphs were well-publicized by District 26 officers in local Nova Scotia newspapers.¹¹⁸

The AMW was not crushed by these developments, but it could never recover the initiative and momentum of its first year and once committed to a prolonged dual union struggle soon moved away from the ultra-democratic posture of its beginning.¹¹⁹ In particular, the union found it was very weak

¹¹⁵*Glace Bay Gazette*, 16, 17, 18 19, 21 and 23 May 1934.

¹¹⁶The AMW remained in Sydney Mines until 1938, two years after its district organization was dissolved.

¹¹⁷Dubofsky and Van Tine, *John L. Lewis*, 183-90.

¹¹⁸*Glace Bay Gazette*, 26 June, 8 July, 4, 10 October 1933.

¹¹⁹This seem to have been a common experience in the communist led WUL unions of the period. See John Manley, "The Workers Unity League."

organizationally and financially; it had only one full-time officer and it was unable to pay him regularly.¹²⁰ The AMW policy of "across the wicket" dues collection had failed badly; the impoverished miners did not pay their dues and the union was close to collapse as a district organization. In autumn 1933 the AMW reversed its policy on voluntary dues collection and began to demand the company check-off, and the struggle for the check-off became a major issue in the inter-union rivalry in 1934 and 1935.¹²¹

The new Liberal government of Angus L. MacDonald and its Minister of Mines and Labor, Michael Dwyer, seemed at first to be more impartial on the union issue than the Conservatives had been, particularly when, in December 1933, it advised Dosco that the existing law required it to check-off dues for the AMW, as it did for the UMW, when requested to do so by employees.¹²² In early 1934, however, the government put through a law that required the company to collect dues only for the union with the greatest number of signed up deduction requests. Card counts were to be held on 15 November each year. The AMW protested the unfairness of having the card counts administered by Dosco officials who were biased against their union, but the government passed the bill, refusing an amendment that a secret ballot be substituted for the company count.¹²³

A card count was held in November 1934 and again in 1935. In both of these the UMW cards were declared to be in a slight majority for almost all companies: Dominion Coal Company in Glace Bay and New Waterford, Cumberland Railway and Coal Company in Springhill, Acadia Mines in Stellarton, and the smaller non-Dosco companies throughout the province. The single exception was Scotia at Sydney Mines, where all the miners had put in AMW cards.¹²⁴ In 1934 the count in Glace Bay was 2848 for the AMW and 2293 for the UMW, but since in New Waterford sub-district the count was 1663 UMW and 435 AMW, the UMW won the check-off for all of the Dominion Coal Company, which encompassed both sub-districts. In Pictou county the count was 641 UMW and 549 AMW, while in Springhill the UMW had 722 and the AMW 508. The UMW also got 100 per cent of the cards for the non-Dosco mines in Inverness, Joggins, River Hebert, and elsewhere, so that its overall total was 6604 to the AMW's 6066.¹²⁵ In 1935 the position was almost unchanged in all areas except Springhill, where the approximately

¹²⁰ AMW Financial Report, 1 August 1933 to 31 October 1933, UMWA Papers, PANS.

¹²¹ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 20 September 1933.

¹²² *Glace Bay Gazette*, 13 December 1933.

¹²³ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 29 March, 3, 25, 28 April, 1 May 1934.

¹²⁴ *Sydney Post Record*, 16 November 1934; *Glace Bay Gazette*, 20 November 1935.

¹²⁵ These figures are those presented at the January 1935 AMW convention as the final official count in *Glace Bay Gazette*, 22 January 1935. They are slightly more favourable to the UMW than the figures given immediately after the count in *Glace Bay Gazette*, 17 November 1934.

500 AMW cards of 1934 were transferred to the UMW, giving a district-wide UMW total of 7221 and an AMW total of 5754.¹²⁶ It should be noted that the AMW had a majority in Cape Breton in both counts, and this majority increased slightly in 1935. After each of the counts the AMW men charged, probably with some truth to their claims, that fraud and intimidation of workers by the company officials had falsified the results, and the union entered into fruitless legal action on this.¹²⁷ The AMW was able to hold the check-off only in Sydney Mines, and its finances suffered greatly thereafter.

The provincial government had also showed its partisanship in the role played by Mines Minister Dwyer at the small mine in Inverness, where he helped force the AMW minority back into the UMW.¹²⁸ But it was the activity of Dwyer during January 1935 in Springhill that caused Bob Stewart to refer publically to him as a "four-flusher."¹²⁹ It was only in late 1934 that the AMW got any organized following in Springhill, but in the November 1934 card count the UMW were shocked to find that close to half the miners submitted AMW cards.¹³⁰ The Springhill UMW organization acted swiftly and ruthlessly. By January most miners were back in the UMW, and then a strike was called to enforce the dismissal of the local AMW leadership. This was the only time and place in which organized violence was used in the inter-union struggle; several of the AMW men were brutally beaten by groups of UMW men. A crowd forced Bob Stewart out of town, and the most prominent local AMW leader, James Columbine, was beaten up, blacklisted by the company, and eventually deported to his native Wales as an immigrant living off relief.¹³¹ The strike was fully successful in forcing the Springhill AMW out of existence, and Minister Dwyer went out of his way to facilitate this UMW victory by his public statements and personal attempts to talk the AMW miners over.¹³² The UMW leadership attempted other strikes for the closed shop where they were in the majority, at Stellarton in May 1934,¹³³ and at New Waterford in July 1935,¹³⁴ but in both cases most UMW miners refused to participate in shutting AMW men out of the mines, and the strikes failed.

¹²⁶*Glance Bay Gazette*, 17 November 1935.

¹²⁷*Glance Bay Gazette*, 26, 30 November, 12 December 1934; Protest submission to M. Dwyer by AMW lawyers, 19 November 1934, UMWA Papers, PANS.

¹²⁸*Glance Bay Gazette*, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12 December 1933.

¹²⁹*Glance Bay Gazette*, 7 February 1935. Because of this and because an AMW convention voted to consign a letter from Angus L. MacDonald "To the wastebasket," the government refused to correspond with the AMW for months.

¹³⁰*Glance Bay Gazette*, 17 November 1934.

¹³¹Wade, *History*.

¹³²*Glance Bay Gazette*, 23, 25, 26, 30 January, 2, 4, 5, 7 February 1935; *Halifax Herald*, 30 January, 5 February 1935.

¹³³*Glance Bay Gazette*, 25 May 1934.

¹³⁴*Sydney Post Record*, 29 July 1935.

The card counts had shown that the AMW was holding most of its membership, but everyone could also see that the UMW was never going to be driven from the district. By 1935 there was some slight upturn in the economy, and it could be hoped that a united movement could wrest more from Dosco than the very slight concessions the company had granted the UMW since the split began. In January 1935 the two year contract signed by the UMW had provided only 5 per cent increases for the datal men and nothing for contract miners.¹³⁵ Thus the necessity for unity was growing more urgent for many miners, and probably the AMW men in particular, who were cut off from any negotiations with Dosco.

At this time, also, a major shift in the policy of the Communist Party led local communists to move decisively towards unity in the miners' movement. Unity was now the major theme being promoted by the central leadership of the Communist Party in its Canada-wide, trade union policy, leading to the disbanding of the WUL and the return of its constituent unions to the TLC. This was a policy springing from the Comintern's strategy of the "United Front Against Fascism and War," and also from the situation in the North American trade union movement at this time, with communists eager to participate in the CIO struggles for industrial unions. Formerly reactionary union leaders like John L. Lewis were now promoting the CIO, and the abandonment of rhetorical attacks on such union leaders seemed the necessary price communists had to pay to become involved in the new industrial union movement, the most exciting development in North American unionism in the century.

At the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee, held in November 1935, the Communist Party made clear its new policy, publishing the major speeches in a pamphlet.¹³⁶ The keynote speaker was Stewart Smith, who had been the Canadian party's delegate to the Seventh Congress of the Comintern. Interspersed with quotations from G. Dimitroff's speech at the Seventh Congress, Smith explained that for Canadian communists achieving the Popular Front Against Fascism and War meant fighting for trade union unity and also for a united front with the CCF. This policy was enthusiastically supported by almost all participants in the plenum. J.B. McLachlan, however, argued that Nova Scotia had no CCF with which to unite, and that while the miners were for one union in Nova Scotia, they were not ready to unite with the UMW.¹³⁷ In his "Reply to Discussion" Stewart Smith agreed that in "such a situation as we have in Nova Scotia, there must be no running ahead," but unity was necessary and workers "must be and can be convinced if the proper

¹³⁵ *Glace Bay Gazette*, 29 January 1935.

¹³⁶ *Towards a Canadian Peoples Front. Reports and Speeches at the Ninth Plenum of the Central Committee, Communist Party of Canada* (Toronto 1935).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 152, 153.

work is conducted.”¹³⁸ Party organizer Bill Findlay was sent to Cape Breton to work for unification, and in the months that followed McLachlan reluctantly co-operated in a unification process that led inexorably to AMW surrender to the UMW.

In early 1936, after two inconclusive meetings between the AMW and UMW executives on the question of unity had occurred, a rank-and-file unity movement got underway on the initiative of AMW miners from which officers of both unions were explicitly excluded.¹³⁹ Both executives were willing to comply. The UMW officers had made it clear that they would accept unity only on their terms, the return of the men to the UMW, and rightly judged that if they held firm this would be the result. The AMW leaders were in a situation providing few options, and may have hoped that a rank-and-file unity movement could be turned into a “united front from below” that would bring about reunification on the best possible terms. A unity committee with representation from both AMW and UMW locals met frequently over the following months. The reports of these meetings show a steady trend of AMW concessions in the face of UMW threats of withdrawal.¹⁴⁰

In the end the unity agreement provided that all the AMW members would return to the UMW with no new initiation fees and with full membership rights.¹⁴¹ The AMW executive agreed to this, provided John L. Lewis give assurance that he would respect District 26 autonomy in the future. Lewis thereupon sent a letter which read, on this point:

The autonomy given District 26 is one of the fullest. There is no desire on the part of the officers of the International union to intrude upon or impair the autonomous rights of the District in any manner or form.¹⁴²

Given Lewis's known record of autocratic behaviour, this letter had little value other than saving face for the surrendering AMW. And this was, in reality, an unconditional surrender to the UMW by the AMW, as was made clear when the AMW officers were all required to sign special loyalty oaths before being allowed membership rights in the UMW, even though this contravened the unity agreement.¹⁴³

Reunification with the UMW had been accepted by J.B. McLachlan with great reluctance, and shortly after this he resigned from the Communist Party. With his many years of bitter hostility to John L. Lewis, McLachlan could

¹³⁸*Ibid.*, 65.

¹³⁹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 13 December 1935 and 22 January 1936.

¹⁴⁰*Glace Bay Gazette*, 13, 15, 22, 27 January, 1, 10, 12 February, 9, 21, 30 March 1936.

¹⁴¹*Glace Bay Gazette*, 30 March, 1 April 1936.

¹⁴²Wade, *History*.

¹⁴³*Glace Bay Gazette*, 9, 11 May 1936.

never believe Lewis had become a progressive union leader, and perhaps his personal hatred for Lewis was an important element in this decision. But it is also probable that he saw the new unity line of the party as being taken too far, to the point of avoiding any criticism of reactionaries like Lewis, of abandoning the communist principle of struggle within unity.¹⁴⁴ He continued to criticize Lewis sharply in *The Nova Scotia Miner*. For example, when Lewis forced through a vote at the 1936 UMW convention which gave him, as International President, the unrestrained right to depose district officers throughout the union, this led McLachlan to write that no one except a "swollen, impudent, aspiring fascist" would seek such power.¹⁴⁵ McLachlan came under sharp criticism for writing such articles from the Communist Party organizer, Bill Findlay, criticism he would not accept.¹⁴⁶ To McLachlan, communist participation in the CIO organizing campaigns, the building of trade union unity and anti-fascist unity were important, but the party was going too far to placate leaders like Lewis, and abandoning the principles of class struggle.

It is easy to understand why communists involved in CIO organizing struggles, like George MacEachern at the Sydney steel plant, might say: "I felt Lewis had changed. And I felt we had to trust him. We *had* no bloody choice there."¹⁴⁷ John L. Lewis had changed his policies in fact, since he was supporting militant struggles and he was prepared to work with communists. He had also become the symbolic leader of the CIO for workers all over North America, gaining a wide prestige never equalled by any other union leader. Communists had good reasons for feeling they had "no bloody choice" but to refrain from attacks on Lewis at this time, or even fully to abstain from joining in the chorus of praise for him. But this meant that they had to turn a blind eye to the fact that Lewis, however militant he might be, had abandoned none of his dictatorial practices within his union.

This was the beginning of the period when communists in Canada and the United States had their greatest impact as union organizers. But with their acceptance of these opportunities, some part of their earlier emphasis on the class struggle, and on rank-and-file democracy in the unions, was lost. The policies of this time, and even more the circumstances during the war and the succeeding cold war, led communists in unions to downplay or even to conceal their political affiliation. They also came to rely a great deal more

¹⁴⁴ John Manley argues this view of McLachlan's position in his thesis and in "Red Unions in Cape Breton," unpublished paper, n.d., Dalhousie University.

¹⁴⁵ "Lewis Becomes Dictator of UMW," *Nova Scotia Miner*, 8 February 1936. See also "Everything Charged Against AFL by Lewis He Does in UMWA Only More So," *Nova Scotia Miner*, 29 February, 1936.

¹⁴⁶ David Frank and Donald MacGillivray, eds., *George MacEachern: An Autobiography* (Sydney 1987), 96.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

on holding positions in the leadership of unions, a false reliance that did little to preserve them from later being purged from unions they had done much to build. It is impossible to know how much of this perspective was in the mind of J.B. McLachlan in 1936, but he could surely see that the UMW was as far from being a democratic, rank-and-file union as it had ever been, and that the Communist Party was prepared to ignore this unpleasant truth.

It is also possible that McLachlan was generally unhappy with the Communist Party policy of striving for a united front with the CCF at this time. This is much more plausible than the claim made by several writers that he himself was soon urging that the miners "get together with Woodsworth and his group in the west."¹⁴⁸ In fact, this was exactly the policy that the Communist Party had adopted, trying to efface completely its earlier characterization of the CCF as "social fascist."¹⁴⁹ But it is difficult to believe that J.B. McLachlan, like a repenting sinner on his deathbed, turned to the CCF, a party he had denounced as "the bosses' third party in Canada" soon after its formation.¹⁵⁰ McLachlan, after all, left the Communist Party on the grounds that it had moved too far to the right. In his letter of resignation to Tim Buck he wrote: "I refuse to follow the Party in Canada in its sad march to the right."¹⁵¹

McLachlan died the following year, but his break with the party had badly disrupted communist organization and influence in Cape Breton. Certainly a number of other party members and sympathizers went with him, including Bob Stewart, the AMW secretary-treasurer.¹⁵² The Communist Party did not lose all its influence in the area, but it was never to recover the position it held prior to McLachlan's resignation. The party centre to some extent placed less importance on working among the miners, being preoccupied with anti-fascist unity. It was about this time that the Nova Scotia centre for the party was moved from Glace Bay to Halifax on the grounds that this was the political capital of the province, even though the party had relatively few followers there.¹⁵³ In the "united front" period, also, the party no longer publicly put forward an independent platform. In the 1937 provincial election in Glace Bay, for example, local communists were very active in the Cape Breton Labour Party and the election campaign of the Rev. William Mercer.¹⁵⁴ In 1938 the District 26 UMW convention voted to

¹⁴⁸ MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers*, 189; Mellor, *The Company Store*, 337.

¹⁴⁹ G. Pierce (Stewart Smith), *Socialism and the CCF* (Montreal 1934).

¹⁵⁰ See "The Careerists," *Nova Scotia Miner*, 25 February 1933.

¹⁵¹ McLachlan to Buck, 13 June 1936, quoted in Manley, thesis, "Workers Unity League," 371. I have been unable to obtain sight of this letter, which is partially quoted by several writers.

¹⁵² Stewart rejoined the party some years later.

¹⁵³ Interview with Dane Parker, Halifax, 23 May 1985.

¹⁵⁴ See *Glace Bay Gazette*, 12 June 1937, in which James Madden and Fred Brodie, both

affiliate to the CCF, the first union organization in Canada to do so, and in 1940 Clarie Gillis was elected to Parliament, becoming the only CCF Member from a constituency east of Manitoba. This was not a matter, however, of the communists having lost all influence, since in 1938 the communists supported the UMW affiliation with the CCF in the provincial election, surprising as this may be in light of developments a few years later.¹⁵⁵ A strong case can be made that it was the rightward move of the Communist Party, above all else, that paved the way for the CCF electoral victories in Cape Breton.

The defeat of the AMW, therefore, had brought about a serious weakening of communist influence in the area. As a rebellion against the international and its policies, none of the AMW's aims were achieved. It had aimed for militant action to win concessions on wages, but the split in the union movement had weakened the miners in relation to the company, and probably brought about lower wage settlements during those years. An opposite case might be argued that the coal company moderated its demands for wage-cuts because of the threat of the AMW, but this seems doubtful. Further, the AMW and UMW split had probably facilitated Dosco's establishment of substantially lower rates paid the Sydney Mines and Stellarton miners compared to those in Glace Bay, New Waterford, and Springhill, a differential that continued for years, even after the Acadia and Scotia coal companies were reunited with Dosco in 1939.

The break with the international had also been an attempt to bring more democracy and district autonomy to the union, but the UMW with which the AMW men reunited was even more bureaucratic than the organization they had left. During the split the rump UMW had lengthened the officers' terms of office, and strengthened the district executive's control over the finances of the locals, by having the check-off remitted by the company to the district office rather than to the locals, as had been the previous practice. Never again could disgruntled locals withhold their "per capita" dues payments from the international, as some had done prior to 1932.

For the AMW miners their organization failed to achieve any advancement of their living standards in a hard time, but perhaps it did bring one real benefit to its members. The hardships, the humiliation of living on relief, the insecurity, and the fear for the future with which people lived in the depression years are often said to have taken a severe emotional toll. The AMW and the radical ideology with which it was associated told the workers that none of this was their fault, but the fault of the capitalist system, and that they

active communists at this time, are prominently mentioned as supporters. This was a real "United Front" campaign, since UMW right-wingers like Silby Barrett were also involved.¹⁵⁵ See John C. Mortimer article, *Steelworker* (Sydney), 27 August 1938; report of Tim Buck speech praising affiliation decision, *Steelworker*, 24 September 1938; and Buck speech, *Daily Clarion*, 23 August 1938.

could make efforts to assert their own control over their circumstances. The extent to which this helped to improve the pride and self-esteem of the miners, and raise hopes for the future, may have been great.

And there were ways in which the militants could regard their defeat as being mitigated. There were no expulsions or blacklistings, and all the AMW men were soon able to play a full part in the reunited UMW. There was also some degree of heightened activity by the old district executive in the 1936-1938 period, a time of uneasy unity between left and right in both labour politics and in the UMW itself. Little substantial increase was won in the miners' wages, but these were the years in which the new "CIO" UMW made a strong drive to organize the miners of Minto, New Brunswick, and played a considerable role in helping the unionization of the Sydney steelworkers and in bringing about the 1937 Nova Scotia Trade Union Act.¹⁵⁶ Glace Bay miners in 1938 were also able to defeat a company effort to introduce new machinery into the mines that would have led to a large reduction in the work force. Because of this strong resistance and the wartime conditions, the large-scale mechanization and rationalization of the mines was in fact put off for a decade, until after the district-wide strike of 1947.

The AMW-UMW split, as an episode in the history of District 26, can be viewed validly as evidence of the continuity of the miners' radicalism over many years and as a turning point in the nature of this radicalism. The AMW assertion of the class struggle form of unionism against the UMW's business unionism provided a bridge carrying forward a radical leadership and a tradition of militance from the bitter strikes of the 1920s to the later period of the 1930s and the 1940s. But the AMW was a rebellion that failed, and the defeat of such a protracted effort to break from the UMW had long-term effects. After this political radicalism still maintained some hold on the miners' consciousness, but in a somewhat diluted and declining form. For a time almost undiminished union militancy continued to exist, but it was increasingly to be channelled and constrained by the legal framework of collective bargaining and the institutional practices of business unionism. The militants could take no decisive action against this trend, remembering well the defeat of the AMW. No serious attempt to replace the international was to be made again until more than 40 years had passed.

The transformation that had taken place in the nature of the miners' radicalism can be seen by a brief glance at the early wartime events in the union, by which time the truce between right and left in the UMW had broken

¹⁵⁶ This act, the first in Canada to explicitly state the obligation of employers to allow their employees to form unions, also included the right to the check-off of union dues, unlike the other provincial acts that soon followed. The Angus L. MacDonald government, in including this clause, was probably influenced by its appreciation of the way in which its 1934 modification of the check-off provision in the Coal Mines Regulation Act helped the moderate UMW defeat the radical AMW.

down. During 1939 and 1940 the miners worked without a contract, having voted down the contracts negotiated by the executive, still led by D.W. Morrison and Silby Barrett. During this time there were almost weekly wildcat strikes at different mines, while the district and international executives futilely threatened disciplinary action. In 1941 the district executive signed a poor contract without placing it before the miners for the customary pithead referendum. In a remarkable display of rank-and-file solidarity, the Cape Breton miners responded with a four months slowdown strike, demanding the removal of the executive and a better contract. They refused even to speak to the district officers, and defied federal and provincial governments and editorial denunciations from one end of Canada to the other for this unpatriotic sabotage of the war effort. The miners protested that they were as patriotic as any Canadians, but nonetheless they were determined to demand their right to a decent standard of living.

No cry arose for a rejection of the UMW or John L. Lewis, however, through all of this, although it was abundantly clear that the international leadership supported the hated district executive, and most of the leaders of this rank-and-file rebellion were former AMW men. In this crisis Lewis appointed Silby Barrett and later William Sneed of Pennsylvania as provisional heads of the district to try and bring the miners back under union discipline. Instead of denouncing Lewis and the international, the miners again and again appealed to Lewis to intervene, to investigate, and to rectify the terrible things that the officers were doing in his name. Part of this response may have had to do with the immense prestige Lewis had by this time, but it must primarily be understood as a defeatist attitude regarding any attempt to break from the UMW because of the fresh memory of the AMW's defeat.

The "curtailment of production" strike was finally defeated, but in the following year, 1942, the miners voted in a new "left" executive, almost all of whom had been prominent leaders of the AMW. District 26 was to remain a relatively militant union organization for some years to come, but the trend away from AMW-style direct union democracy continued. During the split, for example, the rump UMW had changed from annual district elections and conventions to the holding of elections and conventions every two years. In 1942 this was changed to every four years. Thus when, in 1950, District President Freeman Jenkins veered sharply to the right in his policies, the declining strength of the union militants could do little to oppose him, despite the general outrage of the miners at his actions. With the support of the international, Jenkins engaged in a red-baiting campaign. He also declared the only opposing nominee for President, Bob Stewart, ineligible on a technicality, and announced himself to be re-elected by acclamation for a further four year term. Little of the old militancy was left in the 1950s as the mines closed down or were modernized to produce coal with a reduced work force,

and little of the rank-and-file control over their union the AMW miners had fought for remained.

Nonetheless, if it was a failure, the AMW was in some respects a very interesting failure. It was a communist-led union of a period in which these unions often have been characterized as left adventurist, alienated from the majority of workers, and hence ineffectual. Yet it was clearly the support of the company and the government that preserved the UMW, while the majority of the miners were enthusiastic adherents of the AMW. And in its constitution and style of unionism the AMW represented something of a forlorn last effort of radical trade unionists to resist a major transformation that was to come about in the union movement as the large CIO industrial unions were built. The UMW more than any other union served as the model for these new industrial unions, and the battles of radicals and business unionists within the UMW foreshadowed the campaigns of the late 1940s to drive communists from the unions, but by then even the communists had modified their concepts of rank-and-file unionism. The direct democracy that the AMW attempted to institute could never be compatible with the type of contract with the corporations that was to become standard, nor with the government regulation of union affairs that went along with laws establishing the right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining. Implicit in these contracts and these laws is the idea that the union must exercise control and discipline over the workers at the workplace, holding its membership to the contract and to the law, preventing spontaneous and immediate worker struggles for control of the work environment. Unions were to bring about great advances in wage levels, particularly in times of economic prosperity, but they often became primarily organizations of social control rather than instruments of class struggle. The history of the Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia can serve to remind us that a different and more radical tradition in Canadian trade unionism has existed.

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