

God Goes Underground: The Involvement of Churches in Early Twentieth-Century Cape Breton Labour Disputes

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On 30 July [1909, United Mine Workers] supporters marched in a parade from Glace Bay to the neighbouring coal town of Dominion . . . Here the town council had favoured the calling of troops, and when the UMW parade was announced, the town council had passed a by-law prohibiting parades without proper permits. As the parade proceeded through downtown Glace Bay, past several collieries and on towards Dominion, there were some 3,000 people in the line of march. President Dan McDougall, mounted on a white horse, led the way. Flags and banners were held high, and songs of the strike filled the air.

Along the boundary line between Glace Bay and Dominion there ran a small creek, crossed by a wooden bridge. On the far side of the creek on a small height of land commanding the roadway, stood the Church of the Immaculate Conception. The soldiers were there in force, standing at attention with fixed bayonets. On the steps of the church the soldiers had mounted their guns. The parade stopped. A town councillor came rushing up to McDougall, breathless with information: "For God's sake, Dan, don't come any further. The soldiers have been ordered to shoot but to shoot low."¹

The Bishop was unaware that Father Charles Macdonald had given permission for the militia to mount its machine gun on the church steps and

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Father Macdonald found himself transferred from this parish in rather quick order.²

In 2019, many organizations, including churches, are commemorating the centenary of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Names such as Woodsworth, Bland, Pidgeon, Ivens, and Gordon are being lifted up for their support of labour struggles during this strike and during the tumultuous time of postwar employment issues in Canada. While the nation's attention was focused on Winnipeg events the tensions between miners and the mine owners (most notably Dominion Coal Company) were rising. Several work slowdowns, work stoppages, and complete strikes of different lengths occurred. Events in the Cape Breton area led to government inquiries and commissions that resulted in changes to labour legislations. However, most Canadians outside the Maritime area are unfamiliar with these events and mention of church reaction and involvement is negligible.

Clergy served in the pastoral charges. Regional ecclesial governance bodies knew what was happening. Did they care? What did they say? What did they do?

Starting to Dig

Labour disputes between coal companies and miners in Cape Breton existed for most of the twentieth century. This paper focuses on the era between 1905 and 1925. The year 1905 was shortly after the consolidation of the Dominion Coal Company and the beginning of its domination of the Cape Breton coal industry, as well as the year John Moffat became Grand Secretary of the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA). The year 1925 was shortly after the British Empire Steel and Coal Company (BESCO) came into existence, uniting the coal and steel industries; it was also the year the Duncan Royal Commission was convened and the United Church of Canada was formed.³ Each of these events resulted in significant changes in both work life and church life. Dominion, Cape Breton, was the headquarters for the PWA and Glace Bay for the UMW, so it seemed logical to focus on these two communities and their immediate surrounding areas.

The two best-known writings about this era are John Mellor's *The Company Store* and David Frank's *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography*. Mellor's book is no longer considered to be historically accurate. It is, however,

quite passionate, provides “jumping off points” and contains interviews with people who remembered both strikes. Frank’s book is a biography that has a narrow focus and being written fifteen years after Mellor’s, has fewer interviews of people alive during the strikes. Most of the interviews contained within its covers are from the second era of labour unrest. Frank’s book is much more accurate. Other scholarly chapters and papers from sociological, political, economic and labour studies perspectives are also available. However, studies from the perspective of the church or pertaining to the involvement of the church could not be found.

There are many primary sources available. Primary sources include mine records, government documents; diaries; newspapers, both secular and faith based; and Conference, Presbytery, and Synod records for the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.⁴ There were so many of these documents that, in the length of time available to research this paper, they could not be reviewed adequately. Unfortunately, clergy and their families are not good at submitting personal papers and sermons to archives. Pastoral charges are also somewhat remiss in submitting records, especially financial ones. As these limiting parameters became apparent it was necessary to expand the geographic area of study.

Methodist District and Conference minutes, at least in Sydney District and Maritime Conference, usually did not attach reports and so, in many cases, the minutes contain motions without explanation, and very rarely include financial records. Fortunately, many of the local clergy and some of the governance body officials did write articles or columns for local papers and so some sense of their positions on the labour disputes is available. One of the best resources for the Presbyterian church’s response to the disputes is *The Presbyterian Witness*, a Nova Scotia Presbyterian newspaper published weekly from the mid-1800s until 1925 when the United Church of Canada formed.

Mining the Information

Dissatisfaction within the ranks of miners had existed for a long time before the first major work actions took place. There had been a variety of localized actions in various mines and finally, with the formation of the PWA, it seemed there might be some opportunity to negotiate for better conditions, in the same way as was beginning to happen in the UK.

In 1908 Kier Hardie, a Scottish labour activist and the first Labour

MP in Westminster, visited Cape Breton. It was with his visit that the local miners got their first sense of how the church responded to labour organization. Hardie was to give a lecture on the Sunday afternoon of his visit and space had been rented in St. Andrew's Church Hall in Sydney Mines. "According to the account in the *Sydney Post*, 'the arrangement was cancelled when the lessees learned the nature of the meeting to be a labor demonstration' As a result, the assembly was forced to move to an open field near Trinity Church on Queen Street, where Hardie addressed a big crowd from the back of a wagon."⁵ Shortly after the event occurred, Rev. Don Gillies of Glace Bay wrote, "Of late it has not been unusual to hold political meetings on the Lord's Day. A few Sabbaths ago a distinguished member of the British Parliament addressed a Labor Mass-Meeting in one of our mining centres. To the credit of the Christian people of the town, no building in their community could be got for the purpose of the meeting."⁶

In 1909, the miners of Cape Breton who affiliated with the UMW downed tools to demand the right to select their own union. They believed that the PWA was a "yellow" or company union. Whether or not workers should be allowed to select their own representatives became a matter of debate in several circles, including the church.⁷ On 10 August 1909 the *Glace Bay Standard* published a column headline that read "Rev. Father John Fraser Condemns Slanderous and Lying Statements and Urges Miners to Stick Together." The priest at St. John's, Glace Bay, in a sermon encouraged miners to stick together but also to preserve the peace. He concluded his sermon "pointing out how shameful and outrageous was the action of the company in attempting to force its employees into belonging to a labor organization that was of no service or help to the men, but on the other hand, a plaything of the company."⁸ On 7 October 1909 the same newspaper reported Bishop Sbarretti, Apostolic Delegate and priest at the Church for Dominion Coal No. 2, forbade Father Fraser from making any more comments on the strike.⁹ The same disagreements about whether the union should choose its representatives or the employer select with whom it could negotiate played out in opinion pages of newspapers throughout the province, including the *Presbyterian Witness*.

On 6 July, the day the strike was called, the Riot Act was read at Colliery No. 2 and the militia was called in. This was the first of the six times that the coal company called for the militia between 1909 and 1925 and all but one time the militia was sent. On at least one occasion the

militia was sent against the wishes of the mayor and town council.¹⁰ The incident reported at the beginning of this paper occurred during the third week of the 1909 strike. On the same day as the machine gun incident, the Dominion Coal Company began to evict people from their homes. The company owned all homes and a condition of the lease was that at least one resident held company employment. Striking miners and their families were evicted during their dinner, while they were sleeping at night, and sick individuals were removed with their beds. A tent city began to grow on the edge of Glace Bay.¹¹

In its 31 August 1909 minutes, the Presbytery of Sydney recorded:

A letter given in by Mr. N. McQueen resigning his pastorate of St. Luke's Congregation, Dominion No6, was read. The reason given for the resignation was the changed state of calling conditions there resulting from the Miner's [*sic*] strike. The parish thus ceasing to be self-supporting Mr. McQueen stated that announcement – that the resignation would come before Presbytery had been made on Sunday from the pulpit – and that a Congregational meeting subsequently held Messrs Duncan McLeod, Norman Robertson and Donald [illegible] had been anointed to appear before Presbytery in the Matter. It was agreed to hear these communications. They testified to the sound work done by Mr. McQueen whose pastorate had been in every way most satisfactory to all concerned, but stated that under the circumstances, and until a change for the better in Colliery affairs took place there could not be a self-supporting parish, and though very sorry to have to part with him they could not oppose the accepting of Mr. McQueen's resignation.

On Motion of Dr. Pringle, seconded by Mr. Al McMillan, Mr. McQueen's resignation was accepted, his pastorate to conclude with Sunday next, September fifth, and that Mr. Mc[illegible] act as Moderator for the Kirk-session of St. Luke's church pastorate. [Illegible] asked the practical sympathy of the Presbytery with the congregation of St. Luke's church Dominion No. 6 in its trying circumstances, and requested advice [illegible] the [illegible] of its suffering.

Whereupon on motion of Mr. John Macintosh it was agreed to appoint a committee to consider the question and report. The Moderator named Messrs. D.H. McKinnon, D.N. MacKae, and J.W.

McPaxil as such committee, and leave was granted them to meet during session of Presbytery that they might report before adjournment.

Later at the same meeting, it was reported:

Mr. D.H. McKinnon reported from the committee appointed to consider the question as to the pastoral suffering for St. Luke's Church in Dominion No. 6, recommending that said congregation "be for the present [illegible] placed on the Home Missions list, as a Mission Station and that the moderator [illegible] of the congregation, assisted by ministers of the neighboring [*sic*] congregations be authorized to arrange for such suitable supply as can be obtained for the winter months. This report was on a motion of Mr. John MacKinnon adopted.¹²

This Presbytery's minutes and the Presbytery's reporting of its action to the Synod are the only references to the strike that could be found in any of the official church documents for 1909 and 1910 reviewed to date. Through the whole winter of 1909-10 families lived and died in canvas tents. The strike concluded in April 1910 with Dominion Coal still refusing to recognize the UMW, but the miners were beaten.

At the Presbyterian General Assembly immediately following the strike, the Moral and Social Reform Committee reported on its work in Nova Scotia. The major portion of their report pertained to Temperance and its success in that the entire province, with the exception of three counties, was under prohibition and none of those counties had obtained new licenses.¹³ The report continued about Gambling, Sabbath Observance, The Social Evil and finally Industrial Problems where the record states "Even in the case of industrial centres where problems are recognized, according to the reports the problems are not numerous, widespread, alarming or even serious. It would seem that only to a very limited extent are working men out of sympathy with the Church, excepting those who have recently come from the Mother Country, or the Continent of Europe." A few lines down the committee reports, "From Cape Breton comes the report that Socialism is making perhaps slow but steady progress among the masses and among the limited number who are intelligently studying industrial and social problems, but that it is not of the anti-church or anti-religious type, and by no means to be deprecated. From the other end of the

Dominion, namely, at the Pacific Coast, comes the report that the prevalent type of Socialism in the extreme West is distinctly anti-church and anti-religious and that it is not making very rapid or alarming progress.”¹⁴

Digging Deeper

Some church voices in the west of Canada were beginning to be outspoken. They were influencing seminaries, church meetings, and in 1918 influenced the Methodist Conference of Canada to proclaim:

Without committing the church to any definite social or economic programme we aim to co-operate whenever practicable with labor unions, employers' associations, and other bodies interested in industrial problems, with a view to securing better conditions in the labor world . . . We are always urgent for legislation that will decrease the suffering of the toilers and their families and improve their general well being.¹⁵

The national Methodist church had stated it wanted something different for workers and church voices were heard, particularly in Manitoba. They were heard in the pulpits, in the media, in Union Halls, in meetings, in political settings in the streets, but they were not heard in Cape Breton except, on occasion, in the Union Halls.

Following the execution of the Russian Czar and his family, “the rise of Bolshevism” and the Winnipeg General Strike, Canadian corporations saw socialism, communism, sedition and danger in anything that resembled equity for all people, including labour organization. After the disruption of the First World War and the lesser labour disturbances prior to 1920 the government of Nova Scotia was particularly concerned about communism and coal worker stoppages. When the miners again downed tools to support the steelworkers, who were on strike to improve working conditions, the churches were almost invisible. The coal and steel dispute(s) of the 1920s were some of the worst labour conflicts in Canadian history. Four generations removed it is still frequently referred to in Cape Breton as “The Big Strike.”¹⁶ When the UMW first downed tools the response of the companies was to reinforce the company police; the response of the provincial government was to establish a special

provincial police force; and the response of the federal government was to reinforce the militia, and send in the RCMP.

The strike was just a couple of weeks old, and by all accounts quite calm when, on 1 July 1923, “the Provincial Police charged the crowd through the subway and Victoria Road, with the result that quite a number of strikers and other people were injured.”¹⁷ Various reports are much more dramatic and terrifying than this official report of the RCMP. It was this incident that led to the miners laying down tools in support of the Sydney Steelworkers.

Church responses appear to have been mixed. To date no record has been found that indicates any official denominational stance to the various disruptions, at least up to the end of 1922. It must be remembered that concurrent with the Cape Breton coal and steel strike the Methodist Church book steward, Samuel Fallis, was representing all the publishers in the Toronto district during the typographical strike. There was sufficient hand wringing, complaint and embarrassment over the church’s position during the printers’ strike situation after the 1918 “Methodist Statement” without becoming involved in the coal and steel issue in Cape Breton.¹⁸

Rev. Donald M. Gillies, who had served the congregation of St. Paul’s in Glace Bay through the 1909-10 strike was still there during the beginning of labour disputes and the strike of the 1920s, and he wrote an article for the *Presbyterian Witness* that was similar in tone to one he had written in 1908.¹⁹ At the same time, pastoral care was being offered to striking miners and their families who were once again being kicked out of their homes. The UMW had arranged with truckers (horse and cart) to pick up the furniture and take it to new quarters. Some were sheltered in parish churches, halls and glebe houses. One man, Nod McPherson, told Joseph Steele, the economist, that he was given rooms in the Glebe House, and added that he was “not Catholic at all.” Steele’s own family was among those who found shelter in a parish hall divided into four quarters to house miners’ families.²⁰ Due to time constraints the events of 1923 is where the research for this paper concludes.

Follow the Money

Unlike Winnipeg, the board directors of coal companies did not live in the same community as the workers. Only one director lived in Nova Scotia. The rest were in Boston, New York, Montreal, Quebec City, and

England. The economic realities of mine life were unseen by most of them.

The financial realities, as reported by John Mellor, were quite unique to Cape Breton:

Living in company towns and company houses, forced to buy food and other necessities of life from company-owned stores, worshipping in churches where the collection was deducted along with other debts from their weekly pay envelopes, miners and steelworkers in Cape Breton felt they were in grave danger of being subjugated into a medieval form of serfdom that could eventually prove as oppressive as that experienced by the lower classes in Britain during the Middle Ages.²¹

As well as the records of the Dominion Coal Company, the Beaton Institute Archives has hundreds, if not thousands, of pay envelopes, sheets, and slips. These slips prove Mellor's words were true. Joseph P. MacLean picked up his pay packet on 16 July 1909 (probably from his last pay period before the strike). He had worked 3.5 days for \$1.49 a day giving him \$5.21. He mined 16.5 tons of coal at 10 cents a ton and so received an additional \$16.50. From this \$21.71, a total of \$13.50 was deducted for his debt to the company, which left him with \$8.21 for fifteen days of work. From this the powder and oil for work were deducted at 30 cents, the doctor's insurance was 40 cents, the weighman's bill was 25 cents, cash owed the store was 20 cents, the relief fund 25 cents, and finally the church deduction was \$1.50.

Because no congregational financial records have surfaced, it is difficult to know how the congregations received the money. There was no income tax in Canada until 1917 and, therefore, no need for the mining companies to inform the churches if the money was from individuals from the company. This practice of deducting for the church continued until 1930 when income tax began to allow for charitable deductions.

The financial relationship between the churches and the mines was interesting and complex in other ways. Glace Bay, Dominion No. 2, Dominion No. 6, and other locations dependent on mining often needed financial support to keep the church operating, even when there were no strikes or lockouts. Many of the Social Service and Home Mission reports mention the support given to hospitals and chaplaincies in various places in the Maritime region, but Cape Breton is not listed. Is this because the

companies supplied the hospitals and doctors, for which the workers paid from their deduction? And in the 1918 General Assembly minutes of the Presbyterian Church in Canada the Home Mission Board, Eastern Section, reported their delight that all but one or two of the stations had been supplied the past summer. “The President of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company generously financed Wabana.”²²In fact, one cannot help but wonder if Rev. Gillies lack of strike support was influenced in part by his father-in-law, one of Cape Breton’s most successful and influential businessmen, and in part by concern for his own income.²³

Hitting the Mother Lode

There is so much information available and very little has been mined. The diaries of the various miners are filled with stories, financial records, prayers, news, drawings, newspaper clippings, world coal prices, information that is heartbreaking and amusing. These diaries tell of a community of people whose lives were built on coal and they were proud of what they did. The files of the coal companies are immense and demonstrate a determination to use what were regarded as sound economic practices to improve efficiency and profitability. The files of the labour unions and the union leaders demonstrate a determination to educate the miners and their families in civics, politics, and philosophy, and to represent the union members in order to improve their conditions and their lives. There are also at least three more denominational archives to visit, as well as further newspapers and government documents to review. Even though most congregational records have not yet been found, and not all minutes have reports attached, responses and statements of individuals give some indication of the churches’ activities in the labour disputes of Cape Breton.

Certain realizations have emerged while doing this research. Due to the absence of congregational and ministerial records, it would be better to look at the records from a shorter period of time but a larger geographic area in Cape Breton and perhaps even Pictou and Cumberland Counties. Following the First World War and the creation of British Empire Steel and Coal Company, it is better to look at the church’s involvement with both steel and coal issues. With further investigation it may be possible to establish a better understanding of the relationship between the mining companies, the churches’ governance bodies, and the individual congrega-

tions within the mining communities. Finding a congregational financial statement from the era would be finding the mother lode.

Endnotes

1. David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1999), 100-1.
2. James Simpson, "Strikes to Be Ordered in Two Other Coal Centres," *The Toronto Daily Star*, 3 August 1909, 7.
3. The Royal Commission on Maritime Claims chaired by Sir Andrew Rae Duncan included in its mandate the well being of coal mining in the Maritime area. His findings resulted in changes between Maritime provinces and the Dominion that had an impact on the working conditions, wages and relationship between mine owners and miners.
4. Due to time, weather, and other constraints, the relevant Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Salvation Army archives were not visited, nor was the national United Church of Canada Archives.
5. David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 1999), 85.
6. *Presbyterian Witness* (Halifax: The Presbyterian Witness Co. Ltd, 1908), 11.
7. Joseph Steele, "The Big Strike," Unpublished thesis as partial fulfillment of the requirements to complete a M.A. in Economics (Angus L. Macdonald Library: St. Francis Xavier University, 1960), 31.
8. Paul Steele, "Fr. Fraser Fights for, the Miners in 1909," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 59 (1 January 1992): 43.
9. Steele, "Fr. Fraser Fights for, the Miners in 1909," 43.
10. Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 99-100.
11. Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 103.
12. "Sydney Presbytery Minutes" (St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Sydney: Sydney Presbytery, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1909), 34.
13. *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada 1910* (1910), 272-3.
14. *Acts and Proceedings*, 283-6.

15. Department of Evangelism and Social Service Methodist Church (Canada), *Methodist National Campaign: "That is Getting Down to Business"* (Toronto: Methodist Church [Canada], 1919), 12.
16. When searching archives at the Beaton Institute Cape Breton University various people referred to this time as "The Big Strike." There were, in fact, 58 smaller labour disruptions between 1919 and 1925. However, they are frequently referred to as one.
17. Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 302.
18. M.J. Perry, "The United Church of Canada as an Employer: A Brief History of Employment and Workplace Practices," A paper submitted to Marc Talouse in partial completion of the course Religion and Public Life in Canada (Toronto, 2016), 15ff.
19. "The Presbyterian Witness," Nova Scotia Synod Weekly Paper in *Presbyterian Witness* (Halifax: The Presbyterian Witness Co. Ltd, 1920), 8, 1-8.
20. Steele, "The Big Strike," 70.
21. John Mellor, *The Company Store* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited, 1983), 11.
22. "Home Mission Reports," in *Acts & Proceedings of The Presbyterian Church in Canada General Assembly* (Toronto: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1922), 61.
23. A report on the death of the wife of Rev. D.M Gillies of St. Paul's, Glace Bay in the *Presbyterian Witness* states that she was the daughter of William Urquhart, Esq, and was from Richmond Co. Her family was a very prosperous one. See *Presbyterian Witness* (Halifax: The Presbyterian Witness Co. Ltd, 1909), 5.