CAPE BRETON COAL STRIKES, 1920s

1909 The United Mine Workers of America, District 26, forms on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, under the direction of Secretary-Treasurer J.B. McLachlan.

1919 District 26 wins collective bargaining rights and an eight-hour workday. With more than 12,000 members across Nova Scotia, the coal miners have one of the strongest unions in Canada.

1921 Roy M. Wolvin, president of the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco), imposes a 33% cut in miners' wages in order to increase profits.

1922 In response, the miners launch a slowdown strike and reduce production by one-third. After nine months of confrontation, the miners recover about half the wage cut.

1925 Besco closes mines and stops credit at company stores to back up their demand for another wage cut. Miners and their families settle in for a long strike. Relief funds and supplies flood in from far and wide.

June The union withdraws all remaining maintenance workers from the company power plant in New Waterford - the town is left without reliable utilities. Company police and the armed forces escalate the intimidation of miners.

June 11, 1925 The miners take control of the company power plant at Waterford Lake. When company police drive them out, hundreds of miners march on the site. In the clash between mounted police and unarmed union members, miner William Davis is shot and killed.

The police are overwhelmed, and miners raid and burn down the company stores, which are never reopened.

Summer 1925 In a provincial election, the government is defeated, and the strike is brought to an end in August. Besco collapses in 1926, but the union survives.

WE HOLD THE CARDS... EVENTUALLY THEY'LL HAVE TO COME TO US...

THEY CAN'T STAND THE GAFF*

- J.E. McLurg, Vice-President, Besco

* A slang term and insult that refers to surviving severe hardship

LEGACY District 26 contributed to the growth of unionism across Canada and the achievement of collective bargaining rights in provincial and federal law in the 1930s and '40s.

Every year, June 11 is commemorated in mining communities in the Maritimes as William Davis Miners' Memorial Day. In October 2017, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada unveiled a plaque at the Cape Breton Miners' Museum recognizing the coal strikes of the 1920s as events of national significance.
Standing the Gaff: Cape Breton Coal Strikes, 1920s

Poster by Karen Jeane Mills
Essay by David Frank

“They can’t stand the gaff!” The words failed to intimidate the coal miners. Instead, the insult contributed to their resistance, and “standing the gaff” became a rallying cry during the long 1925 strike. That strike was the culmination of the labour war in the Nova Scotia coal mines in the 1920s, an episode of class conflict in Canadian history as dramatic and consequential as the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. To put the events in context, there are five themes to consider.

1. The political economy of coal In 1920 Montreal financiers engineered a merger of all coal and steel producers in the province, issuing stocks and bonds that promised big returns in the boom years ahead. Coal was still the main source of industrial energy in Canada, as it would be into the 1950s, but markets fell apart at the end of the First World War when industries in Central Canada turned to suppliers in the United States. For the British Empire Steel Corporation, wage cuts were the preferred solution to their ongoing crisis of corporate survival. But to succeed, they would have to break the union.

2. The miners’ union After long years of struggle and tragic disasters in 1917 and 1918, the miners were finally gaining ground at the end of the war. In 1919 they won the eight-hour day and recognition of the United Mine Workers of America. They expected improvements in living conditions and safety standards to follow. With labour members on town councils and in the legislature, their political influence was also rising. Under the influence of socialist leaders such as J.B. McLachlan, the union called for public ownership of the coal industry.

3. Workplace resistance When the wage cuts came, the coal miners went on strike, repeatedly showing the effectiveness of workers’ control in the industrial workplace. In the 1922 “strike on the job,” they cut production by one-third to match the wage cut. Later, in “100 per cent” strikes, maintenance workers joined the walkouts, putting company property at risk. In 1925, miners took control of the power plant at Waterford Lake, where a confrontation with provincial police on 11 June led to the shooting of William Davis.

4. Community solidarity The people of the coal towns shared a common way of life, with strong cultural traditions that reinforced local solidarities. The outside corporation, headed by “Roy the Wolf,” was seen as a reckless invader, and governments were seen as callous bystanders. The coal miners survived these years of deprivation by falling back on the resources of family and community. By 1925, their story was widely known in Canada, and support and supplies poured in from near and far.

5. State policy Uneven development between regions was a standing assumption of state policy in Canada, and governments had long collaborated with corporations in draining resources and subordinating the local economy to demands for a cheap fuel supply for Central Canada. Three times during the strikes of the 1920s, the Canadian armed forces occupied the coalfields. In 1923, the province sent in provincial police when steelworkers went on strike for union recognition; and when the coal miners came out in a sympathetic strike, union leader McLachlan was jailed for sedition. Finally, with the appointment of a royal commission in late 1925, coercion started to give way to pacification, and Besco was forced to accept the union.

“The bosses couldn’t stand the gaff,” wrote the labour poet Dawn Fraser in 1926, “Oh, let me write their epitaph.” The collapse of Besco was a vindication for the miners. Their union survived, one of the few coal unions in North America to withstand the employer offensive of the 1920s. The coal miners also held on to their hopes for a better way of life, and their struggles helped inspire the next wave of union organizing and the enactment of collective bargaining rights in the 1930s and 1940s. To this day, descendants of the people of the coal country are found in union struggles across Canada.

Biographies

Karen Jeane Mills is an illustrator and designer. A graduate of NSCAD University in Halifax, NS and NSCC in Middleton, NS, she grew up in Canada’s Maritime provinces and now hangs her hat in Calgary, Alberta. She is a community volunteer inspired by working people in the past and present. More of her work can be seen on Instagram (http://www.instagram.com/karenjeane).

David Frank has taught at the College of Cape Breton and the Atlantic Region Labour Education Centre and was recently named a professor emeritus in Canadian history at the University of New Brunswick. He has published extensively on Cape Breton labour and working-class history, including a prize-winning biography of union leader J.B. McLachlan.

Further Reading