

The Vancouver Island Coal Miners, 1912-1914: A Study of an Organizational Strike*

JOHN NORRIS

In the strike of the Vancouver Island coal miners of 1912-14 the striking miners and the organizing union, the United Mine Workers of America, experienced serious difficulties of organization and management of the strike as a consequence of two sets of circumstances; first, the structural division in the mining work force arising out of the nature of mining operations — a division which led to relatively easy recruitment of strike-breakers from among the strikers; and second, the unusually favourable advantages for resisting the strike enjoyed by the largest of the operating companies and the prime target of the strike — Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Limited. These two sets of circumstances and the resulting steady deterioration of the position of the union and the strikers after the first few months of the strike pushed the union to make successive decisions to widen the strike by including the operations in the Nanaimo district and to escalate the conflict with strike-breakers and police by riots. These latter decisions further weakened the position of the strikers and the union and further encouraged the return to work of strikers, while, by isolating the remainder, strengthening their resolve to continue the strike long after it was lost.

I

The main outlines of the strike are well known.¹ Throughout the history of the Vancouver Island mines up to 1912 the companies — especially the largest, the Wellington Colliery Company, owned after 1910 by Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Limited — had resisted recognition of any union other than a “company union” or bargaining committee of employees,

*I wish to thank my colleague, Dr. Peter Harnetty, for his helpful criticism of the paper, and the staff of the Public Archives of British Columbia for their assistance in securing documents bearing on the strike.

¹ The most comprehensive account of the strike to date is: Alan Wargo, “The great coal strike. The Vancouver Island Coal Miners’ Strike, 1912-1914,” Graduating Honours Essay in History, UBC, 1962.

though various unsuccessful attempts had been made by the Miners' and Mine Labourers' Protective Association in the 1890s and by the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers of America in 1903 to break this embargo. These failures were the more serious for the workers in that the four companies concerned, with complete control over the limited labour market in the mines, had been able with impunity to keep wages down and hours high, employ low-paid oriental labour in competition with occidental labour, and neglect safety regulations in an industry with very high accident and mortality rates. From bitter experience the miners knew that these grievances could not be corrected permanently except with the help of a strong international (i.e., American) union. The strike of 1912-14 began with these grievances, but its main object throughout its duration was recognition of the union by the companies.

The strike began in the Comox Colliery of Canadian Collieries at Cumberland on 16 September 1912, with an impulsive decision by a meeting of about two-thirds of the occidental miners to call a "holiday" to protest the discriminatory dismissal of a union supporter. Equally impulsively, two days later the local at the Canadian Collieries operations at Extension, near Nanaimo, secured the agreement of a large proportion of the occidental mine workers there to declare a "holiday" in sympathy. These "holidays" were intended to continue until the member was reinstated, but later in the course of the strike the union was to maintain that they had been intended to continue for only one day and that the company had subsequently locked the miners out. The company claimed that the stoppage was an illegal strike since the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act of 1907 required thirty days' notice before calling a strike and this the strikers had not given. As only parties to the dispute could invite government intervention and neither party at this stage wanted that, the strike continued. The UMWA international supported the decision of its locals and arranged, after a few weeks, for the payment of strike benefit to strikers who were members of the union. In October 1912 the company re-opened the Cumberland operations, the largest on Vancouver Island, employing a combination of returned strikers, orientals and imported strike-breakers. These operations steadily expanded with increasing efficiency, to the extent that in 1913 production was 7 percent higher than in 1912. In January 1913 the company re-opened its Extension operations, but with only one shift at two of the four pits.

This resumption of production brought increasing conflict between strike-breakers and strikers and, as a consequence, the importation into

the strike zone by the provincial government of substantial numbers of special provincial police to maintain order. So long as these prevented interference with strike-breakers the company was able to continue expanding production. In the hope of breaking out of this situation by drying up the supply of coal from Vancouver Island to the industrial and domestic markets of the province, the International Executive Board of the union widened the strike on 1 May 1913 to include all companies in the field.

By widening the strike the union increased its membership for the time being, most of the new strikers enthusiastically joining the union, only partly in hopes of securing strike benefit. But the extension of the strike also increased the union's difficulties in managing the additional numbers of strikers and pushed them into paying strike benefit to all strikers, whether union members or not. The Vancouver and Nanaimo Coal Company, the smallest of the operators with the least resources to continue the fight, negotiated a settlement which conceded all the major demands of the union, including union recognition, and re-opened its operations at Jingle Pot at the beginning of September 1913. But both Western Fuel and Pacific Coast Coal, after a few weeks of shut-down, made preparations to re-open in defiance of the strikers. These preparations were followed by increasingly violent attacks on strike-breakers, culminating in a series of riots against the importation of specials into Nanaimo on 13 August, and against strike-breakers in Ladysmith and South Wellington on the night of 12-13 August, and in Extension on the nights of 13-14 and 14-15 August. The riots, which involved substantial destruction of property, looting, violence to persons and some serious injuries, brought the intervention of several hundred militia from Victoria on the morning of 14 August, the pacification of the strike zone, and the arrest of 213 accused, of whom 166 were tried and 50 convicted and sentenced to terms in prison. The strike and strike-breaking continued for another year in circumstances increasingly unfavourable to the strikers in both Nanaimo and Cumberland areas. Finally a settlement was reached on 15 August 1914, on terms which did not include union recognition, but which apparently secured workers against discrimination if they joined the UMWA. A serious decline in the demand for Vancouver Island coal in 1914 and 1915, however, resulted in high unemployment and widespread destitution, and provided the opportunity for the companies to ignore the non-discriminatory provisions of the agreement. As a result, by the end of 1915 the UMWA had disappeared once more from Vancouver Island.

II

The drift back to work of mine workers of various categories, which ultimately defeated the strike, arose in the first instance from the structure of the labour force in the mines and, above all, from that in the Comox Colliery of Canadian Collieries. The normal structure in North American bituminous mines at the time of the strike was one in which licensed miners working at the pit-face dominated the other trades, economically and hierarchically. Their power, based on the weight of their numbers and their possession of an apparently irreplaceable skill not yet eroded by the extensive use of coal-cutting machinery, was reinforced by a contracting system in which each miner was permanently assigned his place or "room" at the pit-face and in which he usually hired his helper. The domination of the licensed miners also extended to other trades, including drivers, engineers and surface labourers, and was leading to the formation of inclusive industrial unions in field after field.²

Most of these conditions did not obtain in the Comox operations of Canadian Collieries, however. The faultiness of the coal measures in all the Vancouver Island pits meant that an excessive amount of spoil had to be removed with the coal, requiring, compared to the numbers of licensed miners, a relatively large proportion of unskilled and semi-skilled labour underground to remove it, of skilled mechanics to operate hoisting and dragging machinery (especially in the Comox pits) and of unskilled labour above ground to separate coal from spoil.³ These other trades were not dominated by licensed miners to anything like the same degree as they were in the American fields. The stationary engineers and mechanics, for example, had their own union, the Stationary Engineers, which refused to co-operate with the UMWA during the strike with the result that almost all the engineering staff stayed on the job,⁴ an essential condition for keeping the mines running, especially in the relatively mechanized Comox pits. The mine-labourers, worse-paid and more at the mercy of the fluctuations in the restricted labour market of the mines than were the licensed miners, had not hitherto been the focus of any organizing campaign. Though the UMWA at this time made serious efforts to organize a comprehensive union, they had to make up for past neglect of the mine labourers by their own and other unions. More numerous in most pits

² Jon Amsden and Stephen Brier, "Coal Miners on strike: the transformation of strike demands and the formation of a national union," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Spring 1977), VII/4: 597-606.

³ H. A. Logan, *Trade unions in Canada* (Toronto, 1948), pp. 194-95.

⁴ *B.C. Federationist*, 1 November 1912.

than the licensed miners, the mine labourers could be used to replace the latter underground. Where coal-cutting machinery was used extensively, as in the Comox operations, they might even become more productive than the miners they replaced. As the strike continued more and more of the labouring force came under pressure and temptation to return to work, sometimes at higher wages and higher grades than formerly. Some resisted the temptation; some, especially in the early months of the strike at Cumberland and Extension, took alternative employment in logging, farm labour or railway construction.⁵ But an increasing proportion returned to the mines.

It is difficult to estimate how many mine workers returned to work in the course of the strike. Alan Wargo states that almost all the miners working during the strike were former strikers,⁶ but this seems extreme. There is good evidence of strike-breakers being imported, though even if the impressionistic reports by the union are taken at face value their numbers cannot have been great. For the Comox-Cumberland operations eighty-nine strike-breakers were reported as having been recruited in Edmonton in February 1913, of whom only fourteen apparently reached Cumberland;⁷ sixty-nine were recruited in Durham in June 1913, of whom about forty were working in Cumberland in August 1913;⁸ there was a recruiting mission to Merritt, B.C., in July 1913, with no reported results;⁹ and forty-three (eleven of them refugees from the Extension riots) Italian and British workers recruited in August 1913, of whom thirty-seven actually reached Cumberland,¹⁰ — in total about eighty. For Extension, twenty-three Italian mine labourers were imported from the United States in June 1913, eleven of whom appeared as refugees from the riots at the end of August and willing to go to work in Cumberland;¹¹ and for the Pacific Coast Coal Company's Fiddick Colliery at South Wellington, a number were recruited in Joplin, Missouri, variously reported as numbering five and "dozens."¹²

⁵ "Communication from George Pettigrew," *B.C. Federationist*, 2 May 1913, p. 1. It was concern about this drift of strikers away from the strike and the mines which led the union to extend strike benefit to non-unionist strikers on 1 May 1913.

⁶ Wargo, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89, 101 (footnote 172), 102-05.

⁷ *B.C. Federationist*, 21 February 1913.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6, 13 June, 1 August 1913.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18 July 1913.

¹⁰ J. H. Welsh, Cosmopolitan Labor Agency, to Chief Constable D. Stephenson, 20 August, Welsh to T. B. Shoebottom, Crown Prosecutor, Nanaimo, 25 August 1913; PABC, G.R. 518, Box 3, Miscellaneous Correspondence.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *B.C. Federationist*, 8 August, 19 December 1913.

Coal production and numbers of workers employed in the various struck operations varied in the following manner:¹³

TABLE 1

	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
<i>Comox Colliery</i>					
Production (long tns)	518,426	437,335	475,803	508,095	394,731
No. of workers (incl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental)	1,558	1,259	983	1,009	1,047
No. of workers (excl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental)	843	591	421	366	430
<i>Extension</i>					
Production (long tns)	380,482	331,576	265,766	57,855	129,216
No. of workers (incl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental)	931	881	862	199	518
No. of workers excl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental	722	708	683	104	372
<i>Western Fuel No. 1 Esplanade</i>					
Production (long tns)	364,689	411,909	434,522	172,151	310,090
No. of workers (incl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental)	830	876	893	680	669
No. of workers (excl. supervisory mechanical & oriental)	592	634	661	493	478
<i>Pacific Coast Fiddick Colliery</i>					
Production (long tns)	171,971	205,048	147,097	77,431	130,645
No. of workers (incl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental)	347	386	260	553	281
No. of workers (excl. supervisory, mechanical & oriental)	231	232	156	388	169

¹³ Minister of Mines "Reports, 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, in *Sessional Papers of British Columbia*, 1911, K183-96, 205-12; 1912, K225-39, 256-7; 1913, vol. 2, K252-3, 255-77; 1914, vol. 2, K340-66, 446; 1915, vol. 2, K436-53, 457-64; *Labour Gazette* (November 1913), XIV, 611; (December 1913), XIV, 726; (January 1914), XIV, 786; (March 1914), XIV, 1078-9; (July 1914), XV, 42; G. F. Crompton (Manager, Canadian Collieries) to Malcolm S. Reid, 15 July 1913, PABC, A.G. Papers, 9318-16-12, frame 87; *B.C. Federationist*, 6, 19 December 1912; 9, 16 January 1913.

The figures for workers employed were annual estimates but their magnitude and fluctuation are sufficiently accurate to demonstrate that the probable numbers of imported strike-breakers cannot have been large enough to account for more than a small proportion of the coal production during the strike.

III

Though a substantial proportion of the striking force eventually returned to work, the success of Canadian Collieries in resisting the strike did not depend, in the first instance, upon this return, but upon their ability, particularly in the Comox-Cumberland operations, to do without occidental mine workers by substituting mechanization and oriental workers. Since Canadian Collieries had acquired Wellington Collieries in 1910 they had been modernizing their operations, especially in Cumberland, with large-scale electrification, new tips and hoisting machinery and extensive use of coal-cutting machinery. In addition they substantially increased the numbers of oriental workers employed, both licensed miners and labourers underground and labourers above ground, believing, as did the union, that orientals would not be inclined to strike since they were not recruited by the union. Table 2 demonstrates the changing recruitment pattern at the Cumberland and other operations in the Vancouver Island field.¹⁴

In the Comox section of the table, the decline in the numbers of workers of all races in 1912 from the figure in 1911 accompanied by a marked increase in production indicates an increase in productivity, no doubt due to the improved mechanization of the pits. In the following year, in the middle of the strike, production rose substantially again, though this was probably due to an increase in the numbers of workers employed rather than to further mechanization. An important change was the increase in oriental licensed miners, whose numbers rose from 173 (1910), to 165 (1911), 165 (1912), 189 (1913) and fell to 183 (1914). There was no such spectacular shift in the operations in other pits. At Extension a major tip was built and a tunnel driven under the mountain to connect up the four pits, but no attempt was made before the strike to alter the nature of the labour force. In the case of Extension, the decline in production during the strike was due to the withdrawal of the occidental work force, a loss not compensated for by large-scale hirings of orientals. Production recovered only when the occidental workers returned to work. Similar

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

TABLE 2

	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914
<i>Comox Colliery</i>					
Production	518,426	437,335	475,803	508,095	394,731
<i>Labour below ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	63	80	80	81	80
oriental	284	386	315	402	374
occidental	525	530	371	303	373
<i>Labour above ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	108	54	47	47	48
oriental	261	148	120	113	115
occidental	48	61	50	63	57
<i>Extension</i>					
Production	380,482	331,576	265,766	57,855	129,216
<i>Labour below ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	19	24	19	33	48
oriental	8	—	8	7	16
occidental	710	690	671	95	371
<i>Labour above ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	70	45	62	42	38
oriental	112	104	90	13	44
occidental	12	17	12	9	1
<i>Western Fuel No. 1 Esplanade</i>					
Production	364,689	411,909	434,522	172,151	310,090
<i>Labour below ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	82	74	78	72	70
oriental	—	—	—	—	—
occidental	564	601	629	471	457
<i>Labour above ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	65	65	71	51	51
oriental	88	100	83	64	70
occidental	31	36	32	22	21
<i>Pacific Coast Fiddick Colliery</i>					
Production	171,971	205,048	147,097	77,431	130,645
<i>Labour below ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	21	34	40	3	7
oriental	—	—	—	—	—
occidental	204	216	152	372	169
<i>Labour above ground</i>					
supervisory & mechanical	20	59	24	23	47
oriental	75	61	40	129	58
occidental	27	16	4	16	—

developments occurred at the other two large operations, Western Fuel No. 1 and Pacific Coast's Fiddick Colliery. In neither of these were oriental mine workers used underground, though both depended heavily on them for surface processing. As at Extension, continuance of production during the strike depended upon the return to work of occidental mine workers.

The explanation for this difference in anti-union and anti-strike strategy between Comox-Cumberland and the other operations lies in the varying financial abilities of the different companies to bear the cost of measures necessary to prepare for and carry through a battle with the union. The Vancouver and Nanaimo Coal Company, the smallest of the companies, had recently suffered the withdrawal of German funds in the panic of 1911-12, was unable to put up any resistance to the strikers, and came to terms with the union in August 1913. Western Fuel and Pacific Coast Coal Company were well financed and were able to weather the stoppage between May and August 1913 and make preparations for recommencing operations. Production began again in October under the protection of militia introduced into the strike zone after the riots. Canadian Collieries, the largest of the companies, was in a particularly strong position. Incorporated in 1910, it had floated a capital of \$25 million, on which it had thus far paid no dividends or interest. It had, between 1910 and 1912, enormous funds in cash and was able to undertake its lavish mechanization of the Cumberland operation and to train its oriental miners.¹⁵ It is worth noting, however, that the company concentrated its modernizing and anti-union measures in the first instance in the large and relatively high-yield Comox-Cumberland operation, providing only a new tip and tunnel at Extension, where the yield was declining. Canadian Collieries possessed one other advantage not immediately apparent to its opponents: it had close links with the operations of the Canadian Northern Railway (Sir William McKenzie was president of both companies) and through this connection with the Dominion and provincial governments, both of whom had guaranteed the cost of the railway's construction.¹⁶ Both governments — and certainly the provincial — dared not allow operations of either company to be tied up by strikes for long. There is no doubt that Comox-Cumberland was the best prepared of the operations to resist the

¹⁵ British Columbia, Royal Commission Relating to the Coal Industry (1937), *Report of the Commissioner, Mr. Justice M. A. MacDonald* (Victoria, 1937), II, xii-xiv, 68-81.

¹⁶ G. R. Stevens, *Canadian National Railways* (Toronto, 1962), II, pp. 88, 96; T. D. Regehr, *The Canadian Northern Railway. Pioneer Railway of the Northern Prairies, 1895-1918* (Toronto, 1976), pp. 336-53.

strike, and that it was the key to the outcome of the struggle. Success or failure of the union here was likely to be decisive for the fortunes of the strike as a whole. In fact, though the strike was effective in closing the Extension operation between the middle of September 1912 and the middle of January 1913, and seriously reducing production thereafter;¹⁷ and in closing Western Fuel's two pits (No. 1 and Northfield) and Pacific Coast's Fiddick Colliery between 1 May and 1 October 1913 and restricting production there until the spring of 1914, it failed to bring any of these companies to terms. But above all, and most important, it failed to close the Comox-Cumberland operations for more than a month and failed completely to limit production or shipment of coal from this largest and most modern operation on the island. The failure was decisive. It was to push the union into increasingly militant action, to strike the Nanaimo pits and eventually raise riots against the specials and strike-breakers thereby ensuring the intervention of the government, the defeat of the strike and the failure to secure union recognition.

IV

In view of these circumstances, at first sight it seems surprising that the union should have launched the strike when it did and against the Canadian Collieries operation at Cumberland in the first instance. Part of the explanation is that the outbreak was the result of an impulsive decision by the local, who focused on the grievance of their dismissed member rather than on the larger strategy of securing union recognition, and that the international, though supporting the action of the local in public, privately deplored it. For months before the strike the international had been conducting an organizing campaign under unfavourable conditions. Most mine workers were convinced, on the basis of past bitter experience, that

¹⁷ G. F. Crompton, Manager, Canadian Collieries, provided the following figures of production for Cumberland and Extension in the Spring of 1913:

<i>Month</i>	<i>Extension</i>	<i>Cumberland</i>
January		27,427 tons
February		29,515
March		36,313
April	4,448	39,061
May	5,612	40,087
June		42,660

(G. F. Crompton to Malcolm Reid, 5 July 1913, PABC, A.G. Papers 9318-16-12, frame 87.)

they would be victimized if they became members of the union. If they joined at all, it must be in secret. But this hardly suited the union, which needed to publicize recruitments in order to attract more. Once a strike was called, however, the union could recruit and the mine workers join without much fear of at least immediate retribution.¹⁸ The calling of the strike also drew a rush of recruitment in the first enthusiasm of resisting the companies and in the hope of securing strike benefit from the union. But the representatives of the international nonetheless thought, in the autumn of 1912, that a strike was premature when their own preparations were far from complete¹⁹ and when it was obvious that those of Canadian Collieries, so far as Cumberland was concerned, were very nearly perfected.

This caution arose in part, too, from the fact that the international had the larger purpose in view of securing competitive equality between coal fields — i.e., parity in wages, general working conditions and even economic conditions between Vancouver Island mines and those of Washington State and other American regions so as to prevent the Vancouver Island operations having any economic advantage. Competitive equality was designed to ensure the largest possible membership to the UMWA by ensuring the widest possible distribution of economic prosperity in the coal fields the union organized. Union demands on rich fields must be made to support job security in poor ones. The non-unionized Vancouver Island field must be unionized to deprive its operators of the unfair advantages they had over operators in the unionized fields in the United States.²⁰ It was a complicated goal to have to explain to mine workers and to the public, especially since its pursuit laid the union open to the charge by the companies of being agents of the American coal operators helping to destroy Canadian undertakings. Once the strike was under way, indeed, the companies harped on this theme.²¹ Their appeal to patriotism, however, had little effect on the strikers, who saw that their oppressors were British capitalists and their potential saviours American unionists, but it

¹⁸ The unions claimed a membership of 400 at Extension and 300 at Cumberland before the strike started (Reverend John N. Hedley, "The labour trouble in the Nanaimo district," PABC, A.G. Papers 7529-16-13, frame 32) and 600 and 900 respectively after the strike started. In the Nanaimo district the claims were 400 before and 1,800 after (*B.C. Federationist*, 6 June 1913).

¹⁹ Cf. the statement by Frank Farrington, the international representative organizing the strike (*B.C. Federationist*, 17 July 1914, p. 1).

²⁰ Cf. Frank Farrington's explanation, *ibid.*, 28 March 1913, pp. 1-4, and *ibid.*, 20 December 1912, p. 1; 18 May 1913, p. 1; *Commons Debates*, 1913, vol. 2, 1273.

²¹ Cf. *Nanaimo Free Press*, 9 October 1912, pp. 1-3; *B.C. Federationist*, 23 May 1913, p. 1.

put the union at a disadvantage in explaining its case to the public or the governments. Certainly any such explanation was unlikely to be well received in the atmosphere of a strike, and for this reason, too, the longer the strike was postponed the better it would be for the union's cause.

The union thus began the strike at a disadvantage and remained at a disadvantage. Thereafter they were pushed by the two sets of circumstances of the drift back to work of the strikers and the expansion of operations by Canadian Collieries to try to enlarge and consolidate their support, first by extending the strike to the Nanaimo district and then by organizing riots against strike-breakers and police.

V

The riots of 12-15 August 1913 at first sight appear to have been so predictably prejudicial to the union's cause that they could not be supposed to have been the result of any planned action on the union's part. But the circumstances existing in August 1913 suggest that they were indeed planned, though in an atmosphere of desperation. By August 1913 increasing numbers of strikers were returning to work, the Cumberland operations were approaching full production and the union had failed to secure the intervention of either the Dominion or provincial governments.²² Most significant, economic depression, beginning in the autumn of 1912, had now deepened, drying up the limited alternative employments in logging, milling, farm labour and railway construction.²³ The union was now forced to extend strike benefit to non-union strikers if its credit was to be maintained. Widening the strike to include the Nanaimo operations had not dried up the coal supply and forced the intervention of one or other of the governments, as had been hoped, but had increased the number of strikers to be supported and the number of back-to-work movements to be resisted. The union leadership counselled against violence, but harassment of individual strike-breakers was reaching near-riot proportions — a sure sign that increasing numbers were returning to work. The provincial government, to stop the harassment, was about to ship twenty-five specials into the Nanaimo region. It was clear from the experience in Cumberland that once this happened the drift back to work would become a flood and the strike would be broken. If this sequence was allowed to unfold, the union leaders from the international would

²² Wargo, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-13.

²³ *Labour Gazette*, XII, 627, 847, 1372, XIV, 38.

lose the support of the increasingly divided work force. The importation of the specials must be resisted and the return to work discouraged.

In endeavouring to understand the motives for organizing the riots we must also take into account the influence of the Industrial Workers of the World on the progress of the strike. Throughout its course, the anti-union press, the operators, the propertied public and, to some degree, the governments persisted in identifying the proto-syndicalist IWW as the chief abettors, even though it was apparent that the United Mine Workers and the IWW were competitors rather than allies in promoting industrial unionism. In this identification, however, the IWW was a convenient bogeyman rather than a serious direct influence on the strike. The IWW's indirect influence may have been more considerable. In particular, its free-speech movement among the unemployed in the streets of Vancouver in the winter of 1911-12 and its strike among the migratory construction workers in the Fraser Canyon section of the Canadian Northern Railway's right-of-way in the spring of 1912 created a sense of the need for vigorous confrontation of companies and their government allies which certainly influenced the coal-mine strikers. The IWW overawed the propertied of Vancouver by filling the streets with masses of the true "wretched of the earth" — the migratory "bindle stiffs." Later they had used even more "muscle" to ensure the massive cessation of work on the railroad. The apparent reason for their defeat had also been instructive: they had underestimated the effectiveness of large-scale employment of police and specials in breaking the strike.²⁴ In the climate of revolutionary agitation against property and of organizational strikes broken by mass police violence left behind by the IWW experience, some union organizers of the UMWA may have developed an exaggerated idea of the feasibility of forcing companies to settle and the government to withdraw the police by the threat, and eventually the implementation, of violence.

If the IWW example was in fact followed, the organizers made two false assumptions: first, that it did not matter that the force at their disposal were not migratory workers who could move on if the strikes and riots were broken, but residents of the community they were attacking and hence unlikely to push matters to all-out social warfare; second, that the

²⁴ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*. Vol. IV. *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905-1917* (New York, 1965), pp. 205-07, 227-31, 415-34; A. Ross McCormack, "The Industrial Workers of the World in Western Canada, 1905-1914," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1975), 173-184; *passim.*; *B.C. Federationist*, 22 August, 12 September, 12 December 1913; 2, 16 January and 13 February 1914.

authorities would use the militia to “impose martial law,” rather than as auxiliaries to the civil power in suppressing tumult.

It is not known who made the decision to organize riots against both specials and strike-breakers, but the implementation of it was undertaken by a group of intermediate-level organizers, brought in by the union from the United States to provide picket captains and muscle where this was needed. The most important members of this group were Joe Angelo, originally employed to deal with Italian strike-breakers, his immediate subordinates Crescendo Bartolemeo, Jack Banasky and Ben Dominic; and Louis Nuenthal, president of the UMWA Local 872 at South Wellington.²⁵ Canadian strike leaders apparently had only a minor part in the organizing. The rank and file followed along without much question.

The rioters were highly selective in their targets. Occidental resident strike-breakers had their houses damaged or destroyed and were subjected to personal and in some cases very serious violence.²⁶ Imported strike-breakers and Chinese were driven into the woods and their houses looted, but not destroyed. It was as though the appropriate amount of pressure was being applied to each group: greatest against resident strike-breakers and supervisory and technical staff who were the backbone of the strike-breaking, whose roots were in the community and who were hardest to scare away; least against the imported strike-breakers and Chinese who were supposed to have the least determination. In the case of the Extension targets, the houses to be burned or looted were carefully pointed out by Angelo to his followers early on the morning of 13 August, before the riots started.²⁷

Extension was also apparently planned to be the climax of the rioting, since rioters were deliberately gathered from both South Wellington and Nanaimo to reinforce the Extension contingent by the false news brought to both places by a mysterious young man on a motorcycle on the afternoon of 13 August that six strikers had been killed by strike-breakers at Extension.²⁸ The result was that a crowd of strikers and hangers-on, vari-

²⁵ Preliminary hearing in the case of Rex v. John Anderson et al., Nanaimo, 3 September 1913, *passim.*, PABC, G.R. 518, Commission on Vancouver Island Riots, Box 3.

²⁶ Petition of Alexander Neil McKinnon, *ibid.*, Box No. 12, No. 126; Petition of Strike Claimants, no. 41, Daniel Bow, *ibid.*, Box no. 1; “Report on strike conditions. . . .” PABC, A.G. Papers, 7529-16-13, frames 401-9.

²⁷ Preliminary hearing in the case of Rex v. John Anderson et al., PABC, G.R. 518, Box 3.

²⁸ Deposition of Wong Fung, Petition No. 315, *ibid.*, Box 1; “Report on strike conditions. . . .”, PABC, A.G. Papers, 7529-16-13, frame 412.

ously estimated at 700 and 1,500 people, converged on Extension on the evening of 13 August, exchanged hundreds of shots with the strike-breakers, drove some of them into the entrance tunnel of the mines and more into the woods with their wives and children, and apparently, according to both anti-union and pro-union accounts, ran amok in Extension throughout the night, yet destroyed or damaged no more than the electric motors and coal cars at the pithead and forty-one stores and houses, almost all of them designated targets, killed no one, and wounded one innocent bystander by accident.²⁹ The next afternoon, when ninety men of the 5th Regiment marched into Extension expecting to find a force of more than a thousand armed rioters, these had disappeared. That evening the rioters returned to burn down the mine manager's house, but from 15 August on it was possible for thirty men of the 5th Regiment to camp for several weeks in Extension and arrest and disarm over forty suspected rioters (as well as disarming a great many strike-breakers) without the slightest resistance being offered.³⁰

Had the rioters "worked it out of their system" as was frequently suggested? Or was it that resistance to the military was no part of the organizers' plan and the rioters simply melted away? Support is given to the latter hypothesis by the fact that an open air meeting of strikers was held in the smoking ruins of Extension late on the afternoon of 14 August, from which rioters departed to burn down the mine manager's house.³¹ Next day, when the small contingent of militia returned, all was peaceful once more.

Was the rioting undertaken in anticipation of the militia intervention? The latter was ordered out at Victoria on the afternoon of 13 August while the riots were actually going on at Extension, and arrived at Nanaimo on the following morning, supposedly to the great surprise of the strikers. But for several days it had been rumoured in the Nanaimo district that the troops were coming,³² and the men of the 5th Regiment,

²⁹ Wargo, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-22; "Preliminary hearing in the case of Rex v. John Anderson et al., *passim.*, PABC, G.R. 518, Box 3; Report of A. V. Hoyt and A. E. Mainwaring upon damage done by rioters to Chinese property, *ibid.*, Box 3; Petitions of claimants, *passim.*, *ibid.*, Box 1.

³⁰ T. G. Norris to Mrs. J. F. Norris, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22 August 1913; T. G. Norris to Miss Frances Norris, 15 August 1913; G. E. Norris to Mrs. J. F. Norris, 15 August 1913, Norris Letters from the Strike Zone, 14-27 August 1913, fos. 1-10, in possession of the author; Wargo, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-26.

³¹ Preliminary hearing in the case of Rex v. John Anderson et al., PABC, G.R. 518, Box 3, fo. 18.

³² "Examination of George Hannay," in Preliminary hearing in the case of Rex v. John Anderson et al., *ibid.*

at least, had apparently been warned for service a week before the event and had gone to their armouries directly from work on the afternoon of 13 August.³³ Did the planners of the riot hope that by thus escalating the conflict they might catch the attention of the public and force the federal government to intervene and secure a favourable settlement?

It is entirely possible that the union leaders viewed the riots as a means of resolving their impasse, but they also misread some important circumstances on the basis of their American experience. Their attitude toward the special provincial police suggests that they regarded them as simply the minions of some local sheriff, not temporary provincial policemen enforcing a national criminal code. Certainly they showed remarkable ignorance of local law in their statements that "martial law had been proclaimed" in the strike zone and that the judges trying the rioters "ought to be impeached."³⁴ It would hardly be surprising if they also believed that an intervention of the militia might indeed lead to just such a violent attack on the strikers and subsequent revulsion of public opinion in the strikers' favour as had occurred in the labour struggles in the United States. In any case, they had a desperate situation to resolve and the riots were a measure of desperation.

In the last year of the strike the strikers, now reduced to about half their original number, held even more firmly as their isolation became more and more apparent. The strike benefit was now vital to keep them from destitution. No more was heard of the goal of competitive equality. Instead, union recognition became the *sine qua non* of all bargaining — the strikers could not afford to surrender their hope of the future. But in the end they did, returning to the pits on the same terms or worse, if they were lucky; and to destitution and migration out of the region if they were not.

* * *

To conclude: the strike offers an early example of the difficulties facing an American international trying to establish itself in western Canada at a time when the climate of opinion in the labouring force was changing quickly from resentful acceptance of the economic helotry in which companies held them to violent rebellion against the companies and the social order they represented; but had not yet moved to the more sophisticated level, desired by the international, of supporting patient organization of

³³ T. G. Norris to Mrs. J. F. Norris, 25 August 1913, Norris Letters, fo. 17.

³⁴ Cf. "Communications from Robert Foster," *B.C. Federationist*, 15 August 1913, *ibid.*, 22 November 1913, p. 1; *Labour Gazette* (February 1914), XIV, 953.

industrial unions to enforce the sharing of industrial decisions with management. In this transitional situation, the task of the union was made more difficult by two local circumstances: the sharp division of the work force by the nature of its tasks; and the careful preparations made by the principal employer to resist the strike. Faced with these adverse circumstances the union was pushed into making desperate decisions that widened, prolonged and eventually defeated the struggle of the miners for union recognition and security.