

# The Politics of Coal: A Study of the Wellington Miners' Strike of 1890-91<sup>1</sup>

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The coal miners of Vancouver Island occupy a special place in the history of British Columbia. The communities in which they and their families lived — Ladysmith, Wellington, Nanaimo, and Cumberland — experienced class tensions to a degree and duration rarely seen in other parts of the province. An Island miner involved in the 1912 strike, for example, might have had a grandparent who went through the 1877 strike or a parent who witnessed the 1890 strike. These outbursts of militancy reflect the uneasiness in the social relations of production on the coal fields. Class tensions found expression in other ways as well, such as the ethnic prejudice of the miners or their left-leaning political representatives. Each strike was fought out in a different context, informed both by past struggles and current conditions. What follows is an attempt to explore the context of one such episode, the Wellington strike of 1890-91. It began quietly enough on a Monday morning, 19 May 1890, when miners employed at the Dunsmuirs' Wellington colliery on Vancouver Island arrived late for work. The action expressed their demand for an eight-hour working day and recognition of their union. The Dunsmuirs refused to grant either of these, and an eighteen-month struggle followed. When the strike was finally called off in November 1891, the Wellington miners had failed to achieve their two goals.

The strike has received scant attention from historians, a neglect it scarcely deserves.<sup>2</sup> At a time when the industry played a vital role in the

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank R. A. J. McDonald and Richard Mackie, both of whom read earlier drafts of this paper and offered much good advice. I am also grateful to Keith Ralston, Logan Hovis, and the Vancouver Study Group for their criticism and encouragement.

<sup>2</sup> The only published accounts are Peter Guy Silverman, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Labor Strikes at Wellington and Steveston, 1890, 1900," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, July 1970: 156-61 (drawn from his M.A. thesis, "A History of the Militia Defences of British Columbia 1871-1914," University of British Columbia [UBC hereafter], 1956) and a brief discussion on pp. 195-98, Jack Scott, *Sweat and Struggle: Working Class Struggles in Canada Volume 1: 1789-1899* (Vancouver, 1974). A lengthier treatment can be found on pp. 52-78, Allan Donald Orr, "The Western Federation of Miners and the Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in

province's economy, the dispute helped to perpetuate the complex and contradictory system of industrial relations which prevailed in the Vancouver Island coal mines. Components of this system, such as working conditions in the mines, the two large collieries' differing approach to their employees, the composition of the two groups of miners and their relations with each other, the miners' attitude to Chinese labour, and the usefulness of labour representation in the Legislature, were linked with the onset, course, and outcome of the strike.

The strike did more than reinforce specific labour-management relations, for events surrounding the long struggle reveal that the employers and employed in one of B.C.'s largest coal mines were not the only actors in the dispute. The provincial cabinet saw the strike as an attempt to undermine a status quo to which they were committed. Two of the five cabinet ministers of the day had close ties with the mine owner: the President of the Council, C. E. Pooley, was the Dunsmuirs' lawyer, a job earlier held by Attorney General Theodore Davie. Robert Dunsmuir had been a cabinet minister himself until his death in 1889. Other government supporters in the thirty-three-seat House with close ties to the Dunsmuirs in 1890-91 included Henry Croft, Robert's son-in-law, and Joseph Hunter, Superintendent of the (family-owned) Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway. Thus the miners confronted not just the company, but an alliance of employer and state; an industrial dispute became a political battle which both sides interpreted in class terms.

The strike itself underlined in what ways and with what result the power of the state could be brought to bear on the miners, suggesting to them and their supporters a provincial government controlled by a ruthless plutocracy. The links between government and employer revealed by the strike weakened the arguments of those miners who advocated reformism, the labourist strategy of gradualism. Working within the Legislature was discredited. In the provincial election held soon after the strike began, all three candidates endorsed by the miners' union were elected. In the next election, three years after the strike, none were successful.<sup>3</sup> The strike forced coal miners on Vancouver Island to come to terms with their weak

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1903 with Special Reference to the Vancouver Island Coal Miners' Strike" (unpublished M.A. thesis, UBC, 1968). For the political activities of the miners at the time of the strike, see pp. 47-59, Thomas Robert Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labor Movement and Political Action: 1879-1906" (unpublished M.A. thesis, UBC, 1954).

<sup>3</sup> At least one citizen was now prepared to resort to direct action: just before the 1894 election a bomb exploded on the porch of Wellington's assistant mine manager's home. (Reported in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 13 March 1894).

position in provincial society: at the work place and in the Legislature they had achieved very little. These failures nourished both a heightened sense of class and a radical political tradition.<sup>4</sup>

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From 1870, when the first Wellington pit began production, the mine had yielded coal of a consistently high quality. Good coal earned handsome profits, and the Dunsmuirs (proprietors of the mine) soon ranked among the wealthiest in the province. At the time of the strike, British Columbia's coal-mining industry consisted of three collieries working in the Nanaimo area. The Wellington colliery, property of Robert Dunsmuir & Sons, was six miles northwest of downtown Nanaimo. Before operations halted in May 1890, it employed 752 workers. The principal mine of the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company, the largest colliery in the province, was its No. 1 Shaft on the waterfront in the heart of Nanaimo. The company also worked the Northfield mine on the Wellington seam, nearby the Dunsmuirs' operations, and the Southfield, just south of the city of Nanaimo. The company employed nearly 1,500 people. The third and smallest Nanaimo colliery was owned by the East Wellington Coal Company, which operated two shafts four miles northwest of downtown Nanaimo. One hundred and seventy workers were employed. A fourth colliery, the Dunsmuirs' Union mine up-island, was just beginning production. The industry was highly concentrated, in terms of both ownership and location. Between them the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company and Robert Dunsmuir & Sons (at Wellington) produced 83 percent of the coal exported from British Columbia in 1890.<sup>5</sup> That year the coal market was particularly buoyant: the Inspector of Mines declared at the end of January that

<sup>4</sup> The radical tradition has been amply chronicled: see especially Loosmore's pioneering work, "The British Columbia Labor Movement . . ."; Allen Seager's "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (1985): 23-59; A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto, 1977); and Ross Alfred Johnson, "No Compromise — No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UBC, 1975). By contrast, the social history of Vancouver Island miners remains largely unwritten, with the notable exception of Lynn Bowen's oral history, *Boss Whistle* (Lantzville, 1982). Ian McKay's "The Realm of Uncertainty: The Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927," *Acadiensis*, XVI (1986): 3-57, reveals the depth and quality of scholarship practised by other regional historians in Canada.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics in this paragraph are drawn from the figures given on pp. 381-94, *BRITISH COLUMBIA Sessional Papers [B.C.:S.P. hereafter]*, 1891. The third Nanaimo colliery (East Wellington) produced 7% of the total and the Dunsmuirs' Union Mine at Cumberland contributed another 10%.

I can truly say that the outlook and productive power and resources of the Province at the beginning of the year on which we have entered appear brighter and more promising of substantial success and prosperity, so far as the coal industry is concerned, than ever before.<sup>6</sup>

The strike came at a time when the Dunsmuirs might conceivably have been prepared to make concessions in order to maintain their very profitable production.

Although the two main collieries of British Columbia operated only a few miles from each other, they contrasted sharply. The New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company, owned by English businessmen, had purchased the original Nanaimo coal mine from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1862. The English company went to some trouble to attract and maintain a stable and homogeneous work force. It assisted the migration of British miners to Nanaimo, where it made five-acre lots available to them for purchase or lease. These men worked an eight-hour day underground, their union was recognized by management, and during the course of the strike at Wellington they successfully negotiated a closed-shop agreement.<sup>7</sup> Company shareholders seemed content with rather modest dividends and allowed the superintendent, Samuel Robins, a free hand in running the mine.<sup>8</sup> Robins' management was characterized by a benevolent paternalism typical of liberal attitudes in late-Victorian England. Mackenzie King, no mean judge of human character, described Robins as "a gentleman of more than exceptional quality, I never remember meet-

<sup>6</sup> P. 295, *B.C.:S.P.*, 1889. Report dated 31 Jan. 1890.

<sup>7</sup> The company's generosity and its five-acre scheme are discussed in Marion Matheson's M.A. thesis, "Some Effects of Coal Mining upon the Development of the Nanaimo Area" (UBC, 1950), (see especially pp. 97, 144, 154, 210, and 217) and an (unpublished?) paper on this topic, File 1, Box 165, Add. Mss. 436, Provincial Archives of British Columbia [PABC hereafter]. See also p. 128, B. R. D. Smith, "Some Aspects of the Social Development of Early Nanaimo" (unpublished B.A. essay, UBC, 1956), and pp. 83-84, G. W. Taylor, *The History of Mining in British Columbia* (Saanichton and Seattle, 1978). Copies of the closed-shop agreement were submitted to two commissions on industrial unrest in British Columbia (the Clute Commission of 1899/1900 in the Kootenays, and the better known 1903 Commission which held hearings in Vancouver and on the Island) as well as one on Chinese and Japanese immigration. All three commissions also interviewed the mine's superintendent, Samuel Robins, at length. See pp. 75-84 and 377-88, "Report of the Commission Relating to unrest and discontent among miners and mine owners in the province of British Columbia," 1899, typescript copy available on microfiche (*Canadian Federal Royal Commission Reports*, #91); pp. 72-76, "Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration," *CANADA Sessional Papers*, Vol. XXXVI, 1902, No. 13, 54; and pp. 294-304 and 752-53, Minutes of Evidence, "Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in the Province of British Columbia," *CANADA Sessional Papers*, Volume XXXVIII, 1904, No. 13, 36a.

<sup>8</sup> A. W. Currie, "The Vancouver Coal Mining Company, A Source for Galsworthy's *Strife*," *Queen's Quarterly*, 70 (1963/64): 50-63, especially 59-61.

ing any employer . . . who impressed me as being more genuinely humane, more truly considerate and courteous and more honorable in his views of life and dealings with men. . . ."<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast to the personality of Robins and the policies of the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company were those of Robert Dunsmuir & Sons.<sup>10</sup>

Founded by Robert Dunsmuir in partnership with some naval officers in 1869-70 as Dunsmuir, Diggle and Company, this latter business had grown rapidly.<sup>11</sup> Dunsmuir had come to the province as a miner in 1852 and had pursued his upwardly mobile course with determination. A hard-working man with a shrewd eye for successful investment, his business affairs prospered and expanded following his discovery of the rich Wel-

<sup>9</sup> P. 2, C 9339, Nanaimo, 24 Sept. 1905, MG 26, J4, Vol. 13, Public Archives of Canada [PAC hereafter]. As Currie points out, the British author John Galsworthy was closely associated with the company that employed Robins. Galsworthy visited Nanaimo in September 1891 and evidently based the character of Pippin on Robins, in his short story "The Silence" (printed on pp. 705-30, *Caravan: The Assembled Tales of John Galsworthy*, London, 1925). (A. F. Buckham, "John Galsworthy at Nanaimo," unpublished paper presented to the Victoria branch of the British Columbia Historical Association, 27 May 1965, File 6, Vol. 165, Add. Mss. 436, PABC.) For a case study of another British-owned B.C. company with a history of comparatively benevolent labour policies, see Patricia Roy's "The British Columbia Electric Railway and its Street Railway Employees: Paternalism in Labour Relations," *BC Studies*, 16 (1972-73): 3-24. Ian McKay has recently argued that the concept of paternalism is far more complex than historians have realized: see especially pp. 32-34, in "By Wisdom, Wile or War": The Provincial Workmen's Association and the Struggle for Working-Class Independence in Nova Scotia, 1879-97," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> The Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company only became the *New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company* in 1889, a consequence of a technical reorganization (see Currie, op. cit.). To avoid confusion I have referred to the company simply by its later name. Other useful sources for details of the company's history include Mark Tweedy, "The 1880 and 1881 Strikes by the Miners of the Vancouver Coal Company" (unpublished B.A. honours essay, UBC, 1978); pp. 255-62, *The Williams Official British Columbia Directory 1893* (Victoria, 1893); and the voluminous A. F. Buckham Collection, Add. Mss. 436, PABC. I find little evidence to support the argument that the width of coal seams and the system of work underground were critical factors in the labour relations of Island coal mines, as my friend John Belshaw maintains in his article, "Mining Technique and Social Division on Vancouver Island, 1848-1900," *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1 (1986): 45-65.

<sup>11</sup> Various aspects of the company's (and the family's) history are dealt with in James Audain, *From Coalmine to Castle: The Story of the Dunsmuirs of Vancouver Island* (New York, 1955); Jon Bartlett, "The 1877 Wellington Miners' Strike" (unpublished BA honours essay, UBC, 1975); pp. 301-09, Gustavus Myers, *A History of Canadian Wealth* (Toronto, 1975; originally published Chicago, 1912); the entry on Robert Dunsmuir by Daniel T. Gallacher, pp. 290-94 in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume XI, 1881-1890* (1982); D. T. Gallacher, "Men, Money and Machines: Studies Comparing Colliery Operations and Factors of Production in British Columbia's Coal Industry to 1891" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, UBC, 1979); and R. Turner, *Vancouver Island Railroads* (San Marino, 1973). That a scholarly study of this family has not yet been attempted reflects poorly on the state of B.C. historiography.

lington coal seam in 1869. When the last of the original partners was bought out in 1883, the firm became Robert Dunsmuir & Sons. By this time Robert's interests extended further than the coal business: the same year he was given the contract to build the Vancouver Island railway. The contract, with its remarkably generous land grant (which included coal rights), helped make Dunsmuir a millionaire.<sup>12</sup> A resident of Victoria from 1883, he left the day-to-day affairs of the colliery to his two sons and son-in-law. Alexander Dunsmuir ran the San Francisco office and looked after marketing there; James Dunsmuir lived in Departure Bay and oversaw shipping arrangements; and John Bryden was mine superintendent, taking over the job from James in 1881.<sup>13</sup>

By the time of Robert Dunsmuir's death in April 1889 the family firm had acquired, in addition to considerable wealth, a reputation for intransigence and confrontation with its employees. Any man who turned out to be a union organizer was fired; strikers frequently found themselves black-listed. In itself, the threat of dismissal was a potent anti-labour strategy. When an industrial dispute arose, the company's policy was simple and effective. Since most workers lived in company houses, they could be evicted immediately a strike began. Special constables and/or militia were then brought in and strikebreakers were sought while the Dunsmuir family waited for any remaining resistance to collapse. The method was successfully employed in the strikes of 1877, 1883, and 1890, as well as the lockout of 1889.<sup>14</sup> The Dunsmuir family had never given in to their men. Each strike underlined their unassailable position and each defeat fostered bitterness and alienation among the miners.

The miners at Nanaimo and Wellington formed two distinct groups. The former were mostly British, bringing to the area long-standing tra-

<sup>12</sup> Curiously, British Columbia historians have failed to explore the possible links between Dunsmuir's railway grant and the revelations of the 1891 Public Works scandal in Ottawa. Dunsmuir's name appears on the list of those who contributed to the notorious "Langevin Testimonial Fund" (p. 18, 1 Aug. 1891, *The Globe*). For a discussion of the scandal, see Gustavus Myers, "The Distribution of Railway Subsidies," pp. 19-32, in Kenneth M. Gibbons and Donald C. Rowat, eds., *Political Corruption in Canada: Cases, Causes and Cures* (Toronto, 1976). For the Island railway grant, see pp. 39-46, R. Turner, *The Vancouver Island Railroads*, and pp. 125-45, Robert E. Cail, *Land, Man, and Law: The Disposal of Crown Lands in British Columbia, 1871-1913* (Vancouver, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> Before he assumed the superintendent's job at Wellington, Bryden had held the same post at the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company's mine. For an insight into his career there, see Tweedy, "The 1880 & 1881 Strikes . . .," *passim*. James Dunsmuir returned to Nanaimo from the United States in 1876 and shortly afterwards was appointed Wellington superintendent.

<sup>14</sup> This pattern is also noted on pp. 12-13, Bartlett, "The 1877 Wellington Miners' Strike."

ditions and customs.<sup>15</sup> With the company's active encouragement, these men had put down substantial roots in Nanaimo. In Wellington, on the other hand, the work force was less stable. The 1893 *British Columbia Directory* observed that "the population [of Wellington] is most cosmopolitan, having representatives from every quarter of the globe. . . . [It] is continually changing, so that a complete directory today may be very faulty in a week's time."<sup>16</sup> Since the Wellington men were a composite group drawn from various nationalities, interpreters were required when mass meetings were held, to provide a running commentary on the proceedings. Such a heterogeneous group would have been difficult to organize, even without the anti-union policies of the proprietors. Jealousy and hostility also kept the Wellington and Nanaimo miners from uniting in a common front.<sup>17</sup> The New Vancouver men saw the poor working conditions in Wellington as a continuing threat to their own status. Cheaper labour costs at Wellington put their employer in a poor competitive position, and exerted downward pressure on their wages. At the same time, some Wellington men believed that the Nanaimo miners were simply helping New Vancouver Coal's business affairs by trying to organize the Wellington mine. All these difficulties were finally overcome in 1890 when a virtually unanimous mandate was given to the Miners' and Mine Labourers' Protective Association (MMLPA) to organize and represent all the Island miners. Given the traditional attitude of the Dunsmuir the task would not be an easy one.

Throughout the late 1880s the labour force and the production of the Nanaimo coal mines expanded rapidly.<sup>18</sup> In its description of Nanaimo the *British Columbia Directory* of 1891 noted that "during the past few years the town has grown very much both in size and importance."<sup>19</sup> The *Directory* (compiled in late 1890) estimated the monthly payroll of the three coal companies to be \$175,000. This money, with the other benefits that the mining industry brought to Nanaimo, was having a considerable effect on the town. Service industries were being established or were ex-

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the miners' birthplaces accompanying the casualty list published after the 1887 mine disaster, indicating the cohesiveness and British predominance. (*Nanaimo Free Press*, 11 May 1887.)

<sup>16</sup> P. 248, *The Williams Official British Columbia Directory 1893*, compiled by the Williams' B.C. Directory Co., Ltd. (Victoria, 1893).

<sup>17</sup> This ill-feeling is referred to in a letter published in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 13 Feb. 1890, as well as in the speeches of Boyce and Walkem printed in the same paper, 19 May 1890.

<sup>18</sup> Exact figures are given annually in the Report of the Minister of Mines, *B.C.:S.P.*

<sup>19</sup> Pp. 37-38, *Williams' British Columbia Directory — 1891* (Victoria, 1890).

panding; "real estate of all kinds has more than doubled in value during the last two years"; an explosives factory, the Hamilton Powder Company, had recently been built; a tannery was just starting up; and the local sawmill had diversified and had begun producing joinery and mill work, possibly responding to the demands of a building boom. A railway to Victoria, regular steamship service to the mainland, telephones, telegraph, gas lighting, electrification, a daily newspaper, a municipal water supply: the technological marvels of the late-nineteenth century were all present in Nanaimo. The town boasted an Opera House where shows that had played before Victoria and mainland audiences were staged; fraternal orders and lodges proliferated; and other cultural amenities — ranging from the Nanaimo Brass Band to a variety of sporting events — also provided recreation and amusement. Coal produced the wealth upon which the community flourished.<sup>20</sup>

An expansive economy was not the only consequence of the exploitation of Vancouver Island's coal resources. Disastrous mine tragedies, racial tensions, and class conflict were other, less welcome concomitants. Although danger had always been (and remains) a constant companion of the coal miner, two particularly severe mine accidents in the late 1880s had a profound influence on Island miners. On 3 May 1887, 148 men were killed when an explosion, followed by a fire, rocked the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company's Nanaimo mine. Eight and a half months later another seventy-seven miners died in an explosion in the Dunsmuir's Wellington mine. Disasters of such magnitude deserve careful study beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>21</sup> However, two important results which followed in their wake must be discussed: the expulsion of Chinese workers from Nanaimo mines, and the need to recruit substantial numbers of new miners to maintain production.

During the 1880s, anti-Chinese agitation had been a powerful current in the province's labour movement. This was as true for Nanaimo as it was for Victoria and the mainland, though miners often argued that they were

<sup>20</sup> The information in this paragraph is drawn from the *Directory* and from the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 1890, *passim*. The Inspector of Mines provided a similar analysis in his report dated February 1891 (see p. 383, *B.C.:S.P.*, 1890).

<sup>21</sup> The only extended discussion of the 1887 explosion is in Derek Pethick's *British Columbia Disasters*, 79-90. The history of mine safety and government regulation of the work place in B.C. remains, like much else, unwritten. Studies of other coal regions suggest the importance of these themes: see, for example, Donald Reid's "The Role of Mine Safety in the Development of Working Class Consciousness and Organization: The Case of the Aubin Coal Basin, 1867-1914," *French Historical Studies*, XII (1981): 98-119, and Donald McLeod's "Colliers, Colliery Safety and Coal Mine Politics: The Nova Scotian Experience, 1873 to 1910," pp. 226-53, Canadian Historical Association *Historical Papers*, 1983.



not concerned particularly with racial discrimination but simply wanted safe working conditions.<sup>22</sup> Underground workers blamed the Chinese for the devastating explosions of 1887 and 1888. Although the charge was probably incorrect and could not be substantiated, every miner vehemently insisted on its truth. Following the 1888 Wellington disaster they refused to return to work until all companies agreed to ban Chinese labour underground.<sup>23</sup> After a brief stoppage the companies bowed to public pressure and accepted the men's demand. The Legislature did its bit too, by amending the Coal Mines Regulations Act with improved safety rules, following an investigation into the 1888 tragedy.<sup>24</sup> The agreement to exclude Chinese miners from working underground remained no more than a verbal undertaking on the part of the companies; it did not appear in these revised Mines Regulations. Whatever its status, the ban was effective. White labourers were hired to replace the Chinese labourers who were now excluded from Nanaimo and Wellington pits.

The two mine explosions of the late 1880s reduced the number of working miners by some 15 percent.<sup>25</sup> Since this coincided with a period of buoyant demand and expansion in the Island coal industry, the result was a severe labour shortage.<sup>26</sup> To rebuild the work force, miners had to be recruited from other areas. Inevitably, many of these new miners were familiar with union organization and industrial conflict. When they went to work for Robert Dunsmuir & Sons, they discovered that the normal features of a typical coal mine — such as a pit committee to report on safety conditions and to handle minor grievances, or a checkweighman chosen by the men to oversee their coal weights — were not permitted in the Wellington mine. The resulting confrontation was predictable. Within a year of the second explosion, Wellington was closed by a lockout.

Dismissing the demands of "agitators," the Dunsmuirs refused to mod-

<sup>22</sup> European miners had earlier interpreted the employment of Chinese workers as a managerial tactic to weaken their own position as well as a threat to mine safety. In 1885 the Nanaimo assembly of the Knights of Labor argued that in B.C. the Chinese were "the willing tools whereby grasping and tyrannical employers grind down all labor . . . they are preferred by all who seek to tyrannize over their fellows, or who are resolved to keep together a great fortune. . . ." (In a submission to the 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, p. 156, Report and Evidence, *CANADA Sessional Papers*, Vol. XVIII, 1885, No. 11, 54a.)

<sup>23</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 1, 4, and 8 Feb. 1888.

<sup>24</sup> See *Statutes of the Province of British Columbia* (Victoria, 1888), 71-72.

<sup>25</sup> This figure is derived from the employment statistics included with the Mines Reports of 1887 and 1888, *B.C.:S.P.* The figure of 15% is probably far too low, as the numbers of employed men included above-ground workers.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, p. 39, the *Williams' British Columbia Directory — 1891*, where reference is made to the scarcity of labour in Nanaimo.

erate their total opposition to any form of labour organization within their mines. During the brief lockout of January 1889, Superintendent Bryden told a deputation of workers that "he would not treat with a committee, that it was degrading for a boss to do so, and sooner than he would submit to such an indignity he would dig clams for a livelihood."<sup>27</sup> Lest anyone be misled by the levity of his remarks, the Dunsmuirs emphasized the point by declining to re-employ those considered responsible for causing the trouble. "I had a strike on my hands at Wellington at the first of the year," Robert Dunsmuir confided to his friend Joseph Trutch in February, "but I conquered at the end of three weeks, and the men are very sorry now, more so, the ringleaders who I would not employ again on any account."<sup>28</sup> When he met a delegation of the locked-out miners in his Victoria office, Dunsmuir advised them to "tell the men [back at Wellington] that I am a stubborn Scotchman, and that a multitude cannot coerce or drive me."<sup>29</sup> It could have served as his epitaph.

Good miners were in short supply, and those that the Dunsmuirs no longer wished to keep on in 1889 soon found work with the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company. There they found job security and no longer faced the threat of arbitrary dismissal. The 1887 Nanaimo disaster had killed a pioneer labour leader, Samuel Myers, but these new arrivals helped to continue the drive for industry-wide organization of the Island miners.<sup>30</sup> In the early spring of 1890, they began the task in earnest.

The prohibition in 1888 of the Chinese from working underground necessitated a certain amount of reorganization within the structure of the mines' work force. The Chinese had done the "pushing" or "running," that is, they had removed the miners' loaded coal trucks from the face, and returned with empty ones. The hewing miner was paid by the ton, while the pusher or runner received a daily wage. Pushers' wages were generally two-thirds that of the hewer, as pushing was considered a job requiring little skill. However, to adjust to the sudden vacuum created by

<sup>27</sup> *Colonist*, 11 Jan. 1889.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Dunsmuir to Joseph Trutch, 22 Feb. 1889, Victoria. The letter is held in the O'Reilly Collection, A/E/Or 3/D 92, PABC. For an account of the 1889 lockout, see the *Colonist*, 9 and 10 Jan. 1889.

<sup>29</sup> *Colonist*, 11 Jan. 1889.

<sup>30</sup> For Myers, see the entry by H. Keith Ralston and Gregory S. Kealey in the *Canadian Dictionary of Biography, Volume XI, 1881-1890*, 637-39. The activism of the former Dunsmuir men is apparent from the testimony of the pro-management witnesses to the Select Committee investigating the cause of the Wellington strike. These "outside agitators" were blamed for causing the strike. See *Journal of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of British Columbia*, Volume 20, 1891, pp. ccxli-cccxxxiii [hereafter "Evidence," *JLA*], especially Answers 1174, 1300-1305, 1358, 1392, 1393, 1559, 1583, 1584, 1614, 1615.

the departure of the Chinese, pushers' wages were raised to \$2.50 from the earlier \$2.00. This seemed fair to all concerned since the new pushers were often former hewers, accustomed to a higher wage. Then in February 1890 a rumour circulated at Wellington that the day wages for pushers were to be reduced to the old rate of \$2.00. Although management challenged the truth of this rumour, the resulting agitation precipitated a series of events which led to the 1890-91 strike.<sup>31</sup>

On 1 February 1890 a thousand miners packed the Nanaimo Opera House "to consider the question of the reduction of wages at the Wellington Collieries and also to consider the advisability of forming a Miners Union comprising the miners of the several collieries in the city and the district."<sup>32</sup> A new organization resulted from this meeting, the Miners' and Mine Labourers' Protective Association (MMLPA). It signalled the beginning of another attempt to organize the Wellington miners into a union. The MMLPA dispatched a committee to meet with the manager of the mine at Wellington. The issue of union organization and pit committees had been discussed before, it was told, and management policy was to refuse to recognize them.<sup>33</sup> This early rebuff was probably expected: it certainly could not have come as a surprise. But the defeated leaders from the 1889 lockout had only just begun; other challenges awaited them as well.

From February to May 1890 the new Association consolidated its position within the community, politically and socially. One of the first issues it took up was the formal exclusion of Chinese labour from underground work. The 1888 agreement had been no more than just that, an agreement, and miners wanted to see it transformed into statute law. This desire arose from the increasing use of Chinese workers in Cumberland, where they comprised over half the labour force.<sup>34</sup> While Nanaimo and Wellington collieries honoured the 1888 agreement, the Dunsmuir mine at Cumberland ignored it, maintaining that it applied only to the Nanaimo area. The MMLPA decided the situation could be remedied only by legislative action, which would guarantee their monopoly of underground labour. This monopoly was seen as being necessary to maintain wage rates and guarantee labour solidarity during disputes, quite apart from the threat of unsafe conditions frequently cited by miners to justify their demand for no Chinese underground.

In March 1890 a petition of over 1,400 signatures called for the addition

<sup>31</sup> See answers 1051-1054, 1091-1096, and 1153, "Evidence," *JLA*, 1891.

<sup>32</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 4 Feb. 1890.

<sup>33</sup> See answers 1008-1011 of Superintendent Bryden, "Evidence," *JLA*, 1891.

<sup>34</sup> P. 306, *B.C.:S.P.*, 1890.

of an exclusion clause to the Coal Mining Regulations Act. The petition, arranged by the MMLPA, was introduced in the Legislature by Andrew Haslam, the member for Nanaimo.<sup>35</sup> On the floor of the Legislature the MMLPA achieved its first success: a unanimous vote adopted the amendment forbidding Chinese labour below the surface.<sup>36</sup> Members of the Legislature were probably more concerned with the imminent provincial election than with any desire to placate Nanaimo miners. Anti-Chinese rhetoric was ever-popular with the electorate, and the opportunity to enact legislation pandering to this racist sentiment not long before going to the polls was too good to miss.<sup>37</sup> Whatever motives led to the successful passage of the anti-Chinese amendment, the MMLPA felt that it had manipulated the machinery of government to challenge the Dunsmuirs' authority. No doubt this apparent political victory boosted the confidence of the Association.

To celebrate May Day, the MMLPA decided to give a "grand concert-ball" in the Nanaimo Opera House.<sup>38</sup> The *Nanaimo Free Press* described the miners' arrangements: "a special train has been chartered to bring the Wellington folk in to Nanaimo, where they will be met at the depot by the Nanaimo Brass Band and escorted to the Opera House. . . ." The newspaper acknowledged that the event

was a marked success reflecting the greatest credit on officers and committee of the Association. The commodious Opera House was crowded, many having to stand up. . . . The Chairman at the close of the Concert thanked the audience for their attendance and claimed that the large number present was an endorsement of the Association — its aims and objects. Dancing was kept up till four o'clock this morning when the grandest and largest ball ever given in Nanaimo was brought to a close.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> For the petition and the debate in the Legislature, see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 1, 5, 6, 21, 22, and 27 March 1890.

<sup>36</sup> For the new law, see *Statutes: B.C.*, 1890, p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> This analysis is also offered by a letter in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 10 Jan. 1891, and an editorial in that newspaper, 10 April 1891. The prorogation of the Legislature came in April, dissolution in May, and the election in early June 1890.

<sup>38</sup> 1 May 1890 was a doubly significant date. At its first meeting in Paris (on the centenary of the French Revolution) the Second International resolved "that all workers in every country should celebrate 1 May 1890 as a holiday, in order to give an international demonstration in favour of the eight-hour day and their other demands." The American Federation of Labor (in 1888) also chose 1 May 1890 as a day for demonstration, to publicize the demand for the eight-hour day. (Pp. 48-49, James Joll, *The Second International 1889-1914*, Oxford, 1955.) As this demand came to the fore in Wellington a few weeks later, the MMLPA's party was not an isolated incident. Nanaimo's miners were in touch with the international labour movement of the day, as subsequent events were to prove.

<sup>39</sup> The quotation in the text is from *Nanaimo Free Press*, 29 April 1890; the longer one which follows is from *ibid.*, 2 May 1890.

Not only could miners affect political change; they also had mastered the art of throwing a good party. The ball's "marked success" suggests that the MMLPA enjoyed considerable support from the community at large.

Two weeks later the MMLPA chose to illustrate its strength once more. On Saturday, 17 May, members paraded under "triumphant arches" from Nanaimo to Wellington via the East Wellington and Northfield mining communities, carrying banners, streamers, and flags (the Royal Ensign and the Stars and Stripes, *inter alia*), and led naturally enough by the Nanaimo Brass Band. At Wellington the president of the MMLPA, Tully Boyce, addressed the assembly: "The first thing we have to consider is: to get our employers to recognise our order, as some of them have recently refused to do."<sup>40</sup> The time for a direct attack on the Dunsmuirs had arrived. The meeting dispatched a committee to meet Bryden, the Wellington superintendent, to demand union recognition. The Wellington mine was the only one in the Nanaimo area which did not observe the eight-hour, bank-to-bank rule. This became an additional issue on which to challenge the Dunsmuirs: the meeting decided that an eight-hour day would be worked at Wellington starting on Monday.<sup>41</sup> Then the question of political representation was brought up, and the meeting endorsed two men to run with MMLPA support in the coming provincial election.<sup>42</sup> The meeting initiated the battle with the Dunsmuirs and indicated that it would be fought on a number of fronts over several issues. The demand for recognition — and behind it, a demand for dignity and fair treatment — was central.

On Monday, 19 May, in order to establish the eight-hour rule, most Wellington miners appeared for work at the new time of seven o'clock. After a brief period of confusion — the management claimed ignorance of the new rule, which had been made without prior consultation — the strike began. The MMLPA hoped to ensure victory by adopting a comprehensive strategy. It worked hard to create and maintain labour solidarity, to enforce a boycott of Dunsmuirs' coal in California, and to discourage any men from strikebreaking. A good deal of sympathy and help came in from the wider community, partly a result of the Association's careful con-

<sup>40</sup> An account of the procession and the meeting is in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 20 May 1890.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> The two candidates were Thomas Keith and Thomas Forster. Keith was a working miner while Forster had since turned to farming in the Fraser Valley. Cf. Loosmore's perceptive remarks, pp. 47-53, "The British Columbia Labor Movement . . ."

duct of the strike. In addition, all three Nanaimo-area candidates endorsed by the MMLPA were successful in the provincial election.<sup>43</sup>

The Dunsmuir's repeated their opposition to unionism, in particular to an organization which they claimed came from outside the ranks of their own employees. (Given their policy of dismissing any miner holding union loyalties, the position was a trifle disingenuous.) Robert had died twelve months earlier, but the family's anti-union tradition was kept alive by his thirty-nine-year-old son James. He expressed his determination to shut down rather than back down and served eviction notices on the strikers, all of whom lived in company houses.<sup>44</sup> When these notices came into effect at the end of July, the *Nanaimo Free Press* reported that "the evicted miners . . . won the sympathy of the whole of the inhabitants along the coast for the orderly manner in which they vacated the company's houses."<sup>45</sup> The peaceful departure increased support for the MMLPA: the mayors of New Westminster and Victoria offered money and tents, and the newly formed Vancouver Trades and Labour Council held a public meeting where funds were collected for the miners.<sup>46</sup> Undoubtedly such expressions of sympathy and help encouraged the strikers. Any hopes of an easy victory, however, were soon dashed.

On Friday, 1 August, for the first time since the mine was struck in May, coal was brought to the surface at No. 5 Shaft. The following Monday the MMLPA responded: the dozen or so strikebreaking miners were accompanied to the pit-head by a marching line of 200 striking miners, carrying banners and singing songs. Perhaps in imitation of the remarkably successful processions held by the London dockers a year earlier, such parades continued to be staged regularly.<sup>47</sup> These served to reinforce soli-

<sup>43</sup> The third candidate in the field with the support of the MMLPA (though not himself a miner) was C. C. McKenzie. McKenzie and Forster won in a three-way race for the two Nanaimo district seats, while Keith was elected by acclamation in Nanaimo city. See Loosmore, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> See James Dunsmuir's remarks quoted in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 21 May, 20 June 1890.

<sup>45</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 1 Aug. 1890. Similar evictions during the course of the Wellington strike of 1877 led to angry confrontation and the call out of the militia. See pp. 71-84, Bartlett, "The 1877 Wellington Miners' Strike."

<sup>46</sup> For the mayors' support, see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 29 July 1890. See also Minutebook of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, 22 Aug. 1890, p. 69.

<sup>47</sup> Throughout its course the London Dock Strike (of 1889) had been widely reported in the Nanaimo newspaper and was mentioned by at least one miner at the founding meeting of the MMLPA (see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 4 Feb. 1890). In October 1890 during trial proceedings involving the strikers, their lawyer "referred at great length to the dock labourers strike." (*Nanaimo Free Press*, 3 Oct. 1890.) For a history of the London Dock Strike, see pp. 92-120, John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers: A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London, 1870-1914* (London, 1969).

clarity, to discourage any back-sliding and publicize the dispute.<sup>48</sup> Public support for the strike and government neutrality had beaten London's dock owners. In British Columbia the strike had similar popular support, but the provincial government was far from neutral.

On the afternoon of 4 August, the MMLPA re-assembled to greet the strikebreakers as they came off shift. Superintendent Bryden judged that some caution was required, and after keeping the men down an extra half hour, he sent them home in a rail car. From among the crowd of striking miners came cries of "sons of bitches" and "black-legs."<sup>49</sup> After the jeering, the strikers paraded peacefully once more and then dispersed. Later a working miner laid charges of intimidation against five of the strikers for their part in the afternoon's excitement.<sup>50</sup> During the subsequent trial, the miners' lawyer argued that "this prosecution is . . . for the purpose of breaking up the union."<sup>51</sup> In a similar vein, the *Victoria Daily Times* editorialized that the proceedings smacked of "the abuse of the law in the interests of class."<sup>52</sup>

The following morning (5 August) the militia was called out; they arrived in Wellington that afternoon. The week before, the Nanaimo newspaper attacked the *Victoria Colonist's* coverage of the strike, accusing that journal of "attempting to provide an excuse for the sending of an armed force to Wellington."<sup>53</sup> Whatever the truth of the charge, available evidence does suggest that the militia's appearance was the outcome of considerable collusion between company and government.<sup>54</sup> For several

<sup>48</sup> The *Victoria Daily Times* (7 Aug. 1890) reported a conversation between James Dunsmuir and several of the strike leaders. When asked by Dunsmuir, "Why do you parade here with flags, singing and marching?" the MMLPA men explained that it was to publicize the dispute.

<sup>49</sup> This account relies on the testimony given by strikers and strikebreakers at the subsequent trial of five of the strike leaders for intimidation.

<sup>50</sup> For the laying of charges, see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 16 Aug. 1890; for an account of the trial see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 30 Sept., 3 and 14 Oct. 1890. Twelve men were at work at the main shaft (No. 5) in August 1890. Before the strike began, the number (according to the testimony of a strikebreaking miner) was 250.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 1 Oct. 1890.

<sup>52</sup> Op. cit., 22 Sept. 1890.

<sup>53</sup> The charge was made under the heading, "A Base Imputation and Gratuitous Insult," *Nanaimo Free Press*, 25 July 1890.

<sup>54</sup> What follows is drawn from the *Nanaimo Free Press*, August 1890, *passim*; pp. 167-73, Silverman, "A History of the Militia . . ."; and the correspondence held in Docket A 10234, RG 9, II A 1, State and Military Records, PAC. For a comparison with the use of the militia in other Canadian coal-mining communities during industrial disputes, see Don Macgillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s," *Acadiensis*, III, 2 (1974): 45-64. Captain R. H. Roy's ". . . in Aid of a Civil Power, 1877" (*Canadian Army Journal*, VII (1953): 61-69) discusses the use of the militia in an earlier Wellington strike. Roy

days prior to the event the Attorney-General and the company made careful arrangements so that all would go smoothly when the time came. The officer involved, Colonel Holmes, was instructed as to his duty by the Attorney-General and assured by the company that "we shall be responsible to you for all reasonable expenses";<sup>55</sup> three Victoria magistrates were rounded up to sign the requisition; and one of the Dunsmuir's trains was made ready for the special trip.

The troops, dispatched "to quell the anticipated riot," caused considerable consternation when they arrived in Wellington on 5 August. The local MP wrote angrily to the Minister responsible:

The question is asked and with emphasis, 'is it possible that a triumvirate of scoundrels living at a distance of eighty miles from a community of law-abiding citizens, usurp the functions of the Dominion and Provincial Governments, [and] the civil authorities of that community . . . and send an armed force into their midst to overawe some miners . . . ?'<sup>56</sup>

Much the same question had troubled Colonel Holmes, but the Attorney-General dismissed his objections and reminded him of his duty.<sup>57</sup> Feeling that their law-abiding community had been slandered by the action, Nanaimo's citizens packed the Opera House to hear indignant speeches by the mayor of New Westminster, their own mayor, their MP, and their three provincial members.<sup>58</sup> Despite the anger of the city's population, however, the entire episode rapidly deteriorated into farce. The militia and the strikers fraternized on the best of terms while the commander, arguing

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is somewhat enthusiastic about the militia's role; another perspective on the 1877 call out is offered by Bartlett, "The 1877 Wellington Miners' Strike." Desmond Morton's "Aid to the Civil Power: The Canadian Militia in Support of Social Order, 1867-1914" (*Canadian Historical Review*, LI, 4 (1970): 407-25) provides a general overview of the topic; see also Judy M. Torrance, *Public Violence in Canada, 1867-1982* (Kingston and Montreal, 1986).

<sup>55</sup> Robert Dunsmuir & Sons to Holmes, 4 Aug. 1890; the letter is reproduced in Holmes' letter to Powell, 24 June 1891, RG 9, II A 1, Docket A 10234, PAC.

<sup>56</sup> D. W. Gordon to Caron, 25 Aug. 1890, RG 9, II A 1, Docket A 10234, PAC.

<sup>57</sup> "Feeling that it was not the intention of the Militia Act to permit Magistrates residing miles away . . . to call out troops to proceed to a locality where I knew there were many resident Magistrates, I asked the Attorney General for his opinion as to the legality of the requisition, he said that it was perfectly legal and that I was compelled to act upon it." (From Holmes' Report of 15 Sept. 1890 to the Adjutant General, RG 9, II A 1, Docket A 10234, PAC.)

<sup>58</sup> A report of the "indignation meeting" was carried on the front page of the *Victoria Daily Times*, 9 Aug. 1890. Two months earlier the province's Chief Justice, addressing the jury at the Spring Assizes in Nanaimo, "congratulated them and the district on the blank calendar, which indicated an absence of crime, which might almost be termed sinlessness." (*Nanaimo Free Press*, 3 June 1890.)



that no danger to civil order existed, sent off plaintive appeals urging his recall.

Within two weeks of his arrival, Holmes was writing to the Victoria magistrates requesting that they allow him and his troops to return home. The Victoria magistrates insisted that he remain, as they were "in receipt of advices [*sic*] from Wellington, intimating the daily continuance of illegal processions. . . ."<sup>59</sup> Holmes reacted angrily to this: "permit me to say that I consider the presence of the troops in the locality of *illegal processions* . . . inadmissible [*sic*]. . . ." He reported to his superior that he found the strikers "quiet and civil," and observed that "I saw nothing to warrant intervention on the part of troops. . . . they should be withdrawn altogether as they are simply doing no good that I can see."<sup>60</sup> Holmes could not withdraw the troops on his own authority, although by 15 September he had reduced their number from the original fifty-two to five. These men were finally withdrawn on 1 December 1890.

The evictions and the dispatch of the militia increased public support for the strikers. On at least one occasion after their processions, thirsty strikers could choose between two hotels offering them free drinks.<sup>61</sup> A visiting theatrical company staged a benefit performance for them, and the local newspaper was always quick to defend their interests in print.<sup>62</sup> A rousing "Labour Demonstration" on 20 September indicated the solid backing that Nanaimo gave the strikers. Some 2,000 marched in a parade, and after a pause for lunch the crowd settled in to hear speeches from the MMLPA, the mayor, the Member of Parliament, members of the Legislature, and other assorted dignitaries, "each of whom," reported the *Daily News Advertiser* of Vancouver,

gave stirring addresses which were enthusiastically received. . . . After the speeches all kinds of sports were indulged in and the most imposing labour demonstration ever held in Nanaimo was brought to a successful termination with the good wishes of the whole community.<sup>63</sup>

Typical of the warm feelings that day was the gesture of some sailors, the

<sup>59</sup> Ward, Harris and Morrison to Holmes, 19 Aug. 1890, RG 9, II A 1, Docket A 10234, PAC.

<sup>60</sup> The first quotation is from Holmes to Ward, Harris and Morrison, 25 Aug. 1890 (emphasis in the original); the second from Holmes to Powell, 15 Sept. 1890, both in RG 9, II A 1, Docket A 10234, PAC.

<sup>61</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 12 Aug. 1890.

<sup>62</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 8 Aug. 1890. The sympathy of the *Nanaimo Free Press* is obvious in its coverage of the strike, hence the warm applause given to the editor at the labour demonstration on 20 Sept.

<sup>63</sup> P. 7, *The Daily News Advertiser*, 24 Sept. 1890.

victors in a hard fought tug-of-war contest. Union men all, they donated their \$30 of prize money to the MMLPA strike fund.

Despite the widespread sympathy, the strikers' ranks had begun to dwindle. Three months without a regular wage was a hard burden, and winter was on the way. Of the 700 miners out of work because of the dispute, 200 remained on strike by the end of August. Men either found work with the New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company or left the district to seek employment elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> Striking miners were paid \$17 a month from MMLPA funds, drawn from donations and a 10 percent levy on all working members. This levy led to some argument at a mass MMLPA meeting in November. Several speakers suggested the levy should be lowered to 5 percent if monies from donations could sustain the strikers adequately. The idea met considerable opposition, and finally the matter was referred to the committee responsible for administering the strike funds. The meeting had been called by the MMLPA executive after rumours had begun to circulate suggesting that the strike was lost. While most speakers rejected such a pessimistic view, the president of the East Wellington branch argued that production at the Dunsmuir mine indicated that the strike was no longer relevant. He was overruled by the meeting, which passed a motion to continue the strike amidst much enthusiasm.<sup>65</sup>

The MMLPA attacked the Dunsmuirs in the marketplace, as well as pursuing the more defensive strategy of providing financial aid to their striking miners. Their president went to San Francisco, where most B.C. coal was sold.<sup>66</sup> On 13 June 1890 he attended a council meeting of the Federated Trades, to request their help in settling the Wellington strike.<sup>67</sup> The next week the council heard that Dunsmuir had refused to meet with their executive committee to discuss the situation. The council responded by placing a boycott on the Dunsmuirs' coal. The San Francisco union newspaper editorialized that

<sup>64</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 25 July 1890.

<sup>65</sup> For a report of the meeting, see the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 13 Nov. 1890. Cf. the bitter memories of the levy and its result in the letter of long-time unionist James Young, *Nanaimo Free Press*, 23 Oct. 1900.

<sup>66</sup> Apart from Keith Ralston's "Patterns of Trade and Investment on the Pacific Coast, 1867-1892: The Case of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry" (*BC Studies*, 1 (1968-69): 37-45, and reprinted on pp. 296-305, W. Peter Ward and Robert A. J. McDonald, eds., *British Columbia: Historical Readings*, Vancouver, 1981), little work has been done on the export trade patterns of nineteenth-century British Columbia. For a description of the Californian coal market, see pp. 408-09, K. H. Burley, "The Overseas Trade in New South Wales Coal and the British Shipping Industry, 1860-1914," *The Economic Record*, 36, 1960.

<sup>67</sup> The *Nanaimo Free Press* reported on 22 July 1890 that the MMLPA was "amalgamated with the Knights of Labor and the Federated Trades of California."

This case is particularly aggravating. . . . It is the first time in the history of the Council of the Federated Trades that a committee from that body has been refused an audience. Young Dunsmuir is apparently unaware that when the Council declares a boycott it goes in to win. . . . Dunsmuir & Sons have attacked the most sensitive spot in organised labor, namely, refusal of recognition. . . . [It] will find that the Council is never idle when insulted. . . .<sup>68</sup>

Although the council evidently pursued the boycott for twelve months, sales were not affected deeply enough to alter the outcome of the strike.

The MMLPA made other efforts to generate outside support for the strike. In early September the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress met in Ottawa. Three men from British Columbia attended, including Thomas Salmon of the MMLPA. Obviously impressing the delegates, Salmon became chairman of one of the Congress's committees and even managed to meet with the Prime Minister.<sup>69</sup> The Congress was also read a letter from the Victoria Trades and Labour Council drawing attention to the Wellington strike; the letter soberly informed the gathering that "the future of organized labour in this province depends to a great extent upon the success or failure of this strike."<sup>70</sup>

The MMLPA was also active closer to home, helping to create the first province-wide labour organization. Moves had begun as early as September 1890 to form a provincial labour federation; at the beginning of November the "First Provincial Labor Congress" met in Nanaimo and elected Tully Boyce as president. Delegates from Victoria and Vancouver were present, though bad weather prevented the participation of the New Westminster men.<sup>71</sup> Four years earlier, a Nanaimo miner had organized Vancouver workers into the Knights of Labor; the actions of the MMLPA suggest that this tradition of leadership was still alive.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> P. 2, *Coast Seamen's Journal*, 25 June 1890. During 1890-1891, the boycott was frequently employed by the Federated Trades: "No meeting . . . was held in which some new boycott was not levied. . . ." See pp. 136-38, John Alan Lawrence, "Behind the Palaces: The Working Class and the Labor Movement in San Francisco, 1877-1901" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1979).

<sup>69</sup> Minutebook of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, 1890, p. 82 and *Proceedings of the Sixth Session of the Trades and Labor Congress of the Dominion of Canada*, Toronto, 1890, *passim*.

<sup>70</sup> P. 14, *Proceedings of the Sixth Session*.

<sup>71</sup> See the Minutebook of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, 5 Sept. and 24 Sept., 1890, pp. 69 and 73; also *Nanaimo Free Press*, 4 Nov. 1890.

<sup>72</sup> The miner in question was Samuel Myers (*Nanaimo Free Press*, 13 Feb. 1886). The first Nanaimo assembly of the Knights was organized in late 1883. Two assemblies were active in 1890: a letter from the MMLPA to the Federated Trades of San Francisco asking for financial support included endorsements by the Wellington and Nanaimo assemblies of the Knights. (The letter is printed in the *Coast Seamen's Journal*, 13 Aug. 1890.) Wellington's policeman testified at one of the intimidation

The efforts of the MMLPA to obtain the support of the wider North American movement, as well as its initiative in the drive to form a provincial federation, indicate that its members had a clear grasp of the need for labour organization. Their appeals went out across the continent. Even the head of the American Federation of Labor knew of the strike: Samuel Gompers labelled Robert Dunsmuir & Sons "one of the most villainous grasping corporations that ever lived."<sup>73</sup> Expressions of support and solidarity were not enough to ensure victory in the strike, for its character was changing. Perhaps reassured by the presence of the militia, the Dunsmuir family began to import strikebreakers from San Francisco. At first the union was able to persuade many of these new recruits to honour their struggle and refuse to work, but such moral suasion could not succeed forever. From the autumn of 1890 the Dunsmuir family gradually increased their work force, and by the New Year the colliery's production was returning to normal.<sup>74</sup>

In January 1891 the new Legislature sat in Victoria, including among its members the three Nanaimo-area supporters of the "Workingman's Platform."<sup>75</sup> One of these men, the coal miner Thomas Keith, moved that a Select Committee be formed to look into the Wellington strike. The subsequent debate revolved around the conduct of the strikers and the call out of the militia.<sup>76</sup> The appointment of the Select Committee was not perceived as an endorsement of the strikers or their goal, which explains why the move secured the unanimous approval of the largely pro-business Legislature. The loyalties of the government soon became obvious.

In early March 1891, one of the new workers at Wellington died as a result of a mining accident caused by the incompetence of a fellow miner.<sup>77</sup> The funeral procession passed through nearby Northfield, a community of New Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company miners and their families. On the way back from the cemetery the mourners (largely strikebreakers) were jeered by women and children, and snowballs flew. While the incident was hardly an outbreak of civil disorder, the Legislature acted

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trials that among the strikers' banners had been one bearing the motto "K and L," presumably "K of L" (see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 30 Sept. 1890). The history of the Knights in Nanaimo is touched on by Ralston and Kealey in their entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume XI, 1881-1890*, and also by Paul Phillips, pp. 11-17, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in B.C.* (Vancouver, 1967).

<sup>73</sup> He is quoted in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, 21 March 1891.

<sup>74</sup> See the Report of the Inspector of Mines, *B.C.:S.P.*, 1891.

<sup>75</sup> The platform is reproduced on pp. vi-vii, Appendix, Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labor Movement . . ."

<sup>76</sup> *Victoria Daily Times*, 10 Feb. 1891.

<sup>77</sup> See the verdict of the Inquest, *Nanaimo Free Press*, 4 March 1891.

upon it with surprising alacrity. A second Select Committee was formed, to investigate what became known as the "Snowball Incident."<sup>78</sup> Four days later, on 9 March, sixteen men were arrested while taking part in the (by now, routine) strikers' procession. The men, charged with intimidation, were taken by train to Victoria where the Attorney-General prosecuted the case against them. In the earlier trial of similarly charged strikers in October, a Nanaimo jury had only reluctantly arrived at a guilty verdict.<sup>79</sup> Clearly no chances were being taken a second time. The Attorney-General also made plain the government's intention to end the ritual parades: "They should be stopped, too," he said, "if every man had to be arrested, and every jail in the land filled."<sup>80</sup> Presumably to keep the pressure on the strikers, a few days later the six men who had been tried and found guilty of intimidation in October were recalled for sentencing.<sup>81</sup> The government was engaged in its own campaign of intimidation, in support of the Dunsmuir.

Back in Wellington, on the instructions of the Attorney-General, a magistrate read the Riot Act to strikers as they assembled for the ritual procession. The men replied with a rousing rendition of the Marseillaise before dispersing. The next day, in a demonstration of solidarity and defiance, the miners' wives resolutely marched for female suffrage.<sup>82</sup> The fear of arrest was enough to quell further public display, however, and the gradually increasing production of the Wellington mine must have been a disheartening reminder of the futility of continuing with the strike. Any remaining hopes for success now rested with a successful California boycott of Dunsmuir coal or with positive action by the MMLPA-approved members of the Legislature. Given the hardening attitude of the provincial government, the latter event seemed unlikely to have much effect. Ironically the California boycott failed largely because of the initial success of another hard-fought strike on the Pacific Rim, the bitter Maritime Strike

<sup>78</sup> The leader of the opposition remarked that "It is most humiliating, I think, that this Legislature should descend so low as to trouble itself about such a matter . . ." 19 March 1891, *Victoria Daily Times*, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> For this trial, and the jury's reluctance, see *Nanaimo Free Press*, 3 and 14 Oct. 1890.

<sup>80</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 11 March 1891.

<sup>81</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 13 March 1891.

<sup>82</sup> For the reading of the Riot Act, *Nanaimo Free Press*, 11 March 1891; for the appointment of the Snowball Committee, *ibid.*, 12 March 1891, and p. 74, *JLA*, 1891; for the women marchers, *Nanaimo Free Press*, 12 and 13 March 1891. Female suffrage later featured as the first plank of the 1894 platform of a coalition of Nanaimo area opposition groups (which included the MMLPA). The platform is reproduced on p. xi, Appendix, Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labor Movement . . ."

in Australasia.<sup>83</sup> The result, a coal drought in San Francisco, meant that merchants there could not afford to be particular about the source of their coal.

In late March the Legislature's two committees on the strike heard evidence in the Nanaimo area. Neither was impartial: Keith, for example, was an active member of the MMLPA and had been elected with its endorsement. As chairman of the "Select Committee appointed to enquire into the cause that led to the late strike or lock-out at the Wellington coal mines," he could hardly be considered as a man with neutral views on the question. On the other hand, the Select Committee looking into the "Snowball Incident" had been formed by James Dunsmuir's brother-in-law, Henry Croft, who also acted as its chairman. No more impartial than Keith's, Croft's committee attempted to discredit the strike in the eyes of the public. Quickly formed to investigate a trivial incident, its creation suggests the government was reacting belatedly to Keith's committee, fearing it might provide support for the striking miners.<sup>84</sup>

The Select Committee headed by Keith, whatever its bias, examined the events in Wellington thoroughly. In its ninety pages of evidence both sides argued their case in some detail. The witnesses called by the MMLPA blamed the strike on the refusal of the owners to recognize the union. Some argued that grievances existed, victimization, disputes over wages or faulty means of checking coal weights, which made organization necessary or inevitable: "you could never have organized the men of Wellington," insisted one miner, "if they had been treated properly and got sufficient wages."<sup>85</sup> But the consensus amongst the strikers was that union recognition was the cause; further reasons only underlined the motives of the men who had joined the union. The majority of the witnesses for the owners blamed the strike on agitators, specifically men who had been dismissed after the lockout in 1889. Some of the miners who testified on the owners' behalf

<sup>83</sup> Pp. 4-5, *Coast Seamen's Journal*, 10 June 1891. For an account of the Maritime Strike in Australia, see pp. 7-37, John Rickard, *Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890-1910* (Canberra, 1976). The New Zealand strike is described by H. Roth, "The Maritime Strike of 1890," *Historical News*, 21 (1970): 1-3.

<sup>84</sup> The *Victoria Daily Times* editorialized that the committee was "in search of a grievance for their political masters . . ." (p. 4, 19 March 1891). The committee failed to produce a unanimous report. The majority concluded "that the conduct of the people of Northfield . . . was unseemly and insulting." Aware of the committee's purpose, the dissenting member pointed out in his report that "The striking miners who are now being prosecuted by the Government were in no manner whatever connected with any thing that took place in connection with the funeral procession . . ." (For the two reports see pp. lxxv and lxxvii, *JLA*, 1891).

<sup>85</sup> Answer 462, "Evidence," *JLA*, 1891.

simply observed that they saw no need for organization. The committee's conclusion after hearing all evidence confirmed what most had already deduced: it found "that the primary cause of the strike at Wellington [starting] in May last . . . was the desire of the miners to be recognised as an organization . . . and the refusal of the management . . . to recognise . . . such an organisation."<sup>86</sup>

Keith presented the Select Committee's report to the Legislature on 11 April 1891. A few days earlier he had proposed a new amendment to the Coal Mines Regulation Act, to strengthen the "no Chinese underground" clause for which the MMLPA had lobbied successfully the year previously. Keith justified his bill by pointing out that the earlier amendment had proved inadequate in practice. When the Mines' Inspector charged Dunsmuir's Union Colliery with employing Chinese underground in June 1890, the judge ruled that the Legislature had exceeded its jurisdiction with the provision and dismissed the case.<sup>87</sup> Keith's new amendment provoked some heated debate. Speakers largely ignored the racial aspects of the legislation, concentrating instead on those who might benefit from its enforcement. The "no Chinese" clause, the Wellington strike, and the role of the MMLPA in Nanaimo were not separate issues.

The Premier and the Attorney-General explained away their earlier support for Chinese exclusion and argued that Keith's bill would only help the union. Recalling the passage of the original amendment the year before, Davie confessed that he had been "led away by the petition sent down by the miners. . . . Upon further consideration he found that it merely strengthened the hands of the Union, and that he was not prepared to do." When he had finished, Premier Robson made the government's position perfectly clear:

He was told a year ago that by passing the act [to ban Chinese labour underground in coal mines] they would bring about a strike, and sure enough a strike did take place. . . . He believed that keeping the present Act would only be an additional inducement for the Union miners to go out on strike. Look at those miners living on the contributions of their brother miners, because the mine owners would not recognise the right of the Union to dictate to them how they should work their mines.<sup>88</sup>

Croft, the in-law of the Dunsmuirs, proposed a second amendment, to allow the re-admission of Chinese to work in the mines. After further debate, the Legislature decided against any action: both Keith's and

<sup>86</sup> P. ccxli, *JLA*, 1891.

<sup>87</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 20 and 21 June 1890.

<sup>88</sup> Both passages are from the *Victoria Daily Times*, 15 April 1891.

Croft's bills failed. The ambiguous status quo, a racist law that the courts refused to enforce, prevailed.

In Wellington, the strike continued but its effect on the Dunsmuir family was minimal. With a new labour force, production continued to rise. Government intervention had ended the processions and the strike gradually lost what momentum it had left, although it was not officially called off until mid-November 1891. The Dunsmuir family had won again.

Despite the defeat, the MMLPA carried on. In early 1892, Keith (their most active representative in the Legislature) launched another attempt to have the anti-Chinese provision of the Mines Act tightened up, submitting a 2,680-signature petition from Nanaimo, Wellington, and Cumberland, to add the weight of public opinion in support of his bill.<sup>89</sup> Much the same strategy had secured the unanimous approval of the Legislature for Chinese exclusion in March 1890. But the strike and the rise of the MMLPA dramatically changed the way the government saw Chinese mine labour: exclusion no longer seemed a safety issue. In the 1891 debate, speakers referred repeatedly to the strike and the potential power of the union. During the 1892 debate, with the strike successfully quashed, government members continued to see Keith's bill as an attempt to "get control of the coal mining industries in British Columbia so that [union miners] may say who shall work and who shall not work and what wages they each shall receive."<sup>90</sup> One member freely admitted his anti-Chinese prejudice ("in the abstract") and stressed that he would welcome the day when few Chinese were left in the province. However, he argued that "the bill . . . was class legislation of the most despicable kind, and for that reason he was going to oppose it."<sup>91</sup> The institutional racism enshrined in the "no Chinese" clause was not rejected because such discrimination was seen as immoral or distasteful but only because it now represented support for unionized labour. Once this happened, repeal was inevitable. The MMLPA had been out-manoeuvred on the political as well as the industrial front.

The repeal of the "no Chinese" clause underscored the weakness of independent labour representation in the Legislature. Three men could accomplish little in a thirty-three-seat House, especially when the governing faction had such close ties with the province's merchant élite. The problem was dealt with at an MMLPA meeting in early 1893, although before considering political matters the MMLPA itself had to survive a

<sup>89</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 18 Feb., 3 March 1892.

<sup>90</sup> Pooley, 3 March 1892, *Nanaimo Free Press*.

<sup>91</sup> Hunter, *ibid.*



vote of confidence.<sup>92</sup> After the meeting voted 310 to 43 to continue with the organization, discussion moved on to the question of supporting the candidacy of a working man for a recently vacated seat in the House of Commons. Thomas Keith recounted the difficulties he faced trying to have his anti-Chinese legislation passed in the Legislature. Complaining that the distribution of seats gave an unfair advantage to the government, he admitted that little could be accomplished by single representatives such as himself. On the other hand, he stressed that if working people did not stand for election, their interests would be ignored. The meeting finally decided that Andrew Haslam, a sawmill owner and former member of the Legislature, would be the best candidate to support in the by-election. While not a working man, he was considered to stand the best chance of beating Joseph Hunter (manager of the Dunsmuir's railway) and of affording the expenses incurred by Members of Parliament.<sup>93</sup>

A year later the question of working-class representation came up again, when the Northfield branch of the Nanaimo Reform Club sponsored a political meeting at the Institute Hall in Wellington. A recent creation, the club represented a coalition of anti-government elements, a united front to contest the approaching provincial election. Speakers addressing the crowd included politicians such as Thomas Keith, Thomas Forster, C. C. MacKenzie, and T. R. E. McInnes, as well as newcomer Ralph Smith. Judging by the account published in the *Nanaimo Free Press*, government supporters were also out in force: hecklers frequently interrupted speakers and tempers flared. Thomas Keith, however, was accorded a respectful silence, at least until he got to his main point: "If you send men like Bryden [to Victoria in the next provincial election] . . . they must represent the interests of their own class. (Cheers)." Bryden, who had earlier declined an offer to address the crowd, quickly rose to interject from the floor:

What do you mean by class?

KEITH: I take it this way. You are an employer. Your interests are with the employers and not with the employed.

BRYDEN: I have no more interest in the colliery than my salary, like any other employe [*sic*]. No more than any other man digging coal.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> The meeting is reported in *Nanaimo Free Press*, 4 March 1893.

<sup>93</sup> MMLPA president Tully Boyce told the meeting that he "had heard the name of Mr. J. Hunter [as a candidate for the vacant seat]. . . . If there was one man they must work to defeat this was the man. (The remark was received with great applause.)" *Ibid.* Haslam won the by-election.

<sup>94</sup> In fact, Bryden was married to one of Robert Dunsmuir's daughters and was a partner in the Union Colliery at Cumberland.

KEITH: You are the superintendent. Your interests do not coincide with the miners.<sup>95</sup>

However persuasive Keith's argument, voters rejected him by the narrowest of margins in the subsequent election.<sup>96</sup>

The loss of the strike and the fate of the MMLPA's political initiatives revealed the miners' weak position. Although the province's economy depended on the wealth that they produced in pits that were among the most dangerous in the world, they could not secure the most elementary of working privileges, a union. Successful industrial and political strategies still eluded the Wellington miners.

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By 1890 British Columbia had begun to participate in the industrialized world created by nineteenth-century science and technology. The railway, quintessential symbol of the new reality, had linked the Pacific coast with eastern Canada just four years earlier. The province's staple products were canned salmon to feed the factory workers of Britain and coal to provide power for the state of California. The pioneer days, with their fur traders and individual placer miners, were virtually over.

Although the economy of the province adjusted to the trading conditions of the late-nineteenth century, its political structure remained static, little changed since entry into Confederation. From 1883, provincial authority was exercised by an intimate clique of Victoria merchants and professional men who drew on regional representatives to give further stability to the cabinet. The Dunsmuirs had considerable representation and influence in this relatively small élite. As the province's population grew and its ties

<sup>95</sup> *Nanaimo Free Press*, 9 April 1894. Keith had made the same point in May 1890 when running for office: "Do not believe the capitalist will advance your interests and wants. The only man who will do this is the working man. . . ." (*Nanaimo Free Press*, 19 May 1890.)

<sup>96</sup> R. E. Gosnell gives an interesting contemporary interpretation of "The Moral of the British Columbia Elections" in *The Canadian Magazine*, Vol. III, September 1894, pp. 475-79. He insisted that Island-mainland rivalry and redistribution were not the main issues in the campaign, as had been widely reported. Gosnell argued that although "A desperate effort was made by some of the labor agitators and unscrupulous politicians to draw class distinctions and organize labor on distinctly anti-capitalistic lines . . . the most satisfactory feature of the whole campaign [was] the almost entire failure of the endeavor to arouse hostility among the working men against the employers of labor" (pp. 476 and 477). Loosmore (pp. 68-71 and 75-76, "The British Columbia Labor Movement . . .") suggests that the miners' defeat at the polls in 1894, contrasting so sharply with their electoral victory of 1890, can be explained by their move into the opposition camp, and their abandonment of the independent labour strategy.

with the outside world became more substantial, British Columbia's political immaturity was increasingly inappropriate. The emergence of the miners as a cohesive political force — symbolized by the MMLPA representatives in the Legislature after the 1890 election — reflected the changed nature of provincial society. The reaction of the Robson government to the strike demonstrated a determination to preserve its hegemony, to uphold the status quo, and to deflect any challenge to its authority.

The failure of the Wellington strike and the miners' political initiatives is not surprising: given the power arraigned against them, the defeats were inevitable. Despite similarities with other strikes against the Dunsmuirs, the 1890 dispute saw the miners respond to the owners' (by now, predictable) tactics with their own well-orchestrated campaign. They successfully ran candidates for the Legislature, appealed to fellow unionists across Canada and in the United States, attempted to enforce a boycott of company coal, and resolutely staged thrice-weekly processions at the mine gates. The miners of Vancouver Island were aware of, and in touch with, the latest developments within the labour movement of North America and Britain. With solid community support, they tried every avenue available in their effort to gain union recognition. What stands out is not the fact that they ultimately lost but the determination with which they waged the battle against the Dunsmuirs.

Above all, the striking miners' diverse tactics and disciplined behaviour reveal their heightened sense of class. The strike encouraged a realization that in the British Columbia of 1890 an emerging industrial working class could obtain few concessions from a still-parochial government or a business run by a determined anti-labour group. This consciousness of futility prompted Vancouver Island's miners to travel down various roads in search of more successful strategies.

The following two decades saw Nanaimo emerge as a national focus of working-class organization. One local miner (Ralph Smith) attained prominence as an MP, president of the national Trades and Labour Congress, and leading advocate of "Lib.-Lab.-ism." At the same time the town returned determined socialists to the Legislature in Victoria and helped launch the British Columbia Socialist Party, later the Socialist Party of Canada. Bitter industrial disputes continued in the Island mines, until the First World War finally ended the last and most well known of these. The 1890 strike was not an isolated incident but an important part of a longer series of struggles in which the politics of coal united government and employer against the miners.