

A Community in Conflict: The Crowsnest Pass' 1932 Coal Strike

by

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Abstract

In late-February of 1932, the Mine Workers Union of Canada called a strike against three Crowsnest Pass coal operators: West Canadian Collieries, International Coal and Coke and McGillivray Creek Coal and Coke. Seven months of work stoppage bore down on Alberta's Crowsnest community and several bitter incidents manifested both against classes, and within.

This study examines multiple perspectives that arose during the course of the strike. Several community members shaped the dispute in key ways, affecting how people came to understand the strike and also the union that called it. I explore the perspectives and actions of mine operators, union organizers, rank and file workers and their families, authorities, and other community members as the strike proceeded for seven months. My analysis starts by examining the commercial contexts of West Canadian Collieries. This focus draws attention to the impact the Canadian Pacific Railway had in both the union's choice to call a strike and why West Canadian's officials hesitated in resolving the dispute too quickly. A breakdown of the dispute's momentous May picket lines follows. When West Canadian tried to reopen one of its mines, picket support came from women of the community and several were arrested. Prominent union organizer Harvey Murphy was also taken into custody following the May pickets. The organizer used his courtroom proceedings to scrutinize the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the conditions of his arrest. The pickets of May in combination with other confrontational incidents inside the Crowsnest community provoked resistance to the strike and I analyze this feature. Several members of the community organized a citizens' league and looked to combat strife brought by the strike. As a final component to this study, the strike's resolution is examined. Settlement occurred in two disparate ways. International and McGillivray mineworkers opted for a local union instead of a national union and West Canadian's workers pushed towards

settlement with the Mine Workers Union of Canada. The latter's strike conclusion implicated authorities in their negotiations. By using a multi-perspective approach, the Crowsnest Pass Strike of 1932 reveals how tensions were shaped and reshaped during the course of one hundred and ninety-five days of work stoppage.

Dedication

To my family, past and present

Acknowledgements

I should like to take this opportunity to thank Lynn and my family. They were kind and patient enough to let me explore ideas found in this work over our many conversations in the past few years, lending their ears and their personal insights. I would also like to thank each Canadian history professor inside the University of Alberta's History and Classics department who I had the privilege of studying from during my undergraduate and graduate degrees. David Mills, Linda Kerr, Frances Swyripa, Liza Piper, Paul Voisey, and Gerhard Ens each in their own way added to the foundation of my academic pursuits. While doing this research, I was grateful for the welcoming atmosphere from staff and volunteers, like Karen Simonson and Shannon Cherkowski, at the Provincial Archives of Alberta and Glenbow Archives. They made the archives feel like a second home. I especially want to thank James Muir, my supervisor in this project. He introduced me to important elements on the writing of history, elements that I am looking forward to continue building on in the future. I am also appreciative of the feedback from my thesis committee members Eric Strikwerda and Jeremy Mouat who pushed me to think about my thesis on different levels. Finally, I would like to thank Steven Hijmans and Andrew Gow. Their encouragement to see history as a discipline to pursue is not forgotten.

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List of Abbreviations

BMA- Bellevue Miners' Association

CCF- Co-operative Commonwealth Federation

CPC- Communist Party of Canada

CPR- Canadian Pacific Railway

MWUC- Mine Workers Union of Canada

UFA- United Farmers of Alberta

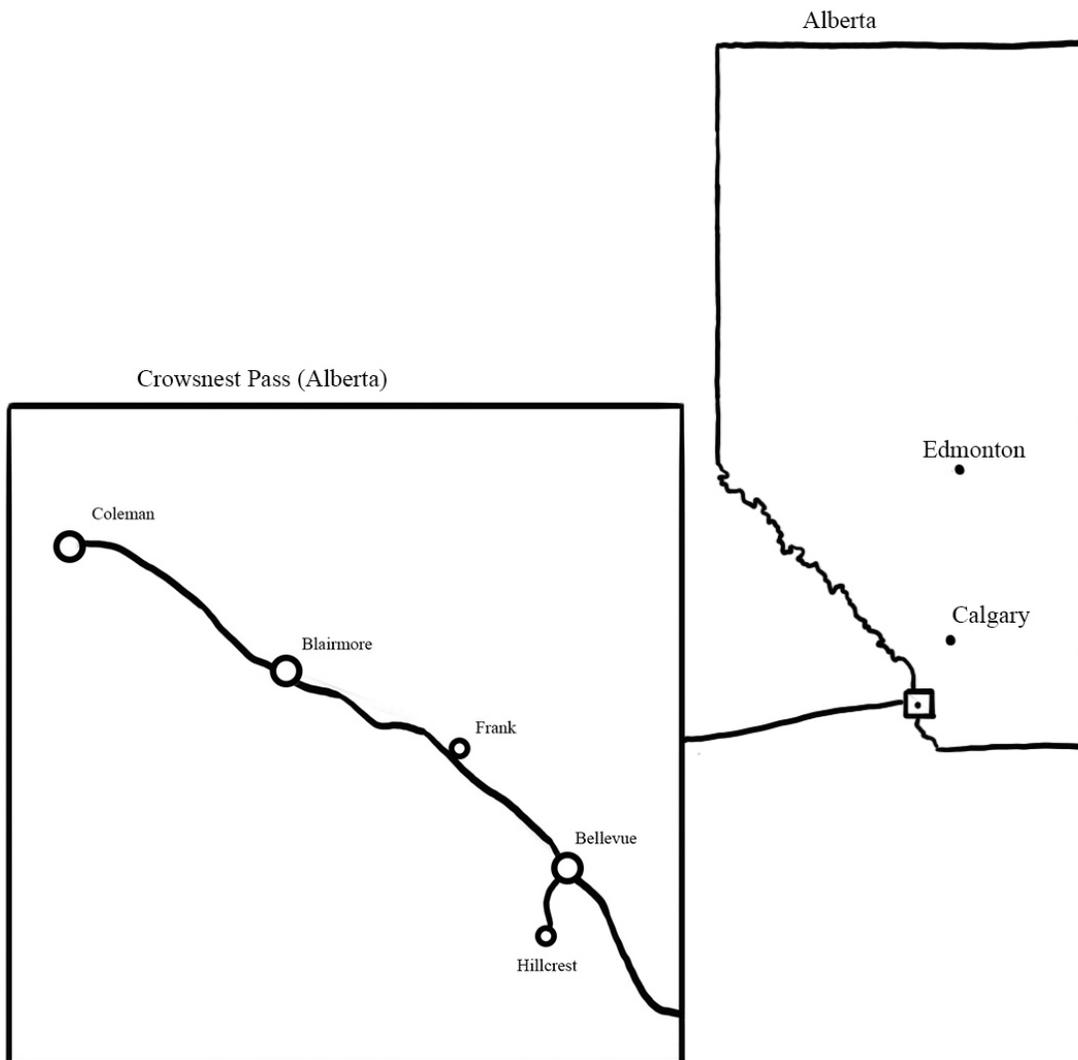
UMWA- United Mine Workers of America

WCC- West Canadian Collieries

WUL- Worker's Unity League

RCMP- Royal Canadian Mounted Police

Map of the Crowsnest Pass



Introduction



‘Communist in Crowsnest Pass Miners’ Strike,’ 1932, Glenbow Archives, NA-3634-24. John Stokaluk Standing on the Right.

“one less scab to work ... in the future”¹

John Stokaluk

John Stokaluk, official secretary of the Mine Workers Union of Canada [MWUC], spoke stern and unsympathetic words about a miner killed in Coleman, Alberta in June of 1932. One of the town’s local mines had a roof cave in, crushing a miner to death under the weight of timbers

¹ “Bellevue Scene of Strike Parade and Mass Meeting,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 2 June 1932.

and rock. Paralleling mining ‘worksapes’ in other areas, fatal workplace accidents were an unfortunate and all-to-common feature of early-twentieth century coal production in the Crowsnest Pass.² More compassion and consideration from a labour leader in the mining industry might have been in order. But that year, Stokaluk had been trying to keep a united strike front against three coal companies, West Canadian Collieries (WCC), International Coal and Coke, and McGillivray Collieries in the Crowsnest towns of Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman. With 1930 work agreements set to expire in April of 1932, miners in Blairmore decided to call a strike in late-February, with Bellevue and Coleman’s miners quickly following Blairmore’s lead. In total, roughly one thousand coalminers struck, with MWUC leaders representing all of the miners in the negotiations.

The choice by Coleman miners to return to the International and McGillivray Collieries after two months was seen as a betrayal to ardent MWUC supporters. In replacing the MWUC with a local union, roughly six hundred Coleman miners left Blairmore and Bellevue miners to face West Canadian Collieries alone. Stokaluk had worked in one of the mines of Coleman before assuming a leadership role in the MWUC.³ Moreover, Coleman was one of the four towns which represented the birth point for the national union.

Seven years earlier in 1925, miners of the Crowsnest Pass brought the Mine Workers Union of Canada into existence.⁴ The newly formed labour organization held national aspirations, looking to organize all coal and metal workers inside Canada.⁵ The union originated

² See Karen Buckley’s *Danger, Death and Disaster in the Crowsnest Pass Mines, 1902-1928* (Calgary, University of Calgary Press, 2004).

³ Allen Seager, “A History of the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1977), 33-34.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners: European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1980), 123.

from a vacuum produced when many miners in Alberta's coal industry lost faith in the United Mine Workers of America. The international union came under fire as miners believed the organization inadequately represented their local interests.⁶ When Coleman miners ousted the MWUC as their work representatives, they shifted the power dynamics of the dispute. They inflicted what appeared to be a major setback on the national union's effort to negotiate a new and fair contract for coalminers. West Canadian Collieries had been holding firm on its position regarding the MWUC: they would not negotiate with the union. When Coleman's miners pushed the MWUC out of their affairs, they likely confirmed to WCC management that the national union could be dislodged influence from their workplaces.

When Coleman miners returned to work at the end of May, many Crowsnest Pass residents faced a spectrum of emotions. Some like Stokaluk, remembered by one miner as a "real rough radical," became incensed at the audacity of Coleman's miners.⁷ Others started questioning, even opposing, the MWUC leadership. Proponents at extreme ends would come to clash and the Crowsnest Pass strike of 1932 is a reminder that labour tensions were not only between classes. The conflict between employees and their employers, between capital and labour, describe only one aspect of working class life. The charged atmosphere prompted by the strike refused to remain on picket lines, refused to remain between capital and labour, and seeped into the community and lives of the Crowsnest residents. From the twenty-third of February to the fifth of September in 1932, these one hundred and ninety five days of work dispute provoked tensions between classes and within, as intimidation and violence came to the community of the Crowsnest Pass.

⁶ Bruce Ramsey, *The Noble Cause: The Story of the United Mine Workers of America in Western Canada* (Calgary: District 19, United Mine Workers of America, 1990), 131.

⁷ "Alrik Tiberg," RCT-260-1-Tom Kirkham Oral History Project (hereafter TKOP), Glenbow Archives (hereafter GA), Calgary, Canada.

The Crowsnest Pass geographically straddles the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. Its towns were built along a corridor through the Rocky mountains in south-western Alberta and south-eastern B.C. when in the late-nineteenth century commercial aspirations enticed entrepreneurs to envision the region as a new and viable area for coal-mining operations.⁸ Assumptions on the industrial potential of the region to produce coal held true. In assessing western-Canada's historic coal production, T.H. Patching finds that the industry in Alberta and British Columbia "showed vigorous expansions as Crowsnest area mines came into production" between 1890 and 1914.⁹ But an enlargement of the coal industry was only one aspect that coincided with development of the Crowsnest Pass. Historians Desmond Morton and Terry Copp further the implications the region held, writing that the "Crowsnest Pass ... became a vital element in western Canadian development" as a whole.¹⁰ By the late-twentieth century, the Crowsnest Pass boasted second highest of all Alberta's coal producing regions.¹¹

The 1932 coal strike hit the three towns hard. Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman were separate municipalities each with different town councils. Several connections nevertheless formed over time between them, lending credence to the idea that together they constituted a tight-knit community. Several historians have used the idea of community to contextualize the Crowsnest Pass. Wayne Norton and Tom Langford, for instance, use the framework as they draw attention to several social and economic themes of the district in *A World Apart: The Crowsnest*

⁸ David Jay Bercuson, *Alberta's Coal Industry, 1919* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 1978), viii.

⁹ T.H. Patching, *Western Canada's Coal: 'The Sleeping Giant'* (Calgary: Canada West Foundation, 1980), 19.

¹⁰ Desmond Morton and Terry Copp, *Working People* (Ottawa: Deneau & Greenberg Publishers Ltd., 1980), 50.

¹¹ Alex Johnston, Keith G. Gladwyn and L. Gregory Ellis, *Lethbridge its Coal Industry* (Lethbridge: Lethbridge Historical Society, 1989), 13.

Communities of Alberta and British Columbia.¹² Moreover, historian Karen Buckley examines the unity community residents came to feel as they contended with the dangers of mining work in *Danger, Death and Disaster in the Crowsnest Pass Mines, 1902-1928*.¹³ The idea of a shared community atmosphere in the towns of Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman also extends from the proximity in space the towns held with each other. The furthest distance between two striking towns, Coleman and Bellevue, spanned thirteen kilometres, easily covered in a three or four-hour walk and even quicker by vehicle. Blairmore stood practically midway between the two towns. Collectively, the towns formed a hub of human activity inside the Crowsnest Pass. Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman's geographical proximity must be considered when looking at the labour dispute, as actions and behaviours in one town held potential to affect perspectives and judgments in another.

The strike played out at the local level, but the labour dispute also reflected larger contexts. It was a reaction to and a product of the economic, political, and social contours that defined Canada generally and Alberta specifically in the early-1930s. Economically, the Great Depression had devastating effects on coalminers who could not escape from the strangling hold larger market forces held on their industry. A major part of Alberta's provincial economy depended on the agricultural industry, but this had fallen victim to pitifully low grain prices. As historian Howard Palmer points out, "as farmers stopped buying [agricultural goods] ... railway

¹² Wayne Norton and Tom Langford, *A World Apart: The Crowsnest Communities of Alberta and British Columbia* (Kamloops: Plateau Press, 2002)

¹³ Buckley, *Danger, Death, and Disaster*; moreover, Diana Wilson also explores the community of the Crowsnest Pass and the deep between the towns when major disasters occurred, the Frank Slide and Hillcrest Mine Disaster, in *Triumph and Tragedy in the Crowsnest Pass* (Surrey: Heritage House Publishing), 53-136.

and coal mines cut back on their operations.”¹⁴ The miners struck to secure for miners a wage that could adequately sustain themselves and their families in poor economic times.

Provincial politics also played a role in the dispute. Coalmining labour disputes in the 1920’s and early 1930’s were often met with the same sort of ambivalent disposition from the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) government. The UFA was, according to Palmer, a “cautious and pragmatic” political party in practice.¹⁵ Its usual response to work-related disputes and strikes was a reluctance to intervene unless absolutely necessary. Premier John Edward Brownlee, took this position in the Crowsnest strike of 1932. The Alberta government’s ‘hands-off’ strategy meant Crowsnest residents were forced to sort out their workplace dispute alone until the end.

The UFA’s overall cautious disposition, not just in relation to strikes and lockouts, spawned dissatisfaction with the party and many Albertans searched for alternative, more radical political organizations. While the Alberta Social Credit Party would eventually dominate Alberta politics after picking up enough support left from the political fall of the UFA, at the time of the strike, socialist and communist options were garnering support inside the province.¹⁶ The UFA split between a political side, embodied by Brownlee the premier, and a popular side filled by its rank and file supporters.¹⁷ When the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) was created in August of 1932, several UFA representatives became federation members.¹⁸ The CCF initially was to be non-political, but it threatened the political side of the UFA and Brownlee. Brownlee finally decided to step in the dispute in an unofficial capacity to encourage conciliation less than

¹⁴ Howard Palmer, *Alberta: A New History* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers Ltd., 1990), 244.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 210.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 244-245.

¹⁷ Ted Byfield, *Fury and Futility: The Onset of the Great Depression, 1930-1935 Vol. 6 of Alberta in the 20th Century* (Edmonton: United Western Communications Ltd., 1998), 118-121.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

a month after the creation of the CCF and when positions between the WCC and the MWUC continued to remain oppositional after more than half a year. Meanwhile, the Communist Party of Canada's (CPC) organizational structures like farmer and worker unity leagues assisted the MWUC with providing for its workers in the way of rations during the dispute.¹⁹

Socially, a wave of labour radicalism in the post-war period had continued to move forward. Historian Craig Heron sees the years between 1917 and 1925 as a watershed moment for the Canadian working class and “defiance swelled up in industrial centres across the country.”²⁰ This militant approach was embodied early on in 1919 with the Winnipeg General Strike and later in the creation of the MWUC in 1925. Working class soldiers who returned from the Great War challenged injustices they experienced in the country they had fought for.²¹ Worker militancy also resulted from the idea that real and meaningful change for the betterment of workers was possible and sections of Canadian workers were encouraged by working class revolutions occurring elsewhere in the world, the Bolshevik revolution being of particular interest.²² While Heron limits the tail-end of this social movement to 1925, he admits that a “much more thorough study of the post-1920 slump in the Canadian economy” needs to be done. Traces of the discourse of dissent did not altogether disappear at the end of the 1920s and calls for change continued into the 1930s. Canadian workers continued to do what Heron describes of workers in the immediate post war period, “confront capitalism as a denial of democracy and justice.”²³

¹⁹ Ibid, 248; Steven L. Endicott, *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930-1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 198-199.

²⁰ Craig Heron, *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 4, 306.

²¹ Byfield, *Fury and Futility*, 189.

²² Ibid; Endicott, *Raising the Workers' Flag*, 12, 25.

²³ Heron, *The Workers' Revolt*, 312.

The economic, the political, and the social contexts combined to create the perfect storm for a long lasting coal mining strike that convulsed Crowsnest residents, heaving them physically into and ideologically away from each other.

To a certain degree I find influence in the general contours labour studies have taken since the mid-twentieth century. Candidly, my focus on an industrial dispute is not unique. In mid to late-twentieth century Canadian labour historiography through to the present, industrial strikes remain a foundational pillar of inquiry for labour historians. These undertakings remain linked to a larger scholarly movement of writing history from the ‘ground up’, where early labour historian E.P. Thompson set a precedent, both directly and indirectly, in the 1960s on both how to write and what to look for when writing the history of labour. Thompson pivotally affected the trajectory of the field. In consequence to the influence that Marxist thought had on those like Thompson and innumerable historians afterwards, most scholarly literature on the working class underscores, with varying degrees, the paradigm of labour’s antagonistic relation with capital.

This is not to suggest that all labour histories seek to use this methodology, but in some ways it is inescapable. Some recent works by historians have attempted to reach beyond the boundaries of this methodology in various fashions. In *Killing For Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War*, Thomas G. Andrews attempts to look at an industrial dispute while straddling aspects of environmental, exploration, and cultural history.²⁴ Andrew’s work is an example of endeavours to move beyond the paradigm. Instead of looking at the event itself, the historian analyzes Ludlow’s coal ‘workscape’ that ultimately gave rise to the dispute. Yet, at the same

²⁴ Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

time, labour/capital frictions implicitly remains a component to labour disputes. This approach cannot be avoided in writing on any strike. As Canadian labour historian Bryan D. Palmer points out, coalminers were “One group particularly subjected to the power of capital ... which fought vigourously to resist its campaigns.”²⁵ The Crowsnest Pass Strike of 1932 cannot be adequately understood without taking into consideration the conflict between labour and capital. And I employ it, though like Andrews with a refocus.

As labour historiography continues developing innovative methods for analyzing strikes, one methodology particularly influences my approach to the labour lockout in the Crowsnest Pass. In 2010, historians Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell set out to re-examine Winnipeg’s General Strike of 1919.²⁶ Instead of emphasizing a working class perspective, Kramer and Mitchell adjust that focus and almost entirely devote attention to A.J Andrews and the Citizens’ Committee of 1000. Andrews and the league opposed the worker labour dispute and responded with actions looking to bring the strike to an end by appealing to the federal government. In tracking Andrews and the CCL1000’s actions, Mitchell and Kramer present a memorable Canadian example of work discontent. They draw attention to the idea that analyzing perspectives besides the working class yields fascinating insights into industrial strikes. I follow their lead but instead of employing a methodology that analyzes one point-of-view in a strike like Kramer and Mitchell, I use a multi-perspective approach to contextualize the Crowsnest Pass Strike of 1932. As the seven-month coal strike unfolded, several groups shaped the progression of the dispute. Company officials, women, union strike leaders, anti-union coal miners, children,

²⁵ Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 221.

²⁶ Tom Reinhold and Mitchell Kramer, *When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andrews and the Citizen’s Committee Broke the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

some of the region's citizens, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police all affected the tone of the one-hundred and ninety five days of strike. Using a chronological narrative, I address these various perspectives, at separate key moments during the strike where these individuals and groups significantly affected the atmosphere found in the community.

Chapter one of my thesis draws attention to the strike before the fourth of May (when WCC attempted to reopen their mine in Bellevue), analyzing the relationship and perspectives of West Canadian Colliery officials and the MWUC's leadership. WCC management unwaveringly opposed negotiating with the MWUC, feature noted by Seager in the late-1970s.²⁷ I explain why West Canadian collieries opposed negotiations with that union, both building on what is already known and offering up new points for consideration. Up to this time, Seager's work has been the most comprehensive detailing of the strike. Seager finds that the colliery refused to negotiate because of the reputation the MWUC had as a trade union with communist affiliations. This feature certainly underscores a major element in the colliery officials' refusal to negotiate with the union; however, Seager admits West Canadian Collieries "presents us with a special case."²⁸ He points out that even one of the most "militant [miners] of 1932 characterized [WCC] as an 'honourable company.'" I build on this point of view, arguing that WCC placed great weight on its reputation with workers. MWUC's radicalization in the 1930s disturbed WCC officials' strategy of keeping miner discontent to a minimum. Additionally, West Canadian's refusal to negotiate had a pragmatic—and, at the time of the dispute, a secretive—aspect which involved collaboration with the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The second chapter of my thesis analyzes a momentous event in the dispute, the May picket lines. The demonstration catapulted the strike into a polemic event, where sentiments of

²⁷ Seager, "Mine Workers' Union of Canada," 128-174.

²⁸ Ibid, 132.

many Crowsnest community members collided. The RCMP arrested and charged six women and two men for their part in the pickets. Contrary to perspectives that interpret pickets as unruly mobs, I argue that the labour demonstration operated as a highly organized event in order to minimize miner conflict and to avoid company blacklisting. My argument parallels Thompson's analysis of restraint and calculation that detailed food riots in England.²⁹

The role of women in the dispute cannot be underestimated. On the eve of the twenty-first century, historian Kathrine Aiken poignantly commented on the general state of scholarly literature of women and mining: "women have simply not been portrayed as part of the mining landscape."³⁰ Aiken was commenting just as historiography of women inside coal communities had started to shift. Since the 1990s, historians have approached women and coal from several starting points, from daily survival to women finding work inside mines.³¹ Historian Paula Petrik argues coal community women were more likely to assume leadership positions inside Rocky Mountain coal hubs, discarding traditional roles.³² The prominent place of women on the picket inside the Crowsnest signals a major component to the coal strike, in spite of not actually being miners themselves, an observation paralleling findings by Daniel Letwin in a study of coalminers

²⁹ E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* No 50 (February 1971): 76-136.

³⁰ Katherine Aiken, "Working and Living: Women and Mining Communities," *Oral History Review* Vol 26 Iss 1 (Winter/Spring 1999): 119.

³¹ see Carol A.B. Giesan's *Coal Miners' Wives: Portraits of Endurance*; Viginia Rinaldo Seitz, *Women, Development, and Communities for Empowerment in Appalachia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Jaclyn J. Gier and Laurie Mercier's *Mining Women: Gender in the Development of a Global Industry, 1670 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmilan, 2006).

³² Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Fronteir, Helena, Montana, 1865-1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987), xiii.

in the late-nineteenth century Alabama.³³ By their actions, Crowsnest picketing women complicated gendered assumptions with their physicality.

Chapter two also draws attention to Harvey Murphy, an organizer for the MWUC. The union leader also found himself under arrest because of his role in the pickets. Charged with unlawful assembly, the organizer abandoned legal representation and instead defended himself inside the courtroom. Labour leaders' trials are notable components for some labour histories. In his biography written on James MacLachlan, David Frank dedicates a chapter to MacLachlan's courtroom proceedings on the charge of sedition.³⁴ Frank Munger stresses that "the legal events accompanying ... strikes [are] ... far more remarkable" than the event itself.³⁵ Inside legal proceedings, "subtle connections between class conflict and law" manifest."³⁶ In Murphy's case, class conflict was not so much implied as it was taken head on, through a loop and back out the other side. The courts offered a key opportunity for the MWUC organizer to confront witnesses who were mainly RCMP officers and force them to answer his questions. His defence and closing statement illuminate how the union official wanted the strike to be understood. Unlike some trials where strike leaders played almost no part in commanding proceedings against them—besides relying on attorneys to do it—Murphy controlled his trial's trajectory. One miner recalled Murphy as a "real smooth talker" and gaining a look into Murphy's perspective is important because the MWUC official dramatically influenced many strikers.³⁷ Both his witness interrogation and closing statement reveals how he appealed to sections of the working class,

³³ Daniel Letwin, "Interracial Unionism, Gender, and 'Social Equality' in the Alabama Coalfields, 1878-1908," *The Journal of Southern History* Vol 61 No 3 (August 1995): 543.

³⁴ David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1999), 319-352.

³⁵ Frank Munger, "Legal Resources of Striking Miners: Notes for a Study of Class Conflict and Law," *Social Science History* Vol 15 No 1 (Spring, 1991): 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "Alrik Tiberg," TKOP, GA.

despite a young age and having never worked in a mine.³⁸ The RCMP officers' public perspective was also revealed at the trial. RCMP historian Steve Hewitt argues that careful attention needs to be given to the RCMP in worker disputes: "to label police forces and their operations as uniformly oppressive is to write history divorced from the contradictions of reality."³⁹

My third chapter addresses community resistance that formed against the strike. While I primarily analyze arguments and events after the May Pickets, I also focus on some points made about the strike by Coleman's newspaper editor as early as March 1932. Since Coleman miners ousted the MWUC immediately after the pickets of May, arguments made earlier than that moment may have resonated in that town and their miners, and are therefore useful to illuminate. I dissect the idea of reaction into constituent parts. When miners and community residents chose to raise criticisms against the strike, they did not do so under one grand, all-encompassing rationale. Historian John R. Hinde points out in his study of Ladysmith coalfields that several subcultures existed inside the British Columbia community formed on Vancouver Island.⁴⁰ Hinde's idea of subcultures can be transported to the Crowsnest context to lend credence to an argument that diverse rationalizations—instead of a bloc—came to fruition against the strike. Defiance against the dispute emerged and expanded because residents, over one hundred and ninety-five days, were supplied with more instances that could appear, for some, as counter-productive in their community. This is not to suggest that each aspect affected everyone in a static manner. A point that resonated with one resident might not have influenced another. I

³⁸ Murphy was twenty-six or twenty seven during the strike. He came from Ontario.

³⁹ Steve Hewitt, *Riding to the Rescue: The Transformation of the RCMP in Alberta and Saskatchewan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 7.

⁴⁰ John R. Hinde, *When Coal Was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 10.

analyze how repulsion to the strike unfolded through myriad arguments: strike legitimacy, work ethic, religious arguments, distrust of outsiders, gendered assumptions, local incidents of intimidation, vandalism, and violence, and perceived economic mismanagement of the MWUC.

Chapter four draws attention to the strike's end for the three towns. Miners of Coleman called off their strike months earlier than Blairmore and Bellevue miners. The circumstances which Coleman mineworkers concluded their strike differed from the other two. It involved direct confrontation with the MWUC organization as local miners challenged the national union for control. Bellevue and Blairmore's push to end the strike revealed divided feelings to its conclusion from rank-and-file. The finality also involved the Mounted police who extended their cooperation to the Mine Workers Union of Canada by forcing lines of communication open between union and colliery, albeit for their own purposes of maintaining law and order.

In order to draw attention to several perspectives, I use several types of primary sources, adding to insights on the seven-month Crowsnest Pass Strike of 1932. Company colliery records, court testimony, newspaper editorials, and RCMP correspondence to Alberta's Attorney-General are used to indicate the lockout's effect on the community. West Canadian Colliery's company records offer valuable insight to the motivations of company's officials and their decision to respond to the strike in a particular way. Fort McLeod Supreme Court records of indictable offences reveal not only actions law authorities deemed arrest-worthy in the pickets of May but also tensions that descended into violence inside the Crowsnest community. Newspapers published during the strike offer insight into streams of rationale that either formed or enforced strike opposition. Finally, RCMP reports supply not only an RCMP-perspective on the lockout

but also draw attention to events of consequence that unfolded in the towns of Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman.

Canadian labour historian Greg Kealey once commented that “the history of the Canadian labour movement and the history of the Canadian working class are not identical.”⁴¹ In some ways, the Crowsnest’s 1932 coal strike exemplifies the interplay of labour movement history and working class history. To analyze the Mine Workers Union of Canada’s strike is to draw attention to an historical episode of the Canadian labour movement. But the strike was much more than this. When the dispute organized in the Crowsnest Pass, it was conducted inside the borders of a community. In this space, residents were enforcing, and challenging stances by argument or action on myriad issues. The strike brought these working class issues to the fore and evolved in the face of them.

⁴¹ Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 330.

Chapter One: Sources of Strain

In the first half of the twentieth century, Canada used coal as one of its principle sources for energy.¹ Looking to compete in that industry, West Canadian Collieries established a commercial presence in the Crowsnest Pass by 1901.² Globally, several types of coal exist. Coal found in the Rockies, where towns like Blairmore, Bellevue, and Coleman set up, was informally known as ‘steam’ coal. Properties of low ash and moisture content made it well-suited for steam-powered applications like engines used in railway transportation or for smelting operations like those in British Columbia.³ On one hand, low moisture content increased the heating value of coal, making it burn hotter. On the other, low ash content reduced the amount of waste to dispose of after the coal was burnt.⁴ By 1917, WCC held the distinction of being one of the two largest coal companies operating in Alberta.⁵ Analyzing the motives and rationale pushing the colliery’s commercial maneuvering situates the Crowsnest Pass strike within a context of broader forces of production, supply and demand, moral convictions, and consumer power. These features illuminate why the dispute evolved in its specific way.

West Canadian’s fluid relationship with the Canadian Pacific Railway, its main purchaser of coal, partly explains the union’s call to strike and the company’s decision to delay negotiations. In the months leading up to the strike, WCC officials were privately contending with an uncertain future with the railway. The buyer-seller relationship between colliery and railway reveals West Canadian officials held limited influence inside the commerce of coal. Resource industries were—and continue to be—notoriously sensitive to forces in the market.

¹ Patching, *Western Canada’s Coal*, 19.

² Allen Seager, “‘The Eldorado of the Golden West’: Blairmore and West Canadian Collieries, 1901-1911,” *Prairie Forum* Vol 18 no 2 (Fall, 1993): 200.

³ Bercuson, *Alberta’s Coal Industry*, viii.

⁴ Patching, *Western Canada’s Coal*, 29.

⁵ Seager, “Eldorado of the Golden West.”198.

The colliery's management knew it was not immune to the effects of supply and demand, and primarily led operations with that issue in mind.⁶ Recessions in both the 1920s and the 1930s led to both cutbacks in production and employment and left huge strains on the coal industry and mining communities.⁷

Internal documents created both before and during the strike by West Canadian colliery assist in interpreting company officials' perspectives. Sources created before the strike show a few topics of interest for the company, like an agenda of combatting the economic downturn, and some genuine concern about employee welfare. But they also hint at a potential reason why the union struck in late-February of 1932. West Canadian Collieries' actions one month before the strike prompted the union's decision to turn an episode between a driver boss and a loader into a strike. Regardless of the superficial reason why the strike started, it fundamentally revolved around contract negotiations set to expire in April. MWUC tried using the work stoppage to press some local grievances but also to address larger aspirations concerning the general approach to work in the mines.⁸

Once the strike started in late-February, documents reveal Colliery official George Vissac's distaste for the leadership of the MWUC. Vissac consistently endeavoured to maintain a compassionate appearance concerning mining employees. The MWUC leadership disrupted that image with their strike and those labour leaders seemed to hold enough potential to disassemble the image Vissac and West Canadian built and consistently attended to. Reputation of the company was everything, with officials believing it set a precedent for order in their mines. The

⁶ Johnston, Gladwyn, & Ellis, *Lethbridge*, 25.

⁷ Patching, *Western Canada's Coal*, 19.

⁸ Ramsey, *Noble Cause*, 150.

official stalled contract negotiations with the MWUC because they saw the union leaders as a threat to future company operations.

Vissac overwhelmingly determined West Canadian's position on the strike. While not president of the company, the WCC official was entrusted by the colliery's president to oversee Crowsnest coal operations with little hierarchal intervention. West Canadian was one of several subsidiaries owned by a French company operating out of London that had global endeavours in locations like Indochina, and the Suez Canal.⁹ Many documents recovered in the company's fonds on the strike were either signed by Vissac or left unidentified. Given Vissac's position, unsigned reports were likely written by Vissac. Within this chapter, I use the name of Vissac and company official interchangeably.

By 1932, West Canadian Collieries started each year by assessing the commercial state of its company in the economy, speculating on both anticipated long and short-term scenarios. The colliery's January analysis affected its actions later in that month, and these subsequent manoeuvrings became an underlying reason for MWUC's February decision to strike. Long-term projections were ambitiously optimistic and a company official remarked that "without a doubt" West Canadian had a "wonderful future ahead."¹⁰ But the forecast on their immediate economic situation was much more bleak. The official went on to advise that the company had better be "prepared for the worst," estimating "it may take many years" before they would reap rewards. A

⁹ Seager, "Mine Workers' Union of Canada," 132.

¹⁰ General Situation in the Country File No. 2614 (hereafter GSCF 2614), 12 January 1932, Blairmore Alberta (Canada), M-1601-102 General Situation in the Country (hereafter GSC Folder), West Canadian Collieries Ltd. Fonds (WCC), GA.

comfortable economic position could only be achieved with cost-cutting measures, and if the company was “careful not to undertake ... [any] new work ... unless absolutely needed.”¹¹

The pessimism pervading their short-term economic assessment was due to the crumbling commercial effects of the Depression and a marked lack of control West Canadian commanded in the resource economy. A reduced commercial influence would come to considerably intervene in the colliery’s relationship with the union. Power fell to their purchasers and specifically the CPR, the colliery’s main coal consumer. As historian A.A. Den Otter notes, the Canadian Pacific had always featured prominently in the progression of the western Canadian coalfields, and especially affected Crowsnest Pass mining operations.¹² The CPR suffered in the Great Depression: Seasonal slowdowns in rail transportation combined with larger reductions in market demand meant they no longer needed as much coal to fuel the reduced number of locomotives running across the country. Despite a lack of consumption demand for the natural resource, the CPR nevertheless continued to purchase healthy amounts of coal from collieries, taking advantage of deflated prices in the energy sector. Its locomotives’ engines had not consumed as much as they steadily bought, and the lack of coal usage was quite visible as “Big [coal] stock piles ... [were] still laying on the ground for all divisional points” of Canadian Pacific’s railway network across the country.¹³ This abundant supply of coal translated into industry power and prompted West Canadian officials to suspect a looming CPR demand for further price reductions. Colliery suspicions of an obligatory rate decrease were not unwarranted. In 1931, CPR fuel agents simply instructed WCC that the rail company expected a price drop.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² A.A. Den Otter, “Bondage of Steam: The CPR and Western Canadian Coal,” in *The CPR West: The Iron Road and the Making of a Nation* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984), 192, 205.

¹³ GSCF 2614, 12 January 1932, GSC Folder, WCC, GA.

West Canadian, commercially competing with several other coal-producers, could voice few effective objections. Colliery officials knew that the CPR could simply walk away from West Canadian, having the difference made up by another colliery. West Canadian expected a repeat performance by the railway for the year 1932. They pessimistically predicted that the CPR would “like last year, advise us what the new price will be” and force the coal company to “swallow a further reduction in price” because they inevitably had “no power to stop” the rail line’s demands.¹⁴

West Canadian officials searched for strategies to contend with the rail company, focusing on their workers. West Canadian paid their miners on the basis of coal tonnage.¹⁵ If price per ton was adjusted by CPR instructions, colliery officials thought the cut may also “have to be partly absorbed by reduction in wages.”¹⁶ Several variables plagued the decision to hastily implement a wage cut. Officials hesitated to implement a wage cut because miner earnings were already very low. One official commented that “work ... [had] been so slack that actual earnings ... seem[ed] too low to reasonably justify wage reductions.”¹⁷ In the company’s 1931 operating year, the “mine ... [had] “worked only 107 days.” Miners shared the work between themselves, and “most ... did not work more than 75 or 80 days.” By the year’s end, most West Canadian miners had not even earned \$400.¹⁸ Some miners who worked far less than others found themselves entirely reliant on municipal relief amounting only to “\$4.24 per month for a diet of flour, rice, porridge, beans, sugar, lard and prunes.” The municipality hoped miners would

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Crowsnest Historical Society, *Crowsnest and Its People, Millennium Edition* (Coleman: Crowsnest Historical Society, 2000), 244-245.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Labour Situation File 2578 (hereafter LSF 2578), report, 11 January 1932, M-1061-101 Labour situation: 1923-1934 (hereafter LS folder), WCC, GA.

¹⁸ Ibid.

supplement their diets, and their families', with hunting and fishing.¹⁹ In response to concerns presented to him by Vissac in the Crowsnest, the president of West Canadian Collieries was inclined to somewhat agree about avoiding a further drop in pay. A "reduction of wages," the president argued, "would have only a minimal benefit to our company ... and there [was] no need to try to obtain it" from their employees.²⁰

While sympathy for their employees was a current in the perspective of company officials, it was mainly superficial. West Canadian had managed to keep the appearance of a good relationship with its workers even in the conditions brought by the Depression. This reputation with workers factored heavily into colliery officials' ruminations on wage reductions. The colliery mostly hoped to avoid the intensity of inevitable miner resistance brought by imposed wage cuts. If West Canadian had to impose worker pay reductions, they would; but it was best if any announcement of cuts were made under specific conditions. The official believed it was undesirable for West Canadian to be the first colliery in the region to publicize an anticipated drop in wages. Miners held potential to strongly resist negative wage adjustments. Work stoppages or slowdowns could affect West Canadian coal output, compromising customer demand, but also could foster miner ill-will towards the company for a long time. The president suspected major worker discontent would only significantly affect the first colliery to announce employee earning cutbacks. Companies that followed suit could defend their decision to do so, arguing that their wage cut was necessary in order to continue competing adequately in the energy sector. West Canadian "could follow them without troubles nor efforts."²¹ With that

¹⁹ Crowsnest Historical Society, *Crowsnest and Its People, Millennium Edition* (Coleman: Crowsnest Historical Society, 2000), 252.

²⁰ "Question Ouvrierers File No. 2578" report, 12 January 1932, LS folder, WCC, GA.

²¹ LSF 2578, report, 11 January 1932, LS folder, WCC, GA.

thought in mind, WCC president was firm on avoiding wage cutbacks “provided ... that none of ... [their] competitors ... [could] obtain such a reduction.”²²

Strikes were undesirable, and unavoidable. Nevertheless, West Canadian did “not really ... fear” them.²³ West Canadian officials mainly feared what sharp worker resistance held potential to bring, governmental intervention in a board of conciliation. A “board might compel,” a company official thought, West Canadian “to give away a lot of information ... “better [kept] out of public discussion.”²⁴ It was commercially compromising to publicly disclose the lack of power WCC had in their relationship with the CPR. If the colliery’s position was investigated and the CPR discovered the colliery’s weakness, the WCC worried that the railway would exploit the information and immediately demand a price reduction. A board might also uncover employee wage statistics, an acknowledged pitiful situation the company was well aware of.

Timing proved critical for any imposed wage cut and West Canadian evaluated several factors swaying them against hastily imposing one. Wage reductions were only an option if the CPR demanded a price reduction. West Canadian never wanted to act in anticipation. By initiating a pre-emptive wage reduction, WCC officials suspected that any generated revenue would be only temporary at best. They believed their action would become highly publicized and the CPR would eventually insist on “a proportionate reduction in ... selling prices.”²⁵ In the short-term, a temporary gain in profit was tempting. In the long-term, any price reductions would be difficult to recover from. A hypothetical wage drop did not guarantee, moreover, that CPR would not demand a greater rate reduction later on. WCC officials concluded that it was only

²² “Question Ouvrierers File No. 2578,” report, 12 January 1932, LS folder, WCC, GA.

²³ LSF 2578, report, 11 January 1932, LS folder, WCC, GA.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

when their customer demanded a drop in price per ton that the WCC would react and “be compelled to give a reduction in wages.”²⁶

West Canadian officials felt compelled to keep options open if a wage cut was deemed unavoidable. If the railway demanded a price adjustment from the colliery, the mine company needed flexibility to respond quickly. Miner contracts of agreement to work posed a problem. Any long-term employee contract prevented the colliery from responding to commercial price demands on coal. Officials felt fortunate that their old agreement with their miners, which had set wages for two years, expired early in 1932. WCC desired to avoid wage levels being locked in for as long a duration as the previous agreement had. But the company needed to act quickly. The previous agreement signed on 24 April 1930 stipulated that “unless notification by either party is delivered by registered letter to the other party 60 days before the expiration of this agreement, it will automatically carry in full force and effect for one additional year.”²⁷ With the contract set to expire on 31 March 1932, West Canadian needed to notify the miners before 31 January 1932 of any decision to modify the agreement. By mid-January, Vissac “decided to denounce this one year extension” and sent a letter to the miners’ union indicating that there would be no automatic agreement renewal.²⁸

When their employers strove to maintain a malleable position if unwanted commercial circumstances arose, miners of the company were placed in a precarious position. A contract, however poor, represented stability for workers. On learning the WCC did not want to continue the contract for another year, the Mine Workers Union of Canada began to react. Without

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Agreement: April 24th 1930,” West Canadian Collieries Limited Agreement,” 24 April 1930, M-1601-527 Union contracts: 1911-1932, WCC, GA.

²⁸ LSF 2578, report, 11 January 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

knowing the complexity of the situation West Canadian found themselves in, union leaders could only suspect that the colliery refused to renew contracts because the company intended to reduce miner wages. In keeping their conditions hidden from miners and the MWUC, West Canadian provoked the union. To apply pressure back, the union began to implement one of the few tools workers had at their disposal: a strike.

Similar to how timing played a prominent role in WCC strategy, so too was it important to the union. A strike called almost immediately before the agreement's deadline gave the MWUC an opportunity to explicitly demonstrate to West Canadian the inherent value of the workforce on the eve of negotiating a new contract. Instead of using the letter sent from West Canadian as the call to strike, the MWUC struck on the basis of an incident in the Blairmore mine. As historian David Frank points out, "challenges to work assignments and discipline in the mines were often justifications for calls to strike in the coal industry."²⁹ On 22 February 1932, driver boss William McVey had "instructed Tim Zemick, a loader, that as soon as he had finished loading a trip of six cars at one of the inside chutes ... to proceed out to 186 and load six cars" at that spot.³⁰ McVey then departed, but when he returned he noticed Zemick had not even started out to 186. Asking the miner why he had not left, the driver boss purportedly "received some very abusive language" from Zemick who indicated that "if he wanted that coal he would have to load it himself."³¹ McVey, overseeing the mine's ground operation, thought Zemick's response was insubordinate and answered back to the miner "that if that was the way he felt he

²⁹ Frank, "Contested Terrain," in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, ed. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), 108.

³⁰ Superintendent of West Canadian Collieries to Department of Labour Canada, re: Reported strike or lockout of coal miners employed at the Greenhill Mine of the West Canadian Collieries Ltd., Blairmore, Alta., commenced on or about February 23rd. 1932 (hereafter West Canadian to DOL), 29 February 1932, M-1601-432 (hereafter Department of Labour), WCC, GA.

³¹ Ibid.

had better go out of the mine.”³² Blairmore’s pit committee, formed by miners to protect worker issues, learnt McVey had sent Zemick out of the mine and the group approached H. Blake, the mine’s manager. They voiced concern over how McVey handled the incident. Blake sympathized with the pit committee, but nevertheless thought some sort of redress was needed from the miner for his conduct. To Blake, Zemick challenged company hierarchy when the loader refused the driver boss’ instructions to load more cars. Instead of enforcing McVey’s penalty, Blake offered to “re-instate Zemick” so long as the worker “made a proper apology to the driver boss.”³³ A public apology might have been hard for Zemick, so the mine manager suggested the apology could be made in Blake’s own office, in private. Zemick, who had accompanied the pit committee to Blake’s office, objected. The loader considered the proposal out of the question because “he was not sorry for anything” and refused to apologize.³⁴ Blake likely felt that his plan to finalize the incident was suitable enough and offered no other alternatives. The pit committee then went up the chain of command and approached Vissac, hoping together they could remedy the situation. The committee did not start off well with Vissac. Possibly anticipating Vissac would ignore looking into the matter too deeply, the pit committee claimed to Vissac that Zemick “had apologized privately to McVey.” Vissac was suspicious and called McVey into the office to confirm what the committee had said. McVey “stated very definitively ... that no apology had been made to him either privately or publicly” by Zemick. The incident was minor and Vissac could have been lenient. Having seemingly been lied to, Vissac decided to use the incident to enforce “discipline” in the mine and refused to

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

“reinstate the man.”³⁵ The contract of 1930 specifically gave the colliery the right to dismiss miners for insubordinate behaviour.

The general manager hoped Zemick’s penalty would serve as a warning. Vissac was aware that West Canadian’s relationship with their employees had begun deteriorating, and the colliery needed to reconstitute workplace order because of the unrest. A week before Zemick’s incident, a West Canadian overseer was “reprimanding” a miner who subsequently exchanged blows with the fire boss. Vissac observed “a lot of agitation” in the Crowsnest district during the months leading into February 1932, seemingly caused by the MWUC.³⁶ While West Canadian “had been immune of any strike” in their workplace, the official saw “more unrest every day,” suspecting sooner or later “a climax was due.” Since Zemick was not allowed to return to work, the union called a strike. A full-on work stoppage called by the union appeared drastic, and Vissac believed it represented only “other small disputes ... at stake” and was meant to be a “test of strength.” It may burn bright, but it would burn short. It never dawned on Vissac—or the general manager chose to ignore—that West Canadian’s registered letter may have influenced the union’s decision to strike.

In hoping to avoid government intervention, the colliery immediately issued a letter to the Dominion’s Department of Labour. West Canadian minimized the dispute by attacking the MWUC’s reputation. The decision to strike lay in the fact that “the control of the union ... [was] entirely in Communistic hands. When the union representing their miners “became affiliated with the Workers Unity League” in the previous year, West Canadian witnessed a dramatic shift

³⁵ LSF 2578, report, 27 February 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

³⁶ Ibid.

in work-atmosphere.³⁷ West Canadian capitalized on the government's general distaste for communism. Historian Brian Palmer argues that miners embraced "'Red' culture ... more readily than most occupational groups."³⁸ In observing that social disruption often followed communist supporters, WCC officials argued a strike was unavoidable. West Canadian officials also called attention to a 1931 Royal Commission which determined that the Mine Workers Union of Canada was an unrecognized union in the country. A company authority concluded the letter written to the federal government by arguing "if it had not been this" minor incident of insubordination, "a strike would have been called on some other pretext" by the "outlaw organization."³⁹

Casting their miners as communists to the federal government was risky for the colliery since accusations potentially held major consequences. Many of West Canadian's miners had emigrated to Canada. Deportation was a tool sometimes used by the country against many inhabitants when it was believed they were communist agitators.⁴⁰ West Canadian officials were quick to clarify the situation further, hoping to side-step any severe consequences for their employees. West Canadian's commercial enterprise relied on its miners, and the company authority took care to note that they "did not believe that the majority of ... men" were of "communist opinion." Rather, West Canadian pointed to the union's leadership as communists.⁴¹ Once a strike ... [was] called ... the vociferous minority can easily overrule a silent majority."⁴² Any objections to the union coming from miners were seemingly "inert" in comparison to the

³⁷ West Canadian to DOL, Department of Labour, WCC, GA.

³⁸ Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 225.

³⁹ West Canadian to DOL, Department of Labour, WCC, GA.

⁴⁰ Need footnote on deportation. Avery's Dangerous Foreigner?

⁴¹ West Canadian to DOL, Department of Labour, WCC, GA.

⁴² Ibid.

colourful addresses by the ‘reds’.⁴³ This minority threatened West Canadian collieries and its officials as they bred contempt and dissent toward the company and its hierarchy. In a separate internal correspondence, one official of the colliery believed it was their responsibility to “clean up the red element ... if we want discipline, order and peace, and ... to retain management of our mines.”⁴⁴ Officials attributed real strike vigilance mostly coming from ‘red’ miners. They were “active, energetic, and determined,” but only represented a third of the workforce. The general manager suspected two-thirds of the workers would “not dare to shake the reds out until they have suffered and realized.”⁴⁵ Less than thirty days into the strike, the general manager predicted that strike support would wane “only after at least one month ... [until] the men ... start[ed] to feel the pinch” and question their union’s effectiveness.⁴⁶

West Canadian looked to other coal operators in the district before deciding to take a stand against the union and their strike. When the strike started, “the other mines ... indicated that they were going to follow” West Canadian by also refusing to recognize the MWUC.⁴⁷ They too felt the sting of work stoppages in their own mines over what they believed were minor incidents. Vissac became disappointed when “at the last minute” they had “shown cold feet, and... [had] not moved yet” to support West Canadian. The union caused frustration with the district but “none had ... the courage to undertake” a clean sweep besides Vissac. In spite of a reluctance from other collieries, the West Canadian general manager insisted on taking “a strong action” and refused to negotiate or speak with MWUC leaders. The contest against the MWUC

⁴³ LSF 2578, report, 27 February 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ LSF 2578, report, 22 March, 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁴⁶ LSF 2578, report, 16 March, 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁴⁷ LSF 2578, report, 27 February 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

became something of a personal battle for West Canadian's general manager who insisted they "would rather fight [the union] alone" anyways. Support would have been nice, but unnecessary.⁴⁸ Vissac envisioned his refusal in dealing with the union as setting a long-term precedent and example in colliery-union relations. He predicted other collieries would "eventually come in line" when they discovered that dealing with the MWUC only caused problems in their relationships with employees. Since they did not stand with WCC, West Canadian officials expected consequences for other collieries. Vissac was certain they would "have a harder time" and "receive no credit" from ousting the union from their district, unlike West Canadian Collieries.

West Canadian prepared to remove MWUC influence from their mines in spite of the cost. This payment translated directly to an expected work stoppage and Vissac disclosed to WCC directors to "be prepared for one or two months of strike, at least."⁴⁹ In doing so, West Canadian looked to improve overall workforce satisfaction, but only for some of their miners. Vissac knew miner discontent had been stretched to a breaking point since there was not enough work for everyone. Meagre work schedules provoked disaffection and explained open defiance in West Canadian mines. Vissac offered only one solution. West Canadian could maintain work satisfaction among miners if the company reduced numbers. On the whole, a smaller workgroup would receive more chances to mine. The general manager strategized on keeping "Just the number of men necessary" to maintain commercial orders coming into the colliery. For several years, West Canadian and the miners tackled coal demands by having workers share coal orders between them. Rotating work shifts between coalminers ensured every worker received a

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

semblance of income from mining operations; however, the collective strategy suited the colliery no longer. Vissac intended to make sure employees follow the rule that “no more turns of work” be permitted. The West Canadian official predicted those chosen by the company would do little to protest since their future employment would be safe. Moreover, their incomes would increase to acceptable levels. Individualism of the miner would challenge collectivism. Because the colliery no longer wished to employ every miner, “The men laid off ... [would] be carefully selected.”⁵⁰ The strike made picking miners painless. The company would use the dispute to identify miners who showed too much enthusiasm for the strike, with Vissac making sure that miners selected for layoff would “include naturally all the agitators.” WCC just needed time to see which miners were major instigators of dissent.

Two days after the strike was called, the MWUC sent West Canadian a list of seventeen objectives they wanted to address in upcoming negotiations (Fig. 1). Some demands hinted at union aspirations which seemed unrealistic given coal demand. But at the same time, the particulars had persuasive underlying reasoning. As a starting point for bargaining, the union petitioned for a “10 percent increase in wages for all men working in and around the mine.” Likely workers did not expect an increase. But the figure would cushion themselves against any proposed wage cuts they expected the company to open negotiations with. The union could counter anticipated wage reductions by coming down from their starting point. Moreover, the previous year’s rate of employment was abysmal. If miners had worked fifty-two weeks in that year, and if miners only managed working seventy-five days or so in 1931, then they worked, on average one day a week, sometimes two. The union’s second demand addressed this: they wanted to work “five days per week with Saturday and Sunday off” with a minimum “Six hour

⁵⁰ Ibid.

day” for each miner. The union also “Demand[ed] ... the abolition of the contract system” replacing it with a wage-scheme.⁵¹ A tonnage contract system favoured employers too greatly. Miners received income based only on what they brought to the surface. But workers wanted all of their time spent at the colliery accounted for. Their current payment system ignored time lost during a shift for things like waiting for timber to reinforce walls of the mine or for tracks to be laid in newly excavated areas. Any work miners did to the benefit of the company indirect from what a weigh scale showed was unaccounted labour and needed remedy.

Figure 1.1
Demands Presented By The Bellevue and Greenhill Unions
February 25th. 1932.
Agreement

1. 10 percent increase in wages for all men working in and around mine.
2. Unemployment relief for both unemployed and partially employed that will be made up by the Government and the Coal Operators on the following scale; \$10.00 a week for all single workers; \$15.00 a week for all married men and \$2.00 a week for each dependent.
3. Six hour day and five days per week with Saturday and Sunday off.
4. A General District Agreement.
5. Expiration of Agreement on August 31st, 1933.
6. Demand for the abolition of the contract system.
7. Weekly Pay.
8. All tools lost through no fault of the miner to be replaced by the Company.
9. Where any miner through no fault of his own such as shortage of timber, cutting of places, track of cars shall be paid for time lost at company rate.
10. That all House Rent be reduced to all workers by 40%.
11. That all House coal be delivered free to all employees free of charge.
12. When workers work more than ten shifts per month the charge for the Wash-House should be 50 cents, if less than ten shifts free of charge.
13. Any company men with Miners Papers now employed by the company shall when miners are needed be given preference for digging coal over any new man according to seniority rights.
14. No mans wages to be lowered after getting a certain wage regardless of what job he works at.
15. Abolition of over-time Sunday and Holiday work where over-time is necessary to be paid time and half Sundays and Holidays time and one half.
16. Abolition of night shift for all men working in and around the mine.
17. Preference of employed for the members of the Union.

“Demands Presented By the Bellevue and Greenhill Unions,” report, 25 February 1932, M-1601-101 Labour situation: 1923-1934, West Canadian Collieries Ltd. fonds, Calgary, Alberta.

⁵¹ “Demands Presented by the Bellevue and Greenhill Unions,” report, 25 February 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

Though union expectations for an increase in wages, a minimum guarantee of daily work, and a complete revamp of how work was paid out seemed lofty, other points appeared unattainable. The issues of weekly wages, house rent, coal transport fees, and lost tools appeared like reasonable requests. The union suggested that wages to miners would be collected by a system of “Weekly Pay.” Workers likely opposed the monthly payout system because there were several ways to reduce the amounts owed to miners. Workers likely felt blindsided if reductions to their cheques occurred too far in the past to adequately defend against. Vissac knew the system favoured the company and considered the demands for weekly pay a “nasty question.” The general manager also felt any board of conciliation would likely empathize with the miners’ point of view about WCC’s payout operation and one “sitting on such a dispute could make things very uncomfortable” for West Canadian.”⁵²

Because the colliery was, for many miners, both the workers’ employer and landlord, union leaders raised the issue of rent. MWUC leadership believed the company should empathize more with workers about the impact the economic downturn had on a miners’ ability to cover rent. What limited income coalminers managed to earn in one or two days of work per week often funneled directly back to West Canadian. Therefore, the union requested “all House Rent be reduced ... by 40%,” hoping for West Canadian Collieries to acknowledge and assist their miners and their families in the set of circumstances the coal industry faced.

Worker coal purchases also became an issue. Miners likely hoped that good favour from the company might be in order since workers, after all, removed the coal from underground. The MWUC asked the company to reconsider their policy on distributing coal to miners whom they treated as customers. On all coal sold to miners, West Canadian added delivery charges so the

⁵² Ibid.

union suggested that “coal be delivered free to all employees.” It was not as though West Canadian miners were customers in any regular sense. Feelings of obligation to purchase coal from their company of employment likely abounded. While West Canadian miners might have technically had options to purchase coal from other collieries in the Pass, they likely had strong reasons to avoid seeking coal elsewhere. That decision would have only garnered unwanted attention from their employers. Officials could find subtle ways to retaliate against miners not buying their colliery coal. Each room inside mines held different coal-producing potential and miners who bought elsewhere might be assigned to low-yielding rooms. Moreover, the colliery charged miners a fee against any tool lost even if the “tools ... [were] lost through no fault of their own.” The union also hoped to remove this latter issue in negotiations.

Miners were also concerned with monthly fees for working at West Canadian. Workers objected to paying a charge for using the company’s washhouse, the facility where miners could clean themselves of coal, dust, dirt, and mud after a work shift. Miners felt they did not use the washhouse enough to justify a standard monthly fee and offered the company an alternative. If miners used the wash-house more than 10 times a month, a fee was in order. But miners who did not work ten times a month should not have to pay a monthly charge.⁵³

One point showed hints of the union’s goal for further national organization of workers in the coal industry. They wanted future negotiations handled on a district-wide basis. In the Crowsnest Pass alone, this meant WCC needed to organize with other coal producing companies, like Mohawk Mines, and McGillivray International Coal & Coke and deal collectively with the MWUC. Since WCC could not even rally other coal-producing companies to take a stand against the MWUC, persuading companies to sign a collective agreement with the union seemed

⁵³ Ibid.

untenable. A major factor leading to negotiations was ultimately called because the company sought to avoid being locked into wages for any period of time. Perhaps West Canadian felt they could do better on their own instead of collective negotiations. WCC had, at the very least, a semblance of sympathy with miners, wishing to avoid a wage cut. Other coal companies might not have looked at the economic situation in the same way. Too many conflicting variables were present for the WCC to organize with other companies and deal collectively with the union.

Miners likely expected a strike to bear pressure on the company as they entered negotiations. The union likely did not expect all their demands to go unchallenged by West Canadian, but presumably anticipated a point or two to pass mediation. But almost as quick as the call to strike, Vissac made a key move to reduce the bargaining power the union held by striking. The company saw its responsibility to keep up with their commercial orders as critical. A strike compromised this agenda, but the company planned around it. West Canadian's total weekly coal orders roughly ranged between 1,500-2,500 tons. The colliery usually supplied the CPR between 1,000-2,000 tons of coal per week ... around 500 tons a week" to other clients.⁵⁴ Vissac likely assumed Canadian Pacific could stop their order from WCC for several weeks since huge coal stocks sat at railway divisional points. But, the GM of WCC could not predict long-term consequences of a supply stoppage. The commercial relationship between the colliery and the railway could be compromised. On one hand, CPR officials very well may have sympathized with West Canadian's strike scenario. On the other hand, sympathy was not guaranteed. With past demands of price reductions, the railway had also proved to West Canadian that they safeguarded CPR interests. Coal companies besides West Canadian could move in on WCC's commercial territory as the latter's colliery production was brought to a

⁵⁴ GSCF 2614, 9 April 1932, Blairmore Alberta (Canada), GSC Folder, WCC, GA.

standstill. After the strike was over, West Canadian's task to remove competitors from their customer's favour might prove difficult and WCC could stand to permanently lose sales. Vissac approached CPR fuel agent E. Humphreys and the two discussed matters. Vissac delighted in the "wonderful support and moral assistance from ... Humphreys" who sympathized with West Canadian's labour situation."⁵⁵ An agreement was made which both assisted in keeping WCC's customers in coal and ensured a good relationship between West Canadian and Canadian Pacific. First, the agent charged with overseeing railway coal acquisition did not see the strike as problematic. Canadian Pacific indeed did not need the 1,000 to 2,000 tons of coal per week usually supplied by WCC's mines. Humphrey's sympathy took major weight off the shoulders of the colliery and Vissac; however, the agreement between the two businessmen went further. Looking to increase the rail company's favour, Vissac either proposed or agreed to let the CPR fill the collieries' commercial orders as the labour dispute went on.⁵⁶ It benefitted the rail line because they stood to gain a little bit of money off of WCC's inability to supply their own customers. But West Canadian also gained benefit since the agreement effectively insulated their other customers away from commercial competitors. WCC found a way to supply their consumers with coal, albeit indirectly. The two agreed everything would return to normal once the strike found terms of settlement. If West Canadian temporarily allowed CPR to sell coal, Humphreys assured Vissac that WCC would not have "lost one ton" of the rail company's future coal orders.

Canadian Pacific had greatly strengthened West Canadian's position against the MWUC, firmly implanting (temporary) control in the colliery's favour, and delaying the strike as an effective tool for the union during bargaining. Had West Canadian been unable to secure the

⁵⁵ LSF 2578, report, 27 February 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

railways' assistance, the colliery would have needed to find another strategy to keep up with customer coal orders. One option coal officials had considered was to receive coal loans from neighbouring coalmines, essentially outsourcing their customers' orders to other collieries. The idea seemed unfavourable since coal companies could exploit West Canadian. In an aim to keep commercial coal orders filled, West Canadian might have been forced to accept loans at high interest or cost. If the colliery absorbed the overhead cost, it made remaining in any industrial dispute for a long period of time unwise. But if they carried the cost of any loan over to customer prices, WCC ran the risk of not having any customers left by the time the industrial dispute was resolved. And, if they did not accept conditions of a coal loan, WCC may have lost customers altogether. Canadian Pacific and Humphreys solved everything. With the CPR, West Canadian agreed upon a favourable fixed price for coal.⁵⁷ The result enabled WCC to avoid coming to a quick settlement with the union and instead try and remove agitators from their mines.

Vissac and Humphreys' agreement also benefited the colliery once the strike was over. The amount of coal the railway company rerouted to other WCC customers would ultimately need replenishing. Humphreys reassured West Canadian officials that CPR coal stock depletion would not be filled by another company: "when the West Canadian mines resume work again we will take additional tonnage from them and make up for the tonnage ... [lost] during the tie-up."⁵⁸ However advantageous the understanding seemed between the two companies, West Canadian nevertheless felt slight pressure to resolve the labour dispute. Humphreys could not

⁵⁷ "Strike Situation," report, 10 March 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁵⁸ E. Humphreys General Fuel Agent to J.R. Smith Esq. West Canadian Collieries Ltd., letter, 4 March 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

definitively answer “at just what rate” the CPR could keep up the agreement and made it clear that it ultimately depended “on how long the mines ... [were] idle.”⁵⁹

By mid-March, railway intervention continued affecting the dynamics of the colliery-union dispute. Had the railway and West Canadian not made a pact, negotiation between the employer and employees would have likely followed a ‘standard’ mediation. Striking workers banked on the economic motivation of the company to keep their customers in coal, pressuring West Canadian to resolve the dispute.

In a normal strike, workers sacrifice their incomes but a company’s bottom-line and commercial reputation also suffer. In those conditions, each party feels compelled to settle in a timely manner since it is in the best interests of both. But West Canadian, in making arrangements with the CPR, added another powerful and lucrative nuance in negotiations. WCC significantly reduced their incentive to bargain with the striking union. Officials felt if they “continue[d] to be protected” by the rail company they could ignore the union for the moment, believing it was “much better in every way” that they avoid negotiations.⁶⁰ Company expenses had been “reduced to a minimum,” costing the colliery less than “days of normal unemployment.”⁶¹ Instead of the dispute being settled in “a few weeks,” the company intended to make the “strike last two or three months.”⁶² Labour negotiations became extremely unpleasant for the miners’ union because of the CPR. By April, Vissac reported that their commercial business was still being filled by the rail company and the colliery was “not losing anything” as he looked to dismantle the communist influence in the mines of West Canadian.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ LSF 2578, report, 16 March, 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶¹ LSF 2578, report, 10 March 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶² LSF 2578, report, 16 March, 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶³ GSCF 2614, 9 April 1932, Blairmore Alberta (Canada), GSC Folder, WCC, GA.

Despite feeling firmly in control when they chose to enter negotiations, officials at the colliery paid attention to external aspects which might intervene in their settlement. WCC officials like Vissac placed great emphasis on the presentation and reputation of the company to their workers. Instead of boldly making decisions that they suspected would bring worker strife, WCC officials appeared to intensely calculate these maneuvers. If any unpopular decision needed to be made, West Canadian strove to make it appear that they had no agency in their proceedings. External aspects featured prominently in this strategy to minimizing worker discontent against the colliery. Other mining negotiations around the province proved to be an area of interest for West Canadian. The MWUC contended with another major union in the province and colliery officials knew that the “majority of the mines in Drumheller belong[ed] to the United Mine Workers of America.” When this union assembled with the collieries in Calgary to negotiate contracts the same year, the UMWA “asked for a 10% increase in wages” while “operators asked for a 25% decrease.”⁶⁴ The two sides could not arrive at a settlement and both agreed to send their issue to a board of conciliation. Vissac suspected that any board’s decision might have a “bearing” on their own settlement with the MWUC. Had Drumheller operators successfully obtained reduced employee wages, this precedent would give West Canadian a chance to develop a similar stance. It satisfied WCC’s earlier rumination on avoiding the major force of discontent that followed the first colliery in the province to reduce wages. In light of unfolding circumstances, Vissac thought the company needed to seriously “give consideration to a new agreement embodying reductions in wages ... for a period of 2 or 3 years.”⁶⁵ For the

⁶⁴ LSF 2578, report, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

general manager, “a contract of three years with successive reductions of 10%, at the end of the first year, and 10% more at the end of the second year” looked appealing. Though wages were reduced, miners might agree so long as the colliery could provide a “minimum [number] of [guaranteed] workdays.” Vissac believed 160-175 days would be suitable.⁶⁶ The potential strategy combined well with upcoming arrangements between West Canadian and Canadian Pacific. The CPR’s fuel agent had guaranteed to Vissac that all coal funneled to WCC customers by the railway would be restocked by the colliery and their miners. It meant that tonnage mined per week would temporarily increase. The CPR would keep purchasing their usual amount and at the same time they would purchase coal for ‘restocking’ purposes. In that scenario, miners would initially receive healthy amounts of work. Considering the coal demand, and that West Canadian appeared to be stalling a wage cut for as long as they could, workers might feel prepared to understand WCC’s position in imposing a wage drop. WCC could always argue to their workers that the colliery needed to stay competitive in the industry. Little would workers know that the bloated coal demand was temporary. After CPR restocking was complete, the colliery’s commercial coal orders would fall and workers would be mining less with looming wage reductions in the future. At that point, West Canadian officials could deflect any worker blame or grievance away from the company and simply point to larger market forces.

Future worker morale inside WCC mines featured prominently in Vissac’s approach to intended settlement. In ruminating on his longterm reputation with WCC employees, Vissac believed ‘red’ agitators were a “stumbling block.” A long-lasting labour dispute could permanently scar the company’s reputation with workers, as miners might further entrench their sympathies and allegiances away from the company. In trying to prolong the strike as long as it

⁶⁶ Ibid.

could because of its agreement with the CPR, West Canadian was performing a balancing act. Extended stoppages would confirm for miners that problems lay in the colliery and not the ‘red’ union. To combat ill-effects of a prolonged strike, the colliery officials needed to deflect blame elsewhere. Imposing strike consequences against miners who appeared to have ‘red’ sympathies offered a solution. Having been lied to by the union (when the pit committee tried getting Zemick re-instated) might have factored into the official’s decision to target ‘red’ sympathizers. Vissac hoped to persuade workers against supporting any union behaviour by using punishment. The West Canadian official planned to avoid hiring all employees back at the end of the dispute. The colliery’s manager looked to lay off coalminers who visibly dissented most during the strike, a behaviour Vissac attributed to ‘red’ action. Vissac, already observing who did what in the strike, expected to “lay off 50 to 60 men at each camp.” With agitators excluded from future WCC employment, the general manager hoped it would not only serve as a lesson for future strikes but to also “assure more peace and more discipline” in the company’s mines.⁶⁷

By 9 April 1932, Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman’s miners continued to strike. The union remained suspicious of West Canadian, convinced that a wage cut was imminent. In order to both show and get a sense of their strength in the labour dispute, union leaders decided to conduct a union-wide ballot. The poll asked members to indicate if they were “in favor [sic] of a strike if the coal operators ... [made] a reduction in pay.”⁶⁸ This ballot represented the beginnings of what they called their “United Front Policy,” and urged miners “to declare a general strike in the event of ... a wage reduction ... in any camp.” It was endorsed by several MWUC locals in both British Columbia and Alberta, like Fernie, B.C., Coleman, Bellevue,

⁶⁷ LSF 2578, report, 9 April 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶⁸ “Miners to Cast Votes on Monday,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 9 April 1932, final edition.

Coalhurst, Lethbridge, Canmore, Rosedale, Saunders, and Robb.⁶⁹ The union's ballot did not go unnoticed and Vissac criticized the union's vote "against wage reductions."⁷⁰ While the colliery had internally entertained the possibility of wage reductions and how best to apply them, it was only in a worst-case scenario. West Canadian had neither publicly nor officially indicated an impending wage cut to their striking workforce. To Vissac's knowledge, "No wage reductions," in fact, had "been even mentioned by the bituminous operators" in any collieries that had its miners represented by the MWUC.⁷¹ Early results from the two towns in the Crowsnest revealed what the MWUC hoped for, support. Both Blairmore and Bellevue miners favoured striking in significant majorities if reductions in price per tonnage were decreased. 189 and 290 miners had voted yes in Blairmore and Bellevue, respectively. Only 5 in Blairmore and 24 in Bellevue voted 'no' in the union's poll.

Poll results in Coleman also favoured the decision to strike, but there were problems. Coleman miners' decision to call a sympathy strike had followed Blairmore and Bellevue on March 23, a month after the first call to strike.⁷² It came about when the MWUC tried to get all the mines in the district to strike but only Coleman had answered the call. The indecision to immediately call a sympathy strike was likely because miners in the town's mines worked for a different company but also because a section of workers had never been unanimous in their acceptance of the MWUC. Coleman's local newspaper reported that the poll reflected "only the radical wing" of the towns' miners.⁷³ At a MWUC-called meeting in Coleman two days before the ballot was to take place, leadership dissent materialized. Before strike leaders had a chance to

⁶⁹ "Ballot Papers Sent Out to Pass Coal Mine Areas," *Lethbridge Herald*, 5 April 1932, final edition.

⁷⁰ LSF 2578, report, 9 April 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² LSF 2578, report, 22 March 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁷³ "Pass Miners For Strike, Vote Shows," *Lethbridge Herald*, 12 April 1932, final edition.

begin, Coleman miner David Gillespie daringly pointed out that it was an “employees’ meeting” only and people who did not work in the mines had “no right to be there.”⁷⁴ Gillespie’s comments were directed at union heads in attendance like John Stokaluk and Harvey Murphy, two who did not work in the mines alongside Coleman miners and not usually in the Crowsnest Pass at all. The protest was issued and ignored, and the MWUC-meeting proceeded. At the close of the indoor meeting, Gillespie, who was “a labor leader of 26 years in the Crows Nest Pass,” shouted out that an “open-air meeting” would immediately follow outside. At the proceeding miner meeting, Gillespie turned meeting chairman and made a “Motion to ignore the strike ballot.” Attendees subsequently passed Gillespie’s motion.⁷⁵ Many Coleman miners opposed the vote on the same basis that Vissac had pointed out. There were “no move[s] to cut the wage scale[s] in the Crow’s Nest Pass area.” A large section of Coleman miners subsequently refused to take part in the MWUC’s poll and the towns’ ballot returns were skewed. In refusing to participate, Coleman miners showed the MWUC that their support was not blind. The national union needed to justify their actions and a vote with no clear purpose misled the issues those on strike faced. West Canadian, for instance, had clearly indicated that representatives in the negotiating committee sent to him by the MWUC were unacceptable. International and McGillivray Collieries in Coleman likely held the same feelings toward the national union. The union, in their refusal to send different representation, had aggravated the situation. Gillespie addressed this concern with another motion which demanding the removal of the current negotiating committee in favour of a new one. This too was passed by a majority of Coleman’s miners in attendance at the open-air meeting. But it was ignored by the MWUC.

⁷⁴ “Local Mine Workers Hold Meetings,” *Coleman Journal*, 14 April 1932.

⁷⁵ “Alberta Miners Taking Strike Vote,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 11 April 1932, final edition.

Whether West Canadian fully believed their campaign against the MWUC is debatable. Leaders of the striking union maintained West Canadian's public castigation of the union as some sort of an arm of a revolutionary movement held ulterior motives. Strike leaders asserted red-baiting diverted attention from the real issue of the dispute, negotiations between the union and the company. In contesting the union's status through the media, West Canadian sought more leverage during negotiations and to keep government intervention out of it. Newspaper journalists looked to colliery officials about the union's complaints and asked "a prominent operator of the Pass" whether there was any merit in what MWUC officials charged. The official simply handed over to the reporter "a copy of the 'Report of Royal Commission on the Industrial Dispute in the Coal Mines in the Estevan District, Saskatchewan,'" stating that "page 2 [of the report]... was the best explanation that could be given of the situation."⁷⁶ For colliery officials, the report set a precedent for the company on dealing with the MWUC. The commission officially stated that the union had originally been formed as an "ordinary labor union."⁷⁷ Yet, as soon as it affiliated with the Workers' Unity League of Canada in the 1930s, the union ceased being a union in a traditional sense. The WUL's purpose was to "organize the Canadian Workers into a powerful revolutionary Industrial Union ... for the final overthrow of capitalism, and for the establishment of a Revolutionary Worker's Government." The Mine Workers Union of Canada had been thus "converted into a revolutionary industrial union, pledged to a program and policy of revolutionary struggle." The report's authors also commented that they "could not see how men who are in charge of these mines entrusted with the management of an industry in which a large amount of capital is invested, can be reasonably expected to recognize ... an

⁷⁶ "Pass Mine Operat ... Report of Roya ... on Estevan," *Lethbridge Herald*, 7 April 1932.

⁷⁷ Ibid; "Report of Royal Commission on the Industrial Dispute in the Coal Miners in the Estevan District, Sask," report, n.d. LS Folder, WCC, GA.

organization with such an avowed economic purpose.” The excerpt that the WCC official handed to the reporter concluded stating that the “attitude of the [MWUC] union ... was more consistent with the avowed policy of the Worker’s Unity League than with securing satisfactory solution of the difficulty in the best interests of the miners.”⁷⁸

In the face of such circumstances, the company publicly justified their strong stance against the union. Insisting MWUC objectives were complicated by politics and affiliations, the company strove to control public sentiment against the union, but internally, they also acted upon these suspicions. West Canadian began considering quotes from insurance companies like Toole, Peet & Co. Ltd, and Willis Faber & Co. Ltd. on “riot and civil commotion insurance.” The collieries’ decision to accept insurance indicated a sense of unease, which was not without warrant. Western Canadian coal companies likely knew of the histories of lockouts in that region. Historian John R. Hinde, who analyzes Vancouver Island’s ‘Great Strike’ of 1912, finds the use of vandalism through fire as notable.⁷⁹ It was a strategy for workers to demonstrate discontent with employers in a visible and consequential fashion. While the insurance covered general labour disputes like “riots, lockouts and or labour disturbances or commotions ... by persons of malicious intent acting on behalf or in connection with any political organization,” it did not stop there.⁸⁰ West Canadian’s coverage extended to wide-ranging circumstances of “Loss and/or damage” to a private company’s property “directly caused by persons taking part in civil war, revolutions, insurrections or rebellions.” West Canadian opted for insurance at both the Bellevue and Greenhill mine and “protected” themselves “up to \$574, 800.00.” The colliery did

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ John R. Hinde, *When Coal Was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003), 183-186.

⁸⁰ Riot and civil commotion insurance, 10 April 1932, M-1601-1776 Business superintendent 1930-1935, WCC, GA.

not fully trust the union, or its members, to conduct themselves in a non-aggressive manner, especially when miner dissent began to form against the MWUC. For more than half a million dollars in coverage, West Canadian needed only to pay “a rate of .348¢ per \$100.00” which worked out to a “premium of \$2000.00.” If any “fire[s] and/or explosions” occurred on their property, the colliery stood to gain a sizeable amount from an insurance payout.

The striking union, by April, faced the realization that the main field of opposition may have laid at the negotiating table but there were other fronts that required its attention. The media’s presentation of the union and the dispute both angered and frustrated MWUC leadership. Much of the information which the newspapers reported on did not come from the union’s point of view. The union soon issued statements to several newspaper presses like the *Lethbridge Herald*, and the *Coleman Journal* that summed up the situation from their perspective. They wanted to make it clear that the strike’s representation was skewed, and this deformity directly related to the company’s hand in controlling what was presented in the media.

For the union West Canadian did its best in equating the strike as something other than a standard labour dispute, accusing operators of “trying to make the impression that this strike ... [was] purely a political strike.” Company effort in that regard served only to distract attention from the real issue.⁸¹ West Canadian officials had incorrectly linked the socialist movement which gained much popularity in Western Canada in the first decades of the twentieth-century to the Crowsnest Pass strike.⁸² Union leaders felt compelled to address their recent affiliation with the WUL, stressing the relationship was inconsequential in their right to negotiate with coal

⁸¹ “Miners State Their Position,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 21 April 1932.

⁸² See Allen Seager’s article “Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-1921” *Labour/ Le Travail* Vol. 16 *Labour in Alberta* (Fall, 1985): 23-59.

operators. Affiliation was not a crime and the MWUC pointed out they could not “dictate to the operators what organization they should belong to, nor ... decide as to what their [operators] political opinions” should be. This was precisely what collieries were doing to workers. Their decision to affiliate with the WUL was a “right of the workers” which they had “fought for years to establish” and would fight to the last ditch for the right of the miners to belong to whatever organization they wish.”⁸³ It mattered not the mandate the WUL held. It was the principle of choosing to affiliate which was at stake. Operators went too far when they “declare[d] they ... [would] have nothing to do with the men unless ... [they] change[d] the committee [members] and renounce the Mine Workers Union of Canada.” The union scoffed at accusations which labeled their organization as a “red union,” insisting that those judging the MWUC in those terms were “only pulling across the track the old red herring.” One point that the MWUC neglected to mention was that not all miners who used the union for their representation endorsed its controversial affiliation.

In what looked like a decision to only publish a company perspective, newspapers ignored the issue of blacklisting, a major area of concern for miners in the dispute. West Canadian official George Vissac had openly viewed the practice as just. Blacklisting miners significantly strained negotiations for the union. Union leaders argued that it allowed “operators to interfere with the [miners’] committees.” Miners and their union had selected a pit committee who they believed could best represent their points in negotiation. Yet, no sooner than when an employee became active, they caught Vissac’s attention, who then proceeded to lay them off and “declare ... they ... [would not] be allowed on any Union committee or to be represented by the

⁸³ “Miners State Their Position,” *Lethbridge Herald*, 21 April 1932.

Union.”⁸⁴ Finding committee members willing to sit at the negotiating table with their company of employ became much more difficult because of potential ramifications. In this fashion, the company continued both to stall negotiations and to determine who could and could not sit at the arbitration table. Issues like these were being ignored in the papers, as newspapers examined affiliations instead of the dispute itself.

Drawing attention to the dispute, the union detailed more issues. Unemployment rates by 1932 were horrendous. Those struck by unemployment might perceive the coal strike with little sympathy. In its most basic understanding, miners were essentially choosing not to work. If newspapers continued to exclude miners’ working conditions from their reports, the union worried public sentiment would oppose its position. West Canadian wages, they argued, were at such low levels that miners could not maintain themselves “in any kind of decency.” Combined with hardly any working days a week inside a mine to make a living, their “earnings ... [had] already brought ... [their] level of existence down to such a point that ... [they could not] permit it to go any lower.” “Coolie levels of subsistence” were not suitable for Crowsnest miners. The article’s writer declared miners would “not be ... driven down” to those standards of living and it was hoped that the public would understand and support their plight.⁸⁵

By the beginning of May, West Canadian operators felt the time had come to organize a reopening of Bellevue’s mine. The decision was not made in haste. Less than three weeks into the dispute, union dissenters had approached Vissac, imploring the official to let them “return to

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

work.”⁸⁶ Vissac appraised the numerical strength of miners willing to dissent against MWUC leadership, but the official could not ignore that a large “cut” of employees still supported the union: “Recent meetings of the Union,” wrote the manager, showed support to reopen mines was not enough to even “make an attempt.”⁸⁷ By the beginning of April, some miners continued pressing the official. The “old [Blairmore] pit committee” had “been trying to meet us for over a week.”⁸⁸ The old pit committee pleased Vissac when they “presented themselves purely representative of our employees” and were “anxious to go back to work, and to know our conditions” on the negotiations. Again, Vissac refused to reopen any mine. By late-April, Bellevue miners also approached Vissac and “expressed their desire to go back to work.”⁸⁹ While yearning to remove MWUC influence, WCC could not appear to shape resistance against the union too directly. Contest against the MWUC needed to appear organic, nurtured from coalminers. Vissac believed a chance existed that work could be started but only if support was “enlarge[d] ... as much as possible.” Only then West Canadian would take “a chance” to “resume limited work.”⁹⁰

The number of miners who approached Vissac nowhere near represented a majority, but the general manager claimed the continual urgings of miners for work were “hard to refuse.” Despite “much hesitation,” on 3 May 1932 the West Canadian official “decided to open the mine on the next day.”⁹¹ The colliery was not “entirely ready” to open the mine but Vissac thought the company had one crucial element, “the effect of surprise.”⁹² If the mine opened swiftly, Vissac

⁸⁶ “Strike Situation,” report, 10 March 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ LSF 2578, report, 9 April 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁸⁹ LSF 2578, report, 23 April 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Strike Situation,” report, 17 May 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁹² Ibid.

predicted that it would catch the union unaware and little resistance could organize. Up until May, there were no clear measures as to the number of workers willing to mine. West Canadian instructed miners to make their way to the mining office so the company could get a firm count. In only a couple of hours, “65 men were at the mine office [prepared] to sign on.”⁹³ Vissac suspected intimidation and threats of violence were significant deterrents in keeping dissenting miners at bay. “Under police protection,” coalminers might decide to work. A lot was riding on the ability of miners to organize themselves against the MWUC. If the group “were to fail” in bringing enough miners to their side, Vissac thought that “it might incur a long setback” against ousting the union from their mines.⁹⁴

However calculated Vissac believed he was being, the general manager was wrong in his assumption about the speed at which resistance could form. The “union got wind ... very quickly” and soon “truck loads of picketing men” were dropped off in Bellevue from the neighbouring mining towns of Blairmore and Coleman.⁹⁵ Up until the fourth of May, no pickets had been needed. However slowly negotiations had gone, there was little necessity for this strategy because West Canadian Collieries had not attempted to reopen their mines. But no sooner had the colliery made the move to re-open the mine, the Mine Workers Union of Canada responded in turn with this very traditional and very public form of worker discontent.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ LSF 2578, report, 23 April 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁹⁵ “Strike Situation,” report, 17 May 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

Chapter Two: The Pickets of May



Chapter Two- Photograph One- ‘Miners Union Rally in Countryside, Crowsnest Pass, Alberta’, April 30 1932, Glenbow Archives, NC-54-2017.

Historian David Frank points out that local traditions inside of Cape Breton’s coal producing towns “enabled the coal miners to adopt resourceful tactics in the strikes” of the 1920s.¹ Actions or strategies evolve into local traditions over time as the behaviour is repeated in similar sets of arrangements or contexts. Fundamentally, consensus about what tactics were successful in one strike would be carried over into subsequent disputes. In the 1930s, the idea of local tradition in the Crowsnest community had constraints. For one, the group was heterogeneous, with miners and families settling into the towns from several different origins. Moreover, the settlement was still relatively young. No one born in coal settlements of the Pass, by the 1930s, had aged significantly. The community was in the process of negotiating what

¹ David Frank, “Contested Terrain: Workers’ Control in the Cape Breton Coal Mines in the 1920s” in *On the Job*

exactly constituted not only local traditions in general, but local traditions of striking. The May picket lines of 1932 tested new strategies, one that placed some women of the community in central roles. Employing women in the pickets of May *was not* a local tradition; but it was a local action. Women who supported the strike through action did so because they understood they had as much riding on the dispute's outcome as miners. Mine work was a primary source of income inside the towns' households for many residents. If a major component to a family wage was compromised, it became a concern for everyone and the reopening of the Bellevue mine threatened MWUC negotiations with West Canadian Collieries.

Vissac notified the Royal Canadian Mounted Police of the company's intention to reopen the mine. The news surprised authorities since it only allowed twenty-four hours to prepare. Inspector of the RCMP's Lethbridge division, Keith Duncan, had made arrangements early on with the mine's general manager in case West Canadian reopened before the dispute officially settled. The inspector predicted that such an action taken by the company would lead to malice, possibly producing peace breeching incidents. Empathizing with police concern, Vissac promised Duncan "he would not open the mine without giving the police [at least] 48 hours notice so that they could be prepared to give the necessary protection."² Because the decision to reopen the mine was made only twenty-four hours before its opening, West Canadian left Duncan and the RCMP scrambling to bring enough personnel into the Pass to oversee the inevitable demonstration the opening would provoke. Lack of notice meant authorities could not offer escorted convoys for the miners who decided to work. RCMP could only arrive early in the

² W.F.W. Hancock to Officer Commanding 'K' Division, letter, 14 June 1932, accession#1983.214 (hereafter Attorney-General), Folder 4A, Provincial Archives of Alberta (hereafter PAA), Edmonton, Canada.

morning on May fourth as picketers assembled and waited for picket-crossers. John Tapson Jones, Sergeant of the Mounted Police, arrived at the company's property at 6:45 a.m. and noticed "a large crowd of people" had already "gathered at the entrance."³ Jones had been previously assigned to the local Crowsnest RCMP detachment and observed "approximately twenty-three [other officers] under the charge of Inspector Duncan" make their way into the region with intention of "keeping the peace, [and] preserving order" during the demonstration.⁴ The sergeant described the situation as "tense." Late the night before, Jones witnessed "seven truck loads of men" drive past the RCMP detachment centrally located on Blairmore's main street.⁵ The convoy attracted Jones' attention when he heard "some of them yelling as they passed by" the sergeant. In the "last four years," the sergeant had never seen "men gather together in trucks ... at that hour of [the] night."⁶

Picketing in front of company property was not the only tool the union used. After learning of the impending mine re-opening, strike advocates assembled against potential opponents at other points in the community. Instead of only waiting at the mine's gates for miners to cross for work, some strikers brought the labour contest and their anger to the homes of union dissidents. Noble McDonald, Bellevue's mine manager, received reports from several men that they had been confronted by numerous union members at their private residences. Those who visited the homes of miners wanting work were blunt in their objective: their visits were to prevent workers from working the mine's coal face the next day. Miners complained to

³ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in "His Majesty the King -and- Harvey Murphy: Preliminary Hearing," 27 May 1932, File No. 1472 (hereafter *King v. Murphy*), Accession# 1978.235 Fort MacLeod Supreme Court Criminal Files-Indictable Offences (Hereafter FMSCCF), Roll 9, PAA.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid; Crowsnest Historical Society, *Crowsnest and Its People, Millennium Edition* (Coleman: Crowsnest Historical Society, 2000), 54.

⁶ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

McDonald that union members were “threatening to abuse them and beat them up” if they chose to break the strike of the MWUC.⁷ House calls to dissenting union members symbolized a significant element in striker strategy. It underscored union challenge to the precarious barrier between the private and the public sphere. In bringing the strike’s tension to homes, union members made a subtle but profound reminder: there was no escape from the community of strikers. In such an isolated community, miners could be conveniently located if it appeared they defied union objectives. The strike strategy clarified, intentionally or not, that the socially-constructed boundary of property and ownership was not insoluble and it was, essentially, permeable if given cause. Safety and privacy found inside homes were precarious luxuries, easily undermined if a miners’ actions complicated strike expectations. If any miner chose to work instead of strike, they transgressed union concepts of a mining community. The union’s strategy to remind wavering miners was partly successful. Some who signed up to work failed to arrive at the company on the fourth of May. General manager McDonald assumed they “were convinced principally because they were afraid to face the mob,” a mob not only at a picket line but inside the community.⁸

West Canadian’s property in Bellevue started one-hundred yards off the main highway that went through the Crowsnest. A trail branched out from the main highway towards company property and lead to West Canadian’s washhouse gate, one of two entrances into WCC’s Bellevue mine.⁹ During work days, miners usually used the gate to enter West Canadian since the gate led directly to the wash-house, where workers would “get [on] their clothes before they ... [went] into the mine.” The crowd had “congregated at ... [this] approach,” expecting workers

⁷ Testimony of Noble McDonald in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

to make their way into the mine through the route.¹⁰ The trail's width was only that of a "well-defined car track ... [with] no graded surface"; but the total area cleared out to about "seventy-five feet of surface that could be travelled over" by foot.¹¹ The number of people on the picket line was unclear since the event was also attended by curious observers; but Sgt. Jones estimated "a crowd of three hundred people" were taking an active part in the picket.¹²

Early-twentieth century picket lines frequently involved a certain amount of physical roughness. The May fourth and fifth pickets in the Crowsnest were no exception. Despite union leaders advocating peace, a certain level of violence, however restrained, marked the exchange between picketers and those opting to make their way to work. Pushing, shoving, and outright blows represented frustrated sentiment each group felt against the other. 'Rational' rhetorical persuasion had proved ineffective. At the picket, deprecatory, threatening, and polemic remarks filled the air.

The picket line would challenge assumptions on who was to be the most visibly active in the protest. It was not only striking miners who were affected by fellow miners' decision to work instead of support the strike. Miners who chose to work impinged on other strikers' families. Workers' wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters also held a vested interest in the union and efforts to strike. It did not matter who directly received cheques from West Canadian since, in most cases, wages supported and went towards a family unit. Family members had just as much to lose as their striking kin. As soon as the intentions of West Canadian to reopen the mine became public knowledge on the third of May, women of the mining community "congregated on the streets in large numbers all talking [of] the strike situation," deciding how best to play a

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

part in the upcoming picket.¹³ Women who supported the picket took a lead role in organizing the picket's distribution of coffee and sandwiches. But their contribution to the cause went further. When miners who had signed on for work started to arrive at West Canadian's property on the fourth of May, they faced a picket not only of striking miners. A large number of picketers were also women. Historian Sue Bruley argues that feminist and women's historians pay less attention to women in disputes primarily about men.¹⁴ Instead, histories written on women and picket lines tend to analyze women as striking workers. The Crowsnest Pass pickets of May was an example of a cross-gendered picket-demonstration. Analyzing women on the picket is fundamental to understanding how the picket operated. The movement of picket bodies illuminate a protest strategy designed to offset blacklisting and arrest. The picket's atmosphere of physicality was promoted by these women and they took key positions into the demonstration's forceful strategy. For onlookers, women enforced the May picket's notable feature of volatility and physicality, showing how far lines of solidarity went in a mining community. Moreover, the Crowsnest picket showed the interconnectedness that gender dynamics has in class conflict. This parallels an argument made by Steven Penfold in his study on Cape Breton coalmining communities where the historian finds that gendered assumptions were used as tools by classes to shape work disputes.¹⁵

¹³ "Strikers Face Police at Bellevue: Re-Open Pass Mine Despite Strong Picket," *Lethbridge Herald*, 4 May 1932, final edition.

¹⁴ Sue Bruley, "Women," in *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout: The Struggle for Dignity*, ed. John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, and Keith Gildart (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 230.

¹⁵ Steve Penfold, "'Have you No Manhood in You?': Gender and Class in Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926," *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 2 (Spring 1994): 23.

Estimating on the numbers of strike advocates on the picket, Sgt. Jones believed that of the three hundred present about “twenty-five per cent of the crowd were women.”¹⁶ Though technically in a numerical minority, women on the picket played a key role in physically manifesting discontent directed towards miners choosing to go back to work. The movement of picket men and women suggested that their actions were highly strategic and organized. This planned tactic was designed to reduce the ill-effects that picket strife could potentially bring between miners once the dispute was over. Instead of striking miners instigating episodes of confrontation, most men, the sergeant noticed, “were behind in the rear” far from any rough contests.¹⁷ By contrast, in observing “any of the [major] activities that took place,” the officer noted women “were in the forefront,” instigating conflict against “Men who were proceeding to work.” These men usually “came one by one and sometimes in pairs” toward the picket and Sgt. Jones noticed that when women spotted them they would surge” ahead. When picketers reached the men, “a number of women” encircled their targets, “getting in their way.”¹⁸ Women on the front-lines would “forcibly take hold” of union dissenters, “Yelling at the men going to work” to stop.¹⁹ Another member of the Mounted Police, Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey saw the same. Cst. Bailey remembered women “laying hands on the men that went to work ... pushing them back ... [and] grabbing them by the arm.”²⁰ The picket line, with its mass of bodies continually in motion, was a disarray; and picketers used its confusing atmosphere brought by the crowded conditions to their advantage. Bailey observed women “Attempting to propel ... [miners] in the opposite direction.” Women likely hoped the picket’s clutter would get miners to accidentally

¹⁶ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey in *King v. Murphy*, FLSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

walk away from the mines. Some picketers willing to use physical provocation alarmed observers. Noble McDonald, resident manager of the Bellevue mine, looked on at the demonstration and commented that “it really wasn’t safe for the men to try and go through” to work under those conditions.²¹

For those prepared to walk through the picket, they likely did not anticipate forceful actions by women. Pickets inevitably and intentionally brought individuals holding different points of view together close in space. Because of these tight quarters, the possibility of disagreements becoming intensified loomed continually overhead. When miners opted to walk through a picket, defying the union’s strike, they likely expected to face opposition. But they likely held a general assumption. Any physical opposition would come mainly from union miners, not women in the community. During a physical confrontation with picketing men, those choosing to work could combat any physicality—however measured—directed at them with their own measure of roughness. If they were pushed or shoved, they could push or shove back. If they were punched, they could return blows. Against male opponents, miners would have likely felt increasingly comfortable in physically pushing through a picket and, if need be, defending themselves; however, because women were the “main culprits,” men going through the picket were likely constrained.²² Gendered expectations and assumptions existed which obligated men to self-censor physical actions against female opponents in public. While this self-restraint did not necessarily carry over into homes and domestic violence was an issue behind closed doors, a man using physicality against women in public was usually an unacceptable course of conduct. This gendered expectation affected the way the picket line evolved. For Sgt. Jones, women “standing in front” of the miners on their way to work posed a great obstacle and

²¹ Testimony of Noble McDonald in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

²² Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

“Without any exception they [picket crossers] all had great difficulty in getting through”²³ The picket moved fluidly from one moment to the next and “Whenever there was a man coming from the other direction they would rush down the other way” refusing to allow any miner to pass without confrontation.²⁴

Women participating in the picket also assisted striking miners facing blacklisting. A striking worker might have felt satisfied while vocalizing, and potentially manifesting physically, discontent at a picket. Yet, they remained responsible for their actions after the labour dispute ended. In the case of a striker’s relationship with the company who hired them, any action deemed too overt or remarkable by West Canadian threatened future chances of employment. Work had been sparse at West Canadian. If the company had reason to justify holding work back from an employee, it would do so. But this particular MWUC picket, where women took the central role in publicly demonstrating discontent, confounded repercussions. A degree of separation had been formed. Striking men relied on women in the mining community to represent them and their dissatisfaction. West Canadian officials could not blame or impose ramifications onto a striking miner if their wife, sister, mother, or daughter caused tumult. Strikers could certainly argue the point so long as they did not physically engage or draw too much attention to themselves in the labour dispute. Moreover, how could a miner who crossed the picket lay blame on a striking worker for actions of relatives who were women?

As a result of the function women played in the public demonstration, men who picketed participated peripherally and carefully. Miners assisted by voicing their discontent, an action easily disguised in a large crowd. Yet, striking miners, with few exceptions, carefully sanctioned

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Testimony of Keith Duncan in “His Majesty the King -and- Gaston Bazille: Preliminary Hearing,” 13 May 1932, File No. 1478 (hereafter *King v. Bazille*), FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

any overt physical action. Instead of physically challenging men crossing the assembled crowd, strikers limited overt involvement against miners. There was another role, increasingly covert but highly crucial, that needed filling: preventing authorities from breaking up the physical show of discontent too quickly. According to Inspector Duncan, while “women started [the trouble] in practically every instance” they were not alone and “ably supported by the men.”²⁵ When miners walked into the picket, “five or six women ... would grab ahold of these men and endeavour to [both] turn them around and push them back.” Picketing men separated these crowds of women from authorities who tried to intervene as quickly as possible. Duncan complained that “if one of ... [his] men went to interfere” they encountered a block of strikers who by simply standing in the way performed a role. The delay it took officers to make their way through the men allowed more time for women to impose their sense of justice against union transgressors. Physical punishment was meted out and then stopped before authorities could intervene. In this way, Duncan suspected “it was a preconceived plan.” “Women started this thing,” and men prevented authorities from assisting those crossing the picket to work.²⁶

Though picketers failed in preventing all miners from crossing onto company property, they managed to stop some. In spite of threats made at his home, miner Jack Dambois decided to go to the mine’s reopening for work. Both Noble McDonald, general manager of Bellevue’s mine, and Walter Warn, a tippie foreman at the colliery, watched Jack Dambois cede to the picketers’ vigilance in obstructing his crossing. Dambois had approached on May fourth from the highway and into the picket and Warn suspected the miner was unable to cross partly because he was “not a very big chap.”²⁷ As Dambois approached, he was “set upon by quite a number of

²⁵ Testimony of Keith Duncan in *King v. Bazille*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Testimony of Walter R. Warn in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

women.” Nevertheless, “he tried to force his way through.”²⁸ Dambois made it “fairly well into the gate, but soon, “the crowd got too much for him.”²⁹ All ground Dambois gained towards the gate was lost as a “surge” met him from “a whole bunch” of picketers. Warn said the miner tried to resist “but he didn’t make the grade, [and] he got turned back.” The surge carried Dambois quickly back from the gate, and before the miner knew it he was “back to the [main highway] road.” After the push, Warn figured “it was a case of give up.” With “clothes ... torn,” Dambois walked away, his efforts frustrated by the picket.³⁰

RCMP officers arrested several women involved in the picket. Though women likely felt their actions were genuinely warranted and that through their demonstration they evoked the importance of the strike, they were treated in a less noble light by RCMP officers. Some authorities challenged any legitimacy picketers might have had in their actions and replaced it with an alternative reading. Sociologists Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman define gender as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category.”³¹ In the Crowsnest Pass Strike, a clash took place between the authorities’ normative conceptions of gender and that of the women on the picket. From the perspective of authorities, women-picketers and their behaviours were determined by a general inability to control emotions. Unlike men, *capable of emotional control*, women were inevitable victims of emotional tumult. Proponents of that theory believed a picket’s atmosphere exacerbated this assumption on the *nature* of women.

²⁸ Testimony of Noble McDonald in *King v. Bazille*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, ‘Doing Gender’ ‘Doing Gender,’ in *The Gendered Society Reader*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel, Amy Aronson, and Amy Kaler (Canada: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

Five women particularly caught police attention: Sophie Stellamahovich, Mrs. Tony Lucas, Matilda Fantin, Sofie Sefcik, and Annie Polski. Mounties arrested each of them for unlawful assembly on the fourth and fifth. Emotional states were on trial as much as their actions in the court's preliminary hearing against the women. In describing Stellamahovich, Sgt. Jones defined her as both "excited" and "unbalanced" as she picketed.³² Incapable of controlling their emotions, Stellamahovich was observed by Jones at one point as even "crying" at the picket.³³ The subtle implication at her trial was that if she could not control her emotions then she certainly could not control her actions. Instead of her interactions with others being symbolized as rightful grievance and showing that the mine's reopening affected more than just striking miners, Stellamahovich's displays were marginalized. Officers, intentionally or otherwise, subtly smeared Stellamahovich's reputation. In being unable to control her emotions, Stellamahovich was seen as less feminine, a being giving into primal urges, acting more "like a wildcat" than a woman with respectable and thought-out values or judgment.³⁴ Insp. Duncan also called her maturity into question when he commented that she was "dancing up and down" the trail during the picket.³⁵ A lack of emotional control *inevitably* led to more overt actions, like when Stellamahovich "expectorate[d] at the cars ... [which took] officials in to the mine."³⁶ She also "waylaid" many miners, "grabbing hold" of the picket line crossers.³⁷ Duncan needed to "push her away from several of the men at different times" but it never stopped her and "She would

³² Testimony of John Tapson Jones in "His Majesty the King -and- Mrs. Stellamahovich, Mrs. Lucas and Mrs. Fantin: Preliminary Hearing," 13 May 1932, File No. 1479 (hereafter *King v. Stellamahovich et al.*), FLSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Testimony of Keith Duncan in *King v. Stellamahovich et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

return” to inflict picket justice.³⁸ By far, the inspector believed Stellamahovich to be “the most active and excitable of all the women;” a point echoed by other officers.³⁹ For Jones, Stellamahovich was “uncontrollable” and the “one that ... police officers had the most difficulty with.”⁴⁰ With an “aggressive attitude,” Stellamahovich avoided arrest during intense moments of the picket and was taken into custody only after “things quieted down and the men went to work.”⁴¹ In spite of authorities debasing her actions, simplifying them up to *unwomanly* conduct, authorities acknowledged Stellamahovich’s importance in the picket. “Everything seemed to centre about her.”⁴²

Defiant actions by women-picketers surprised several officers. Constable Bailey had some experience with crowds, but the officer found himself at a loss in the Crowsnest picket. Bailey admitted he had “nothing resembling” familiarity in dealing with crowds “as far as the women [were] concerned.”⁴³ Lucas’ actions especially confounded the Mountie when he tried to arrest her. During the dispute, Lucas engaged in several acts directed against picket crossers. She would be “standing in their way, calling them scabs and generally trying to prevent them rushing through the crowd.” When the decision was finally made to arrest Lucas by the RCMP, Bailey “saw her out in the crowd with a child in her arms.” For the officer, this posed a problem. He did not want to arrest the woman with a baby in her arms. It challenged the status of the RCMP officer. RCMP historian Steve Hewitt argues the concept of physicality mediated values of masculinity to ensure the public’s conformity to order.⁴⁴ To enforce the government’s position

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Stellamahovich et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁴¹ Testimony of Keith Duncan in *King v. Stellamahovich et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hewitt, *Riding to the Rescue*, 36-40.

against a woman with a baby in her hands challenged this identity. Despite contradictions in representation, Bailey arrested Lucas. To cope with the contradiction, the officer suspected Lucas held the infant in a calculated measure to avoid arrest. For Bailey, Lucas used the child as a shield, “protecting herself” and creating an uncomfortable position for those tasked to arrest the picketer.

Women-pickers were not only those who had relatives working for West Canadian Collieries. Fantin, for instance, had no economic connection to the strike besides belonging to the Crowsnest mining community. Fantin’s husband was “an employee at the Maple Leaf Mines,” another mine in another town in the Crowsnest Pass who was not on strike. The Fantins lived in Bellevue “on the right of the entrance to the wash-house” where picketing took place.⁴⁵ Cst. Bailey knew Fantin “agreed in the spirits ... [and] ideas” of the union’s strike and subsequently she actively engaged in the dispute.⁴⁶ The officer saw her “working collectively” with Stellamahovich and Lucas, “waylaying each worker who was on foot.”⁴⁷ Together the three “were giving their lungs exercise,” ... “screaming... ‘Dirty scabs’ ...[and] bastard too” at those trying to pass.⁴⁸ Like Stellamahovich, observers also seemed to characterize the demeanour of Fantin in animalistic terms, seeing Fantin as “howling” about at the picket line.

The picket had a measure of success on the fourth of May. Efforts to deter miners from working yielded demonstrable results. From a total of sixty-four men the officials had signed on

⁴⁵ Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey in *King v. Stellamahovich et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

to work, Vissac reported only “45 men ... went through without too much damage.”⁴⁹ The general manager expected the swift reopening would help in bringing most men to work. The official failed to account for the effective reactionary mobilization of the Pass’ mining community. The mine’s re-opening brought immediate deterrent actions. Vissac recognized the effective resistance faced by miners from picketers and decided to use a different tactic to get willing workers across the line the next day. The official undertook to remove direct aggression towards individual miners. “Strong preparations ... were made for the 5th,” addressing the situation which caused several miners the day before to give up trying to cross the picket.⁵⁰ Instead of letting miners walk through the demonstration, the official “decided to rush the men through the picket line by trucks.”⁵¹ The manager hoped picketers would have less of a chance to physically confront and dissuade those going to West Canadian’s mine. The change in tactic was timely because the number of picketers practically doubled from the day before. Vissac estimated that “over 700 men, women and children were picketing” on the fifth of May. Those who ushered miners by vehicles into the colliery were not deterred by the increased show of support.⁵² The manager reported that “Several fights occurred, stones were thrown at the trucks, two of our men were wounded, [and] several men and women were arrested.”⁵³ As West Canadian’s strategy for bringing miners in changed, picketers reacted to the new encounter. Insp. Duncan saw that the convoys had “rather unexpectedly” surprised the picket’s participants, but

⁴⁹ “Strike Situation,” report, 17 May 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

pickers soon recovered from their initial shock and responded accordingly.⁵⁴ They treated trucks similar to how they stopped miners, using their bodies to slow truck progress to the gate. One truck that had turned from the main highway and went down the 100 yard trail was slowed because a “large gathering of people” flocked “in front of it.”⁵⁵ As the truck full of miners braked, “not able to proceed with ease without danger of running over some of them,” it was surrounded by demonstrators.⁵⁶ On one side of the trail, there were massive boulders elevated higher than the road which people could stand on. The height not only offered a vantage point but opportunity for picketers to launch “a number of rocks” at the truck. Sgt. Jones saw the “majority ... [of rocks coming] from a number of women that were on the left hand side.”⁵⁷ A witnessing officer later said that he “never saw a man throw [any] rock” but he did see “a number of women” throwing them. Several trucks eventually got through, according to Sgt. Jones, “without any undue disturbance ... outside of a large volume of shouting and yelling.”⁵⁸

Some picketers avoided arrest with the power of anonymity supplied by the the veil of the crowd. Some did not. Sgt. Jones noticed Sefcik violently engaging in picket activity on the second day of demonstrations. The officer saw her “stoop down, pick up a rock and throw it at the truck.”⁵⁹ The stone “did not hit anybody” and “land[ed] on the tail of the truck,” but it was close enough for Jones to justify her arrest. Sefcik’s arrest proved more difficult than the sergeant anticipated. As the officer “went to apprehend her,” Jones’ efforts were matched by the

⁵⁴ Testimony of Keith Duncan in “His Majesty the King -and- Annie Polski, Mrs. Stellamahovich and Mrs. Sofie Sefcik: Preliminary Hearing,” 13 May 1932, File No. 1475 (hereafter *King v. Polski et al.*), FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁵⁵ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

solidarity of women on the picket.⁶⁰ When the officer closed the distance between he and Sefcik, Jones “put ... [his] hand on her ... [and] a large number of other women” instantly reacted.⁶¹ They rushed to Sefcik’s aid, preventing Sgt. Jones from arresting her.⁶² Judging it was futile to apprehend her at that moment, he stopped, waiting for a better opportunity. He “followed Mrs. Sefcik around for about a minute or more with the particular purpose of being able to identify her face” and after the picket had settled down he arrested her.

Not all miners used trucks to pass the picket, choosing to go on foot like the day before. And picketers acted like they had a day earlier. Insp. Duncan recalled that one man walked into the picket but was immediately “forced back.” Those on the line had sent the miner “practically from the gate right [back] onto the main road.”⁶³ During that time, the worker was “quite badly molested” by those physically stopping him from going onto West Canadian property. Concerned with the miner’s “own protection,” the RCMP inspector “hustled him into the patrol wagon” that was parked at the main highway.⁶⁴ Miner Bill Cousins also decided to walk to the colliery instead of being convoyed in. He managed to get through the picket, though not unscathed. After he passed onto company property, Cousins reported to McDonald. The Bellevue manager could not help noticing the worker was “bleeding quite a good deal” from a blow suffered while crossing the line. The manager believed the wound was severe enough to think it could “develop into something quite serious.”⁶⁵

Even miners who the company drove in by truck could not entirely avoid face-to-face confrontations with those supporting the strike. Demonstrators situated themselves at spaces

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Testimony of Keith Duncan in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

inside the community besides the picket to confront union dissenters. Constable James A. Simpson was assigned to accompany a truck to pick up miners. The chaperoned vehicle had first went to “Walter Warn’s Residence and from there ... to the mine through the office gate.”⁶⁶ After, the convoy made another run to pick up more workers. When the truck stopped inside the community, miners exited their houses.⁶⁷ Strike advocates seemed undeterred by police presence. Simpson recalled that as soon as workers started for the road “about a dozen men and women” appeared.⁶⁸ One was Stellamahovich. Given the extent of Stellamahovich’s participation a day earlier, these small crowds encountered by RCMP officers and trucks were likely part of a conscious picketing strategy as opposed to sheer coincidence. Members of the group immediately showed opposition against miners deciding to work instead of strike. Simpson saw “Two women went for them [miners] and took hold of them” as they walked towards the truck.⁶⁹ Annie Polski was “probably six or eight feet from the right hand side of the truck” and prepared to intervene further. She stooped down to pick up a piece of coal on the ground.⁷⁰ Simpson noticed Polski’s behaviour, and before “she went to throw the piece of coal” the officer “grabbed her wrist.”⁷¹ Frustrated with the officer’s intervention, Polski turned around, faced the officer and “slapped ... [him] in the face.” The blow did not loosen Simpson’s grip. “This lady apparently did not want to go with him,” commented another officer who observed the unfolding scene. Temporarily forgetting about workers being ushered into the trucks, Polski continued targeting Simpson and “proceeded to hit him ... with the her [free] left hand.” Simpson still held onto her, but the incident devolved further when other demonstrators took notice. Not wanting the

⁶⁶ Testimony of James A. Simpson in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Mounted police to take Polski, the group tried to help her and “Several other women ... crowded” around the two.⁷² Stellamahovich “came up and threw her arms around ... [Polski’s] body” and “wouldn’t let go.”⁷³ Others also tried to block Simpson in other ways. Constable James A. Cawsey, another officer assisting the convoy, recalled that when Simpson had his arms around Polski, another woman jumped onto the officer’s “back with her hand ... pulling his hair.”⁷⁴ Cawsey remembered Polski was also holding onto Simpson “by the hair.”⁷⁵ The crowd of women who stepped in to defend their fellow demonstrator forced Simpson “off the road” and into a “fence.”⁷⁶ Seeing Simpson unable to complete the arrest because of encountered resistance, Cst. Cawsey dismounted from his horse and assisted his distressed colleague in combatting the women. With the help of Cawsey and “several of the other constables,” Simpson completed Polski’s arrest.

For her actions, Polski was charged with unlawful assembly. Gendered assumptions, again, were used to marginalize the role women played in the strike, downplaying the significance of the labour dispute. But gendered social constructions were also used to defend women inside the courtroom. At the preliminary trial, defence lawyer J.E. Gillis downplayed Polski’s resistance by using her gender as a subtle argument against charges. Polski’s actions were not as alarming and ‘arrest-worthy’ as Simpson and others made them out to be. Polski was a woman, and Gillis used her gender as a strategy to downplay the extent of resistance officers encountered, diminishing the physical presence of his client. Gillis continually referred to Polski

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Testimony of James A. Cawsey, in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA; Cawsey did not identify this women who had her arms around Polski as Stellamahovich but John Edgar Fontaine was able to make the identification. See Testimony of John Edgar Fontaine, in in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁷⁴ Testimony of James A. Cawsey, in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Testimony of James A. Simpson, in *King v. Polski et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

in her trial as a ‘little lady,’ mockingly challenging Polski’s rough persona officers testified to.⁷⁷ The attorney likely hoped Sgt. Simpson might have downplayed Polski’s actions once the officer’s manliness was subtly called into question when he arrested her. The attorney jokingly asked Simpson if he arrested her “for mussing up” his hair, a notion the officer dismissed.⁷⁸ The lawyer continued his challenge to Simpson, asking “she called you a couple of names ... That didn’t hurt you, of course? Simpson, again answered “No.”⁷⁹ Despite the lawyer’s defence strategy to debase their legitimacy, RCMP officers continued to argue in court that Polski’s actions justified her arrest.

On one hand, some women-pickers assumed essential, visible, and physical positions in the labour dispute. On the other hand, most striking-miners embodied anonymous, restrained, and peripheral roles. When asked about the striking miner’s participation, Bellevue’s mine manager Noble McDonald, for instance, admitted that he “didn’t see any of the men taking any active part” in the picket.⁸⁰ Describing how he was personally treated, McDonald recalled that “the boys never offered to stop me or interfere in any way or shape” with what he was doing.⁸¹ When he looked on at the men in the picket, all McDonald could attest to was “quiet talking” among the striking miners.⁸² Most striking miners were successful in avoiding being seen playing an aggressively-visible role in the May pickets. They likely knew it was the best way to avoid repercussions. The discrimination list held over the heads of strikers was such a salient

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Testimony of Noble McDonald in *King v. Bazille*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

factor that alternative picketing strategies were necessary. Nevertheless, some men were arrested both during and after the picket.

Pickets of May were the first public demonstration against West Canadian Collieries in the dispute. Fort MacLeod Supreme Court Files show that five women and three men were arrested and charged with criminal acts. A disparity exists between these findings and historian Allen Seager's. The historian argues that "over a dozen picketers were arrested for unlawful assembly" for their part in the May pickets. The disparity between my findings and Seager's might be explained several ways. For one, Seager uses oral testimony and newspapers to back his claim. Neither may have reliably remembered or recorded the proper outcome. It is true that during the seven-month strike numerous people were arrested.⁸³ Nevertheless another element is worth consideration. It is possible that many picketers were arrested during the picket and simply released with no official record of incarceration, bail proceedings, or trial testimony. RCMP officers might have believed certain individuals posed a threat to law and order. But with not enough evidence available to make a successful conviction, those arrested might have been released. The disparity is a reminder that individuals can be arrested and released without charges. This observation makes a case study of individuals who were indeed officially arrested and compelled to have a preliminary trial date important. Gaston Bazille and Harvey Murphy's experiences in the May pickets offer insights into actions of picketers worthy of arrest by authorities.

⁸³ Months after the strike ended, Alberta's Deputy Attorney-General asked how many people were arrested and charged in the dispute. There were nine convictions for unlawful assembly, of which 8 plead guilty (all but one was suspended); thirteen convictions and guilty pleas for common assault (all suspended); and, thirty-eight discontinued charges of intimidation. See Joseph D. Matheson, Agent of the Attorney General for Alberta to Geo B. Henwood, Deputy Attorney General, letter, Attorney-General, Folder 15, PAA.

Gaston Bazille was one of the only men arrested and officially charged in the early-May pickets. Unlike most miners present who opted to keep a low-profile in the demonstration, Bazille called attention to himself in several ways, both during and before the strike. His reputation had preceded him to the picket. The *Herald*, for instance, reported that Bazille was “an organizer of the youth’s section of the Workers Unity League.”⁸⁴ Authorities might have likely known of Bazille. Bazille was connected to a group closely-watched by authorities because of open communist sympathies.⁸⁵ His face may have been more recognized, or his actions more scrutinized, than other men in the crowd of protesters. On the first day of the picket, the mine’s manager watched the demonstration proceed but also spoke to some workers on strike. As McDonald conversed with an employee, Bazille boldly approached the two and interrupted Bellevue’s mine manager. Frustrated by the company’s decision to reopen the mine and their refusal to meet with MWUC leaders, Bazille lambasted McDonald, demanding to know “why it was that the company wouldn’t recognize the Canadian union.”⁸⁶ Bazille questioning McDonald was likely more out of a motive of instigation rather than ignorance since the colliery had continually publicly stated their reason in refusing to negotiate with the MWUC. Few picketers directly spoke with McDonald, and most of them avoided provoking officials in light of the potential power of the company to blacklist. McDonald responded to Bazille, saying that as far as he knew “it was possibly due to the fact that they were more or less dominated by the Communist party.”⁸⁷ Bazille then started mocking McDonald, saying the manager “didn’t really know what ... [he] was talking about.” The picketer proceeded to insult the manager, saying “in

⁸⁴ “Strikers Face Police at Bellevue: Re-Open Pass Mine Despite Strong Picket,” 4 Mat 1932, final edition.

⁸⁵ Hewitt.

⁸⁶ Testimony of Noble McDonald in *King v. Bazille*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

fact ... [McDonald] didn't [even] know how to pronounce the word."⁸⁸ McDonald said that Bazille then left and "started towards the centre of excitement," where picketers spotted a crosser.⁸⁹ A miner looking to work, Charles Dambois, had tried to make it through the crowd and into the washhouse gate. As Bazille approached Dambois, he screamed "give it to him."⁹⁰ McDonald estimated Bazille had let the "excitement of the moment" get to him and it "was carrying him away."⁹¹ Bazille's actions captured the attention of Sgt. Jones and another officer, Cst. Evan Basil Davies. The constable distinctly remembered Bazille, testifying at the picketer's trial that "the man [was] running up and down the crowd doing considerable talking ... [and] when a miner would attempt to go through the pickets he would immediately accost ... [the] man and attempt to talk to him."⁹² According to Davies, Bazille "did this with several men" and was "quite prominent in the activities" on the fourth.⁹³ While Sgt. Jones did not object to Bazille running close to a miner on his way to the Bellevue mine to "talk to him," the sergeant saw an issue when the picketer "took hold of Dambois by the arm and struck him."⁹⁴ Bazille then "proceeded to turn him [Dambois] around ... [to] get him to go in the opposite direction to which he was going." But after the two had "proceeded a few paces," Sgt. Jones arrested Bazille with both assault on Dambois and being a member of an unlawful assembly.⁹⁵

Authorities also arrested Harvey Murphy, organizer of the Mine Workers Union of Canada, in connection to the May pickets, charging him with unlawful assembly. Historian David Frank once wrote that in Canadian labour history the law of sedition had been used to

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Testimony of Evan Basil Davies in *King v. Bazille*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Bazille*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

“curtail freedom of speech and to punish labour radicalism” for labour leaders.⁹⁶ So too was unlawful assembly used as a tool of punishment. RCMP actions clearly show a difference in the treatment of Murphy. Unlike other participants who authorities arrested on the fourth and fifth of May, Mounted police arrested and charged Murphy several days after. The organizer’s preliminary trial was scheduled for 27 May 1932 and the union organizer used it not only to defend against the charges levied toward him but to also showcase his criticisms at the events that transpired and to undermine police credibility. The actions of Murphy paralleled strategy that the MWUC used when their members faced charges in Estevan a year earlier. Reverend Alfred E. Smith helped in preparing those charged. Smith argued “We were not looking for justice in the courts of capitalism ... Our task was to expose the lack of it.”⁹⁷ Choosing to represent himself at his preliminary trial, Murphy scrutinized witnesses brought to court to testify against him. Murphy’s court proceedings are fascinating because it offered a unique opportunity for the organizer. In proceedings against union leaders, or union members, courtrooms were usually directed by attorneys. Defence attorneys attempted to represent their clients in as effective a manner as possible, but likely held back from certain lines of questioning. Courtroom etiquette also implied a certain set of behaviour. For instance, Murphy interrupted the prosecution’s questions to Sgt. Jones, asking if the officer was telling the truth because the organizer “did not see him kiss the bible.”⁹⁸ Presumably, a trained attorney might have taken a different route. Because Murphy defended himself, he had direct access to confront those officers testifying against him. The labour leader controlled the trajectory his trial took. This

⁹⁶ David Frank, “The Trial of J.B. McLachlan,” *Historical Papers / Communications historiques* Vol 18 No 1 (1983): 225.

⁹⁷ Steve Endicott, *Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners’ Struggle of ‘31*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 111-112.

⁹⁸ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

might have hindered its eventual outcome. Murphy used the preliminary trial to illuminate how he interpreted the strike. Often his interpretation conflicted with those authorities tasked to ensuring that law and order was kept in the pickets. Murphy's testimony should be seen as not only as a defence of his role in the dispute but a form of worker political activism so prevalent in the depression.⁹⁹

As one of the labour leader's main contentions, Murphy emphasized whether authorities were truly justified in arresting him. The union leader continually asserted otherwise, seeing it as entirely unacceptable and unfounded. Murphy attributed RCMP action inside of the Crowsnest miners as part of a larger campaign against workers inside of Canada. Historian Donald Avery believed that 1931-1932 were years of a particularly aggressive RCMP campaign against workers who publicly supported communism.¹⁰⁰ Murphy was one in a list of influential figures inside of Canada unafraid to show his support for the Comintern. The labour leader believed, in comparison to some on the picket, that he was hardly an active participant in it, describing his actions as more closely resembling that of the many spectators in attendance who stood idly by and merely observed the demonstration.¹⁰¹ Yet despite his non-active role in picket violence, he frustratingly complained that he was "treated different than any other of his Majesty's subjects that were assembled there."¹⁰² Candidly, the union organizer concluded why he was arrested: it was "pure prejudice, plain and simple."¹⁰³ It did not matter what his actions were. RCMP targeted him because he was an "active organizer" in the labour dispute. For this reason, Murphy vehemently disagreed with his charge, criticizing as utterly inexcusable the aim of the RCMP to

⁹⁹ Laurel Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth, *Canadian Working Class History, Second Edition* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars's Press, 2000), 407.

¹⁰⁰ Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigner'*, 125.

¹⁰¹ Statement of the Accused in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

arrest him. By receiving “particular discrimination from the law and the officers who ... [were] supposed to carry out the law” Murphy felt police actions in the Crowsnest revealed authorities were “nothing more than extensions of the company’s will.”¹⁰⁴

Murphy took issue with the warrant for his arrest being issued several days after the picket. When Sgt. Jones took the stand, Murphy demanded the officer explain why he was not treated like Bazille, Stellamahovich, or any of those immediately taken into custody on the day of their offence. Because the circumstance of his arrest was entirely different, he suspected his capture was part of a larger plot against him, his position in the union, and the labour dispute in general. RCMP had located Murphy in a hotel in the city of Calgary a few days after the picket. Sardonicly, he pressed Jones to answer why he received the “privilege that no other person at the picket was given by authorities.”¹⁰⁵ The officer’s courtroom response offered no tangible explanation. Jones simply responded ambiguously, answering that as an officer he “was concerned with the evidence and that alone.”¹⁰⁶ Jones testified that was the only reason why Murphy was arrested several days after the picket. But the response was only what the officer was willing to publicly disclose. In a briefing sent to W.F.W. Hancock, a representative of Alberta’s government who visited the Crowsnest Pass after the picket, RCMP officials admitted that they chose to wait because they felt it “inadvisable for them to endeavour to arrest some of the ring leaders out of a crowd of 300 or 400.”¹⁰⁷ Authorities suspected the action would have likely aggravated an already tense moment amongst picketers.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ W.F.W. Hancock to Officer Commanding ‘K’ Division, “Re-Crow’s Nest Pass Situation,” letter, 14 June 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 4A, PAA.

Convinced that his conduct fell in line with that of a lawful citizen, Murphy asked Jones to explain what he had saw and heard that on the fourth of May. The organizer, like most of the other men on the picket line, had avoided engaging in a directly physical fashion. Especially because of his position in the union, Murphy had even attempted to avoid central disturbances which arose from time to time during the labour demonstration. Murphy assumed that the only circumstance which might have opened up a cause for his arrest occurred was only after the men who opted to go to work went through the picket. With no miners for picketers to confront, the demonstration wound down and speeches were made. Jones confirmed that, “The crowd left the area and went across the street and were addressed by” the accused.¹⁰⁸ The union’s organizer spoke “no more than ten minutes” and only “congratulated the large turnout of pickets ... [and was] glad to see so many on the picket line.”¹⁰⁹ To Sgt. Jones, it appeared Murphy was “the leader of the agitation” of the picket, given the role the MWUC leader took in speeches afterwards.¹¹⁰ Dissatisfied with the officer’s level of detail, Murphy urged Jones to comprehensively specify the contents of the labour leader’s address which was made to the crowd. Jones was going on court record as witnessing Murphy congratulating the picket. The union leader hoped to make his position clearer for those attending his preliminary trial, believing it would make a difference. Murphy made Jones clarify that while the organizer “praised the women” for their role in the picket, he also “condemned” their actions too, believing it was contrary to what a peaceful picket was.¹¹¹

If being found innocent was a goal for the MWUC organizer then Murphy’s inexperience as an attorney hindered cross-examinations of witnesses testifying against him. As an individual

¹⁰⁸ Testimony of John Tapson Jones *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

prepared to use his trial to bring to light the conduct of authorities, the labour leader might have inadvertently opened up lines of testimony in court that cast doubt on his innocence. One area of contention the union leader addressed was the concept of a picket line being an activity of concern for police. He questioned Jones' expectation that peace in the Pass would be disturbed tumultuously because of picket activity. Murphy hoped to capitalize on the close relationship Sgt. Jones established with residents of the Crowsnest Pass. The officer had been stationed in the region for several years, in which time Jones developed a personal rapport with the community's residents. Jones confirmed to Murphy that miners of the Pass were not "a bunch of unruly irresponsible people" but instead law abiding citizens.¹¹² Murphy had begun subtly demonstrating that workers who were picketing posed no threat, therefore could never truly be an unlawful assembly. However, as he pressed Jones into admitting strikers were non-threatening—thereby technically making the increased police presence in the Pass unwarranted—Murphy received a succinct response from the officer. Jones argued that while it was true that the miners had reputable status, it was "Not until ... [Murphy] came here to agitate them" that he worried about law and order.¹¹³

Instead of keeping questions directed to his actions on the day of his offence, Murphy knew Jones had watched a union mass-meeting a few days before the picket. The union leader spoke at that meeting and wanted the sergeant to reveal what he heard. Murphy hoped it would help his side of the case but the strategy might have backfired. He unwittingly set a precedent in his trial to examine Jones' previous experiences with the union leader. Murphy asked Jones what the officer remembered of 2 May 1932. Jones reluctantly but openly responded that the labour

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

leader gave advice on the labour demonstration they were about to engage in. The unionist reminded the crowd that “a picket was not a mob” and “advised the assembly not to take any clubs” in order to avoid violence.¹¹⁴ Jones went on to say he witnessed Murphy “explaining to them the laws of the land with regards to peaceful picketing.”¹¹⁵ Another constable testifying at Murphy’s trial also judged the meeting held on the second of May, saying “good order [was] kept” and the union organizer “Urged the men to stay away from beer parlours, since alcohol held potential to exacerbate the upcoming demonstration beyond peace.”¹¹⁶ Instead of letting the observation rest, Murphy again pressed Jones. He demanded the RCMP officer answer why he thought the peace would then be affected when the union leader had, as a prominent and persuasive strike leader, advocated a peaceful picket. Jones sharply retorted to Murphy: “Frankly I did not believe what you said.”¹¹⁷ To the officer’s response, Murphy asked Jones to explain himself and the RCMP officer told those in attendance the history of Murphy in the Pass. Jones recalled that two years earlier Murphy was asked by a miner “What’s the use of us going on strike when Hillcrest, Fernie and Michel work?”¹¹⁸ At that time, Murphy had not advocated a peaceful reaction. The labour leader answered, “get your men together, get marches going over, march over to Hillcrest and close up the bloody camp.”¹¹⁹ Murphy went on to promote a “fight with the Provincial Police.” Jones explained to Murphy and the court that “a police officer ... [was] suspicious of particular individuals” who advocated conflict with authorities.¹²⁰ Though Murphy wanted to establish his reputation as an advocator of peaceful pickets, he opened up a

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹¹⁷ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

discussion of his general reputation, a reputation that lacked respect for law and order at one point in time.

In spite of the setback with Sgt. Jones, Murphy continued to try to establish the idea that he encouraged a peaceful picket through other witnesses. But like his experience with Jones, the union leader provoked witnesses and pressed them too far. In cross-examining Walter Warn, tippie foreman for WCC, Murphy asked what he had seen on the second of May.¹²¹ Warn acknowledged, like Jones, that the union leader spoke about peaceful picketing. Again, Murphy did not let the point rest, taxing the witness to reveal more. When compelled for more detail by the union leader, the foreman said he remained unconvinced about Murphy's ability to control a picket. Even if the union leader's intentions were noble, the tippie foreman surmised that the picket on the fourth may have started peacefully but soon devolved into a large spectacle.¹²² Warn speculated that as soon as Murphy advocated a picket the community was "in for trouble." Murphy did not "have to say very much to let those people get excited over it." Despite a call for a peaceful picket, Warn believed speeches made by the union leader besides the one on the second of May continually enforced discontent and promoted strife. The labour leader infused "continual rounds" of speeches with divisive rhetoric. Calling anyone opposed to the national MWUC as 'scabs' and other deprecatory terms aggravated an already precarious situation. Warn was skeptical that Murphy and his words were meant to elicit anything other than animosity and provocation in the community.

Murphy continually diverged from his own defence to bring up what he believed was questionable and prejudicial police conduct. Suspected collaboration between West Canadian and the RCMP bothered the union leader. Murphy utilized the opportunity to directly question

¹²¹ As tippie foreman, Warn was not part of WCC employees represented by the union.

¹²² Testimony of Walter R. Warn in *King v. Murphy*, FLSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

officers at his trial in order to show collusive behaviour between the company and authorities. RCMP Constable Fredrick Harold Bailey testified against Murphy. The union leader hoped to demonstrate that Bailey's objectivity was compromised with biases favouring the colliery. As he cross-examined the constable, Murphy brought up amicability displayed publicly between company official and RCMP officers. Every action by authorities held meaning, and Murphy believed Bailey excluded picketers from good standing with the Mounted police. During the picket, Murphy thought he noticed Bailey shake hands with Vissac in front of the strikers, picketers, and onlooking community. Murphy implicitly suggested the handshake proved a collaboration between the colliery and the authorities. To Murphy, authorities were not there to ensure law and order were being kept. The handshake stood for more. RCMP were in the Pass because the WCC wanted to smash the picket, the strike, and the union. But when the strike leader confronted the constable, Bailey denied publicly shaking hands with Vissac. The witness was only willing to attest to that they were "accompanied by a constable" who Bailey had introduced to Vissac. "They shook hands" on introduction.¹²³ Before Murphy finished questioning the officer, Bailey reminded the union leader that he had also introduced constables to miners in the Pass, and they too had shook hands.

With authorities ultimately arresting Murphy for unlawful assembly, the strike leader tried to show his arrest as unwarranted because an unlawful assembly did not exist at the labour demonstration in early May. The union leader did this by refuting the claim by police that the picket got out of control. Officers on the picket's scene held little familiarity with the atmosphere brought about by a picket. The union leader sought to challenge whether authorities could, given

¹²³ Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

their personal job experience, determine an unlawful assembly. Murphy argued the labour demonstration was simply a ‘standard’ picket. Admittedly, a few incidents got out of hand; but importantly those occurrences were both those which Murphy was not a part of nor condoned. With officers lacking knowledge of how picketing experiences went, what police considered as disruptive and breeches against law and order were, Murphy stressed, how pickets operated in practice. Officers who testified for the crown, Murphy discovered, lacked expertise and familiarity in their dealings with the traditional form of worker discontent. Sgt. Jones, for instance, admitted that while he had experience in watching over “patriotic demonstrations,” he had no previous encounters with picketing miners.¹²⁴ Cst. Bailey also disclosed he had only ever “assisted in keeping the peace [by] controlling a crowd in Edmonton in 1928 witnessing a bad fire” and that he had “attended parades, [and] demonstrations of workers.” Like Jones, the officer had never attended a picket before.¹²⁵ Murphy used the officers’ inexperience to argue the picket was, in fact, restrained; and as the union leader he felt responsible for its restraint. He reminded those in attendance at his preliminary trial that there could have been “lots of violence” at large gatherings assembled because of a conflict like a labour dispute, especially “if the leaders wanted it so.”¹²⁶ In comparison to what a picket demonstration could have been, so far as Murphy was concerned, the May fourth and fifth pickets in front of West Canadian Collieries were far from beyond control and therefore not, on the whole, unlawful assemblies. The MWUC representative argued pickets, at their heart, were demonstrations allowing workers to show that they were “standing solid.”¹²⁷ Demonstrators chose, according to Murphy, to use “moral influences by

¹²⁴ Testimony of John Tapson Jones in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹²⁵ Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹²⁶ Statement of the Accused in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

picketing ... to convince men” from choosing to work, “show[ing] them where it isn’t in their interests to go.”¹²⁸

Another aspect informed the exchange between the union leader and RCMP witnesses, the application of different sets of principles for similar situations. Murphy aimed to illuminate RCMP incompetence in their decision of when to enforce laws and when to look the other way at offences. The labour leader accused authorities of enforcing a double standard when it came to law and order at the demonstration. The union leader felt officers conveniently ignored their duty to keep strikers and picketers free from harm while the latter protested. The unionist observed several acts by police made against demonstrators who intervened against miners on their way to work. Murphy argued picket participants were also engaged in a lawful mission. Picketing was not an illegal expression. The MWUC member complained non-picketing miners were “allowed to do unlawful things and get away with it.” By training on picketers—possibly because of inexperience—law enforcement officials only scrutinized the actions of picket participants, taking little notice of injustices and breeches of law committed against demonstrators. During the organizer’s trial, Murphy continually implicated miner Bob Glover with several testifying officers. Glover had opted to cross the pickets of May. For Murphy, Glover was guilty in objectionable actions that materialized during the labour demonstration. The union leader alluded in court that Glover was guilty of directly assaulting picketers. The miner not only lumbered through the picket, the worker lashed out against them. The accused queried several witnesses whether they saw Glover “punching a woman in the face,” though none admitted seeing the act.¹²⁹ One officer confessed seeing Glover as “He pushed his way through the crowd ... using

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

his arms and elbows.”¹³⁰ Murphy censured inaction of authorities since “none [of those crossing the picket] were arrested” even when actions necessitated it. It was only because picket opponents were “on a lawful mission going to work” were aggressive actions towards picketers permitted by police. Authorities had a ‘blind-spot’ in seeing a picket as a lawful activity.¹³¹



Chapter Two- Photograph Two- ‘Royal Canadian Mounted Police Watching Strike Meeting, Blairmore, Alberta’, 1932, Glenbow Archives, NC-54-4400, Gushul Studios.

The union official also took issue with the symbolism of intimidation practiced by the RCMP in the Pass. Instead of simply keeping law and order, Murphy argued authorities formed opposition directly against the striking union. Police endeavoured to establish a menacing presence inside the Crowsnest community. Hoping to draw attention to what Murphy believed was a campaign of tyranny by authorities, the union leader identified some of the police’s actions inside the Pass away from the pickets. The MWUC representative demanded to know whether Cst. Bailey was part of an officer “demonstration ... [where] about twenty-three of them

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Statement of the Accused in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

marched through in orderly file through Bellevue” for no particular reason.¹³² While Bailey was not present at the demonstration in question, he knew of it. For Murphy, the symbolism of the event was clear. The Mounted police asserted a frightening presence in the community, an aura wholly opposed to the strike. As official representatives of the government, who held the status of representing the public interest, and defending law and order, authorities challenged the legitimacy for residents to strike in public. Bailey suggested to the union leader that the demonstration was only “an exercise ride,” but Murphy jeered at the defence. The labour leader retorted back to the officer that if it was only what Bailey suggested, if it was only for exercise, why were the officers “riding with guns.”¹³³ Murphy hinted at the real reason behind the RCMP march through the town of Bellevue; it was solely meant to intimidate strike advocates inside the community. A threat of being shot down by RCMP officers was not beyond belief. It had become a salient possibility in the mindset of Crowsnest strikers since the Estevan strike of 1931. Some RCMP officers there had shot and killed three MWUC-miners on strike. The RCMP ‘exercise’ ride through Bellevue with guns reminded Murphy, and likely many others, of potentially fatal repercussions of their labour dispute.

In the union leader’s closing statement, Murphy detailed how he believed his arrest was unjust and explained the fundamental idea behind picketing. The MWUC leader contrasted his behaviour to the turbulent atmosphere created by zealous picket line members, insisting he was “not among those that were active in there.”¹³⁴ The organizer stressed they took no part in any physical confrontations taking place against any of the strike’s dissenters. Above all else, the

¹³² Testimony of Fredrick Harold Brooks Bailey *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Statement of the Accused in *King v. Murphy*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

union leader maintained that he only “advocated peaceful picketing.” Under the laws of the country, Murphy reminded everyone attending his preliminary trial that individuals had “freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and he had plainly followed the law and pursued his rights.”¹³⁵ Yet because of his position in the union, he was unjustly targeted. Critical of authorities and their relationship with companies during labour disputes, the MWUC leader “wasn’t at all surprised when ... [he] was arrested” days later since he was “an active organizer of the workers.” As a staunch defender of the working class, the advocate had tried protecting the right of workers to assemble since there were “no other means of expressing discontent in the economic system.”¹³⁶ Only by “their withdrawal of their efficiency, their labour,” could working class citizens pressure companies for whom they worked.¹³⁷ Besides withdrawing their labour, workers held little influence in their economic role. Comparing the workers’ experience with that of company officials’, Murphy went on to say a company could “shut down a mine ... combine with other companies ... [or] order wage cuts;” all affecting workers’ lives. Employees, on the other hand, possessed negligible affect. Therefore, “the right to strike ... [was] absolutely necessary.”¹³⁸ A picket allowed workers to symbolically impart the idea that they were “standing solid.” Strength of a picket laid in its public visibility. Instead of keeping worker discontent in the shadows, a picket’s organized occupation of public space both physically and psychologically thrust work dissatisfaction to light. An assembly composed of many individuals remained a critical component. Murphy contended pickets ultimately needed large crowds if only “because numbers influence people.” It had “a moral effect.” “Lots of people ... [would] go back to work or break a strike if they ... [thought] other people ... [were] doing it and they ... [had]

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

no hope for victory.”¹³⁹ Pickets afforded an opportunity to witness the support for worker grievance inside a community, awakening a sense of duty and fellowship between workers. He concluded in court by remarking, “my crime . . . must have been my speaking at meetings of the men.”¹⁴⁰

The pickets of May and the subsequent trials later that month shifted where tensions existed in the strike. Bellevue and Blairmore miners who tried to work at West Canadian that month were symbolically and physically confronted with the idea that their actions provoked a section of the community. As part of a small and isolated community, some residents reminded picket-crossers that consequences for their actions existed. Surveillance was not only a tool used by authorities. Ardent strikers imposed it against individuals who threatened the degree of power a strike had on contract negotiations.

The presence of woman on the picket lines of May defined the event. Historians Thomas Dublin and Walter Licht argue that “working class families held to middle class conceptions.” However, historian Caroline W. Merithew emphasizes the existence of co-existing gendered frameworks in the early-twentieth century, where working-class housewives were held in marked distinction from “that of their middle-class contemporaries.”¹⁴¹ When women participated in the picketing, it made apparent tensions between two different sets of understandings and assumptions on gendered behaviour. Some onlookers viewed the actions of women on the picket from a middle-class perspective. Women inside the picket likely held a different set of

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Caroline Waldron Merithew, “‘We Were Not Ladies’: Gender, Class, and a Women’s Auxiliary’s Battle for Mining Unionism,” *Journal of Women’s History* Vol 18 No 2 (Summer, 2006): 65-66.

assumptions, originating from a working class life inside a coal community. Their actions represented what historian Paula Petrik describes as a “Metamorphosis of women’s perceptions of their public and private roles and a new definition of womanhood” formed in coal communities.¹⁴²

Picketing strategy was a highly planned, calculated, and deliberate affair. Potential punishment—physically, legally, and work-related—imposed against striking miners for zealous picketing was minimized. As some women assumed the role as major representatives of physical discontent, they diverted attention and consequences away from striking miners and channeled it towards themselves. They used gendered assumptions to maximize the extent they could inflict moral justice against their targets. Picket crossers who held to the idea of public physical restraint against women—with possibly the exception of Glover—had little recourse. At the same time, their defence attorneys used traditional assumptions on the nature of women to minimize legal consequences of their client’s actions.¹⁴³ The physicality issued by some women, the spectacle of their appearance, impaired West Canadian officials to use the picket as an event to select which striking miners to blacklist.

After the May pickets, Murphy and strikers complained about the actions of officers in the labour dispute, but so too did West Canadian Collieries. Company officials like Vissac were left with doubts about the ability of law authorities to protect miners entering onto West Canadians’ property. Collective zeal of picketers appeared too considerable, or the resolve of authorities to impose their command seemed too deficient. In spite of roughly “65 mounted

¹⁴² Paula Petrik, *No Step Backward: Women and Family on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier, Helena, Montana, 1865-1900* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 1987), xiii.

¹⁴³ All charges against the local community resident Stellamahovich, Lucas, Fantin, Sefcik, Polski, and Bazille were stayed. Harvey Murphy was found guilty of unlawful assembly and served three months hard labour in Lethbridge Gaol.

police” on surveillance duty for the picket on the fifth of May, Vissac felt they “had considerable trouble trying to handle the crowd.”¹⁴⁴ Officer inability combined with other factors and Vissac decided to discontinue efforts at reopening Bellevue’s mine. In the eyes of Vissac, the union, strikers, and onlookers, the May pickets effectively fended off a reopening.

¹⁴⁴ “Strike Situation,” report, 17 May 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

Chapter Three: Beyond the Picket

Some residents in positions of influence had tried to direct the outcome of Bellevue's mine reopening using community mechanisms. Blairmore's mayor J.H. Farmer attempted to intervene using the town's municipal council as a tool against strikers. One day before the picket, the mayor hoped to persuade men to return to work by applying pressure against an issue faced in most work stoppages, a striker's shortage of money. In earlier meetings, the town council had agreed to show lenience to striking residents for payments due for utilities during work stoppage. This suited Farmer no longer. The mayor saw an opportunity to persuade the strikers back to work by motioning that "all lights be cut off on the first day of June to all consumers over 30 days in arrears and all previous motions to the contrary be rescinded."¹ The motion carried, but the decision provoked outcry in the community. After the mine's reopening had failed, the miner's local union requested the council to give "some consideration for light arrears while on strike."² Subsequently, Farmer amended the motion at the next council meeting, instead proposing that "the lights of miners on strike will not be cut off until the strike is settled and they have 30 days to settle their accounts for light."³ While a few councillors opposed Farmer's new motion, enough agreed it was best to handle the issue of electricity in this manner and the mayor's motion passed. Soon though, the council divested themselves of making any motions about electricity on the basis of the labour dispute, calling a special town meeting to rescind the initial and latter motions.⁴ But the use of Blairmore's town council during the strike continued in the following months. Miner

¹ "Regular Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blairmore," Town Council minutes, 3 May 1932, M-Micro-Crow-8 Council Minutes: 1932-1937 (hereafter MCCM), Municipality of Crowsnest Pass fonds (hereafter MCPF), GA.

² "Regular Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blairmore," Town Council minutes, 16 May 1932, MCCM, MCPF, GA.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Special Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blairmore," Town Council minutes, 20 May 1932, MCCM, MCPF, GA.

William Oakes, who opposed the strike, was also councillor for Blairmore and he moved that only “twenty-four hours notice be given before the water be cut off where possible” which was then carried by the council.⁵ Direct access to water through plumbing was a luxury that could be removed but was not detrimental. It would only inconvenience strikers inasmuch as water would need to be manually retrieved from the Crowsnest River.

After the intense May pickets, the issue of the strike played out in the Crowsnest community. In the late-1970s, historian Allen Seager attributes resistance against the strike in terms of ethnicity.⁶ The historian argues those who opposed the MWUC were Anglo-Saxons and resistance formed because of the fact. But resistance did not form against the strike *solely* on the basis of ethnicity. To be clear, defiance based on that framework certainly existed. Yet, that argument’s strength was only salient for *some* strike opponents. Ethnic derision was a feature in life in early-twentieth century Canada, for some. For others, ethnic assumptions did not motivate them to oppose the strike. They did so for other reasons. Some miners hostile to the strike believed “Those of us who are of British origin do not pretend to assume any attitude of superiority or privilege over those of other nationalities ... Nearly all of them are by intention and past behaviour as good as we are.”⁷ These workers complained that part of the problem with the strike was that “Most of the others ... do not understand the issues” as “their ears are of course not so well tuned to the English language.” Union leaders like Murphy who made grand speeches were

⁵ “Regular Meeting of the Council of the Town of Blairmore,” Town Council minutes, 20 June 1932, MCCM, MCPF, GA.

⁶ Seager, “Mine Workers Union of Canada,” 151-154.

⁷ Memorandum of the Coal Miners of Coleman, Blairmore and Bellevue, memorandum, 2 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 4A, PAA.

“spell-binding ... at public and union meetings.”⁸ Strike resistance never amplified because of an all-encompassing argument mediated by ethnicity. Ethnic assumptions were only one node among a constellation of nodes contending against the strike. Religious resistance, ‘outsider’ distrust, political assumptions on the union, and gendered arguments manifested as points against the union and the dispute. Moreover, actions during the strike by the more ardent strike supporters likely prompted inclination for many Crowsnest residents to oppose the dispute. Tensions built over seven months and were difficult to abandon even when the industrial action came to a screeching halt, as MWUC leadership finally made progress in September of 1932 to bring the strike to an end.

Arguments against the strike evolved over time. Initially, opposition to the dispute only saw the superficial reason behind the strike, the ejection of Zemick from the mines in late-February. Almost immediately after the strike was called for ‘insubordination’, the editor of the Coleman’s local newspaper, the *Journal*, embarked on publishing editorials concerning the labour dispute. He entirely disagreed with the call to strike and explained his opposing point of view. The *Journal* acknowledged that coal mining, with its “dangerous conditions, gave rise to legitimate grievances more often than most occupations.” Because of life and death concerns, “In no other industry ... [were] strikes so frequent as [in] the coal industry.”⁹ But the editor could not support the root cause of the Crowsnest strike, finding “alleged insubordination” as a weak basis. The strikers’ overall economic circumstances were already too fragile for an extended stoppage of work, especially over a seemingly minor issue. The amount of work per miner was well-known to be grossly sub par and the *Journal’s* editor criticized the union’s decision to strike in light of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 6 March 1932.

circumstances workers faced. Simply, it was poor judgement. While miners received less earnings during the Depression, at least it was something. But “Instead of half a loaf,” the miners were left with “no loaf,” straining workers’ and their families.

Realizing the potential foment a coal town’s newspaper could stir up by publishing points against the strike, the *Journal* clarified its position. Their views were less confrontational towards the community’s miners and instead scrutinized the workers’ union leadership. Believing unions were “essential to maintain[ing] a fair standard of wages for workers in all industries,” the editor nevertheless thought the leadership of the Mine Workers Union of Canada in particular had overextended its role. The *Journal*’s editor conceded that “a dispute of any kind must have two sides” and he understood “each side ... [had] its prejudices or biased viewpoint;” however, the MWUC exploited this breach instead of trying to conciliate the two positions.¹⁰ For the editor, union leaders ultimately wanted to call a strike “no matter if there were reasons to justify it or not.”¹¹ Rather than fostering an equitable rapport with the company, the union did not appear to be promoting “harmonious working relations.” Instead, the union seemed to be advocating disharmony between miners and the coal company operators. The editor warned miners to ask themselves whether the MWUC truly had the workers’ best interest in mind since they “close[d] up avenues for employment... entail[ing] financial loss” for all in the union’s ranks.

Blacklisting was a major strike issue and the *Journal* tried to address it in terms of its advantages. The argument was based on the potential the system held to better the most number of coal town neighbours. Because they were the employers of hundreds of residents, colliery officials assumed direct responsibility for the community. The editor recognized that the coal industry affected more than just coal miners as it reached into the homes and also impressed upon families.

¹⁰ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 31 March 1932.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

With spouses and dependants, some coal miners bore, it was argued, a greater burden than workers without any. Blacklisting, in the newspaper's theory, distributed work to miners who needed it most. It was either an intentional misunderstanding or a perverse theory. A company, suggested the editor, needed freedom to weigh the personal circumstances of each of their workers. When MWUC demanded a rigid seniority policy for hiring and laying off miners from an employer, they confounded a manager's ability to assist workers most in need. If a single man had signed up at a business earlier than a married one, a seniority protocol meant the latter would be turned away.¹² The newspaper editor was critical of a framework in which "single men wanting the same amount of work as married men with families" might be given it.¹³ The process impinged on more of the community's residents. They insisted employers needed the right to hire whoever they wanted, and for however much work, because it was an employer's duty to regulate worker production based on ethical circumstances. Plainly, single men did not deserve as much time in the mines as married men with families. In developing that stance, the editor ignored the idea of a family wage, where each member contributed in myriad ways to the struggle for daily survival in working class families.¹⁴ In that sense, single miners needed more work than those part of a diffuse survival scheme. Moreover, while advocating 'theory of blacklisting', the editor ignored the reality. West Canadian officials looked not to control hiring and firing based on moral consideration, they wanted to remove what they believed were unruly workers from their mines. Nevertheless, the argument likely resonated with those miners who had families.

¹² Ibid; The seniority system was also used to combat aspects like favoritism and ageism; however, in this case, the editor only weighed it against the benefits to blacklisting.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ For an exploration into the idea of a family wage in a different historic and geographic context, see Bettina Bradbury's *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993).

An article entitled “Teamwork” reflected the sentiment that problems tearing away at the community could not be resolved without general changes in attitude by both company officials and workers. The article showed the Blairmore *Enterprise’s* editor’s attempt in avoiding taking sides in the dispute: “What the world need[ed],” the editor insisted, was not “antagonism, but mutual sympathy; not competition, but co-operation.”¹⁵ Pointing to the tattered relationship between employers and employees, the writer believed that teamwork could only be found with a “willingness to compromise.”¹⁶ The strike had divided, crystallized, and pitted individuals against each other, clouding judgements and any chance of reaching an agreement. The idea of compromise, subsequently, had come to be seen as “essentially wrong [or] as a great evil.”¹⁷ The editor suggested that neither union’s leadership nor colliery’s officials were entirely innocent, arguing that “Unless there is a compromise, rather than each one insisting upon acceptance of their views to the exclusion of others, failure for both must inevitably follow.”¹⁸

In the same manner how MWUC’s 1931 affiliation with the Workers Unity League soured negotiations with West Canadian collieries, the link also detrimentally affected the union’s status in Coleman.¹⁹ The *Journal’s* editor suspected the WUL influenced the union and their strategies more than MWUC leaders cared to admit. Instead of diffusing the strike, the league “aggravated” it.²⁰ Trying to present an argument against WUL influence that went beyond simply casting the coalition as ‘red’, the editor drew attention to the league’s illegitimacy in Canadian labour affairs. The newspaper’s editor dismissed the WUL’s intervention into labour concerns because the

¹⁵ “Teamwork,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 12 May 1932.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Morton and Copp, *Working People*, 142.

²⁰ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 31 March 1932.

Canadian Federation of Labour gave “no official recognition” to the league.²¹ Past actions and statements had haunted the WUL’s reputation in industrial relations because they tried “to gain its objective ... by inciting ... members to open violence if necessary.”²² In communities needing to work and live together again after a labour dispute, violence was a “very dangerous doctrine to promulgate” since it was not easily forgotten. Union leaders argued that their strategies promoted their position and swayed support to their side; the *Journal*’s editor entirely disagreed. The publisher declared MWUC strike tactics which mirrored the WUL’s inflammatory course of action only had the opposite effect. The strategy of “hurl[ing] open defiance at all who ... [were] not within its ranks” did little except alienate “public opinion to a large extent.”²³

The *Journal*’s editor tried offering explanations for miner grievances, explanations which were out of the hands of both the colliery and their workers. General materialistic patterns of consumption, the editor argued, stimulated the conditions they all faced. “Mr. And Mrs. Householder, union or non-union members are always clamoring [sic] for lower prices. Price-cutting ensues ... [and] manufacturers look around to find where they can trim production costs.”²⁴ Everyone contributed to this “vicious policy” and workers subsequently played a part in their “own downfall.”²⁵ Obsession with finding the best deal inevitably meant “somebody must accept lower wages.”²⁶ The editor empathized that it was “a rotten policy” and the “economic system ... [was] badly balanced,”²⁷ but the WUL’s solution was unfeasible. To “Knock down the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 31 March 1932; “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 14 April 1932.

whole system galley west ... and set up communism in its place ... [was] Easier said than done.”²⁸

To “set up a revolutionary workers government ... [was] impossible ... because there are not leaders to undertake such a change.”²⁹ The editor of the *Journal* alluded that the union and WUL leaders were “false prophets” who only “pour[ed] salt and vinegar into the wounds of the workers.”³⁰

Striving to shift support away from the MWUC, the editor attacked the idea that the union’s members had the community’s best interest in mind. Every community issue held opportunity to examine what union representatives believed were best courses of action. The *Journal*’s editor scrutinized the assessments of individuals who belonged to the union and considered them as official union opinion. In an important matter to the community though unrelated to the labour dispute, the district’s school board was deciding on whether to renew a dental plan for the community’s children. The editor reported that union members on the board opposed the renewal. Their disapproval, to the editor, demonstrated a general lack of foresight and wisdom. The renewed dental plan would cost \$1200 which the editor insisted constituted only “a fractional figure for the individual ratepayer.”³¹ In opposing the renewal of the dental plan, the union was “acting against the interests of the pupils and their parents” of the community.³² In questioning the rationality of the union’s members on this issue, the editor likely hoped to expose a general sense of deficiency in MWUC’s ability to handle matters in a way that placed prime importance on the community’s members.

²⁸ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 31 March 1932.

²⁹ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 14 April 1932.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

The *Journal's* editor also attacked suspected WUL influence since it was believed the group challenged “the golden rule” of Christianity.³³ Only a religious mindset could truly provide an answer to worldly grievance. He accused the unity league of directly disobeying Christian principles when they advocated the use of “violence as a means to achieve goals.” It was only through Christianity where workers could “rise above ... present difficulties ... [and] solve them in a peaceful way.”³⁴ Using religion as an argument against WUL and the MWUC placed subtle strain on strikers and their supporters. The tactic undermined any steadfast resolve to strike coming from strike advocates who also placed great weight on personal senses of religion and Christianity. In analyzing major points of divisions between strikers, historian John Manly finds the influence of the parish priest often “led to defections from the union.”³⁵ In showing that Christianity was directly at odds with the MWUC and the WUL, the editor strained union and strike sentiment for religiously-inclined miners.

The effect that the strike had on the atmosphere of the community was a major issue for the *Journal's* editor. Disagreement between residents had arisen inside the Crowsnest. In extreme cases, residents turned against residents on the basis of whether they did or did support the strike. Open animosity and hostility ensued. Searching to find elements which aggravated the unpleasant incidents in the environment, the editor pointed out and condemned the withdrawal from work. The idea of work was seen as a critical feature to the lives of the working class. Labour energy expelled during employment had a cathartic effect for workers. Arguing jobs meant more than just an income, the editors stressed it also brought happiness. The removal of work's cleansing effect on miners created a vacuum inside of a worker's being. The strike had severed miners, he argued,

³³ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 31 March 1932.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ John Manley, “Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935,” *Labour/ Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992): 75.

from a fundamental feature that improved an individual's quality of life, replacing it only with idleness. Crowsnest residents were witnessing what idleness brought. The editor took issue with the strike leaving miners with little to do because it only led to discontent and brooding. Inactivity intensified "grievances ... when not engaged in gainful occupation," and explained for the editor why the community appeared to be destabilizing."³⁶

Editorials condemning the union drew from the knowledge that its members were not entirely unanimous on the call to strike. The *Journal* remonstrated against mistreatment targeting union members who disagreed with the MWUC decision to stop work. Several workers who publicly opposed the union's actions were experienced veteran miners in the coal industry yet the union's leaders ignored and even stigmatized the men. The editor believed these workers who had "served labor for years in the Crows Nest Pass" should be treated with more respect than they had been receiving.³⁷ Some experienced miners were forced "to walk the thorny path of scowling looks and biased criticisms" because they were unafraid to openly disagree with the union's leadership. Taking aim at those who drummed up animosity, the editor labeled individuals who "derided" others as mere "circus barkers," declaring they suffered from "delusions" if they believed their actions served to reconcile positions.³⁸ Union leaders believed they were making a difference and promoting solidarity but the editor scoffed at the thought: union leaders "who ... [had] been occupying the stage front or the soap box will pass into the limbo of forgotten things" as soon as miners realized the strike and its leaders offered nothing of value.³⁹

MWUC organizer Harvey Murphy, in particular, attracted editorial attacks because of speeches he gave. The editor believed Murphy incited members of the community when the leader

³⁶ Coleman Journal Press, "Voice from Strike Area," *Blairmore Enterprise*, April 7, 1932.

³⁷ "Notes and Comments," *Coleman Journal*, 28 April 1932.

³⁸ "Notes and Comments," *Coleman Journal*, 28 April 1932.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

would boast that they had “walked under the red banner of Moscow’s May-Day celebrations,” or when he criticized the Canadian work experience. The editor interpreted Murphy’s promotion of another country as a criticism against Canada and it “promoted strife and sedition among those who ... would have [otherwise] settled their labor disputes in an orderly manner.”⁴⁰ Murphy’s “campaign of vilification” was seen as “seditious and vicious propaganda.” It only served to foster “economic paralysis” in the mines and the country instead of improving labour relations. The editor used the *Journal* to openly asks its readership whether MWUC leaders like Harvey Murphy and John Stokaluk had a transparent agenda in the dispute. For the editor, signs pointed otherwise. Unlike striking miners who were financially distressed because of the strike, union leaders appeared, by comparison, well off. The editor criticized Murphy and Stokaluk, believing they were living comfortable while the community of miners suffered. He accused union organizers as being nothing but “paid heelers ... hanging onto their jobs while the impoverished miner pays the price” for their leaders’ inefficiency at negotiating return-to-work conditions. For the *Journal*, these “hirelings” had little to offer when it came to solving “serious problems” and in actuality gave the Crowsnest miners little, if anything, in return for their union salaries. Speeches were not enough, action was necessary and Murphy and Stokaluk clearly were not doing enough, in the eyes of the editor, “to warrant them holding jobs at the workers’ expense.”⁴¹

Coleman’s *Journal* editor also took issue with workers allowing Murphy and Stokaluk to make key choices which affected the standard of life for the Pass’ miners. Both had little tangible connection to the Crowsnest. Presence of the two union leaders was temporary at best in the western mining region since the two were only visiting from Calgary, hundreds of kilometres away. Allowing their influence to significantly shape economic relations and the lives of

⁴⁰ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 5 May 1932.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

community members was therefore illogical. The editor reminded residents to consider that Murphy and Stokaluk were outsiders and “men of whose ancestry and record they ... [knew] practically nothing.”⁴² The publisher believed it would be a tough situation, but workers needed to remove the MWUC from a position of influence. The editor urged miners that “it ... [was] time that men took a tumble as to whom they ... [would] follow.”⁴³ In comparison to others, MWUC leaders like Stokaluk and Murphy were poor choices for representation. Instead, the “men with whom ... [workers] have worked and lived among for twenty or twenty-five years in these Crows Nest Pass Towns” were better choices as spokesmen. They had substantial ties to the community which encouraged these local labour leaders to weigh decisions and actions more carefully.⁴⁴

The *Journal's* editor watched the labour dispute closely, and the actions taken by women in the May pickets, in particular, attracted his attention. The newspaper condemned picketing women in degrading terms, calling them “worse than savages.” With their participation, women-picketers made the dispute much “more lurid” as they acted out and were arrested.⁴⁵ The editor lamented the effects the picket and the strike had, complaining “Girls of 16 to 18 years were heard using the most disgusting language.”⁴⁶ The editor’s assessment were founded on traditional gendered assumptions, and subsequently marginalized the strength of conviction coming from those women in the community. Women on the picket likely responded to the degree they did because they saw unjust treatment of men in the coal mines. Consciously or not, editors ignored this aspect, attributing the behaviour of picketing women as simply “hysterical and frantic.”⁴⁷

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Violent Scuffles at Bellevue This Morning,” *Coleman Journal*, 5 May 1932.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ “Four Strikers Arrested Bellevue This Morning,” *Coleman Journal*, 5 May 1932.

When he challenged the function that women had on the picket, the editor was also indicating expectations on the role of women in public. During the strike, actions of women in the public sphere went beyond the May pickets and ended up provoking some of the Pass' residents. Women who supported the strike used strategies like leading pro-strike parades to promote the union, the strike, and their own point of view. In mid-July, RCMP carefully watched "three young women" lead a demonstration on the streets.⁴⁸ What would come to frustrate some residents about these parades were the women's choice of participants. These women specifically formed parades solely using community youth. Cst. Butcher noted that a total of roughly "80 children [were] led by Mary North of Blairmore, Angela Roman of Frank, [and] Hilda Johnson of Blairmore."⁴⁹ As the women marched the children through Blairmore, they encouraged the young to sing "parodies of popular songs" and rallied the young to boo at "several of the houses" as they passed by them.⁵⁰

North, Roman, and Johnson pushed the boundaries of the labour dispute beyond the picket line and forced the strike to the front doors of Blairmore residents. RCMP officers observing the parades took care to record parts of the lyrics of songs sung by the children assembled. The lyrics embodied an essence of defiance. "Included in their repertoire" were phrases such as "hail, hail Lethbridge Gaol, what the hell do we care, what the hell do we care."⁵¹ Historian Archie Green has argued that songs were a form of resistance in and of themselves and the struggles of men on the job inspired industrial folksongs.⁵² Scholar Steven Keith Welborn argues that music could transcend "various ethnic, racial, religious, and interpersonal tensions which gnawed at many coal

⁴⁸ Report by E.B. Butcher, 15 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Report by J.T. Jones, 14 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁵² Archie Green, "A Discography of American Coal Miners' Songs," *Labor History* 2:1 (1961): 102.

communities.⁵³ Moreover, historian Richard McKinnon notes that throughout North America “where labour and capital have fought battles over the years, there are many songs and verses about labour and protest.”⁵⁴ But the art-form could also divide communities. Some Crowsnest residents did not appreciate the songs taught to children, nor the youth’s public performances in the streets. In addition to lyrics sung, banners with slogans like ‘Down with the monkey-faced scabs’ and ‘Down with the yellow scabs’ were paraded by children.⁵⁵

Besides subjecting the community to lyrics boasting disobedience to the law, youth targeted and taunted those against the strike. Ridicule from youth likely jarred some resident’s sensibilities concerning expectations for children and their proper conduct. Some residents reacted by confronting the women and the young of the parade. Constable Butcher wrote in his report that “When they were passing the house of one Mrs. Pete McEwan ... [she got] very excited and angry.”⁵⁶ McEwan “ran out of the gate on to the street and commenced shouting at them and waving her hands.”⁵⁷ One other resident, only referred to as Marcieau, supported McEwan’s reaction to children being taught what was perceived to be outright disrespect by North, Roman, and Johnson. Marcieau followed McEwan out onto the street to scold both the children and the women. As they verbally reprimanded parade participants, the two women discovered they had little support from other residents on the street. Whether it was because the two had verbally attacked the children, possibly scaring them, or simply because of their anti-strike sentiment, McEwan and Marcieau were confronted by other residents. More women left their houses and

⁵³ Steven Keith Welborn, “‘After this is Over We’ll Lay Our Hands on You’: Music as a Form of Cultural Resistance in Depression-Era Pennsylvania,” *Pennsylvania History* Vol 63 No 1 (Winter 1996): 126.

⁵⁴ Richard MacKinnon, “Protest Song and Verse in Cape Breton Island,” *Ethnologies* Vol 30 No 2, (2008): 33.

⁵⁵ Caragata, *Alberta Labour*, 117.

⁵⁶ Report by E.B. Butcher, 15 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

spilled onto the street in defence of the parade organizers and the children. This “large number of women” targeted Marcieau and McEwan and began “shouting and waving their hands,” screaming “Scabs” at the two who dared reproach the parade.⁵⁸ Excited at the conflict that grew, some of the children of the parade “commenced throwing stones” at McEwan and Marcieau. Witnessing the conflict escalate to dangerous levels, police officers intervened and “ordered them to keep the parade moving.”⁵⁹ North, Roman, and Johnson obliged, and the children’s parade continued down the street.

Directly using children to promote the strike incensed some in the community because it likely breeched trust imparted to women in their interactions with the young. Women like North, Roman, and Johnson used the children as tools to promote a certain perspective, a perspective not wholly agreed upon. The education imparted to young community members defied a sense of acceptable behaviour for youth. It moved those who disagreed with the teachings to threats of vigilantism. Those opposed to the tutelage by North, Roman, and Johnson confronted authorities, threatening to take the issue into their own hands. An unknown resident, recalled one officer, said “If you don’t stop them we will.”⁶⁰ Angered and frustrated, those sickened by the parades turned their disgust towards proper authorities. Parade opponents could not understand why the police allowed the parades to operate. RCMP presence in the Pass was supposed to maintain law and order; however, in the eyes of some, authorities failed in this regard when they permitted the parades to run. Disheartened and cynical about the police’s lack of intervention, someone sardonically asked the RCMP to “go and march with them” since they did nothing better.⁶¹ It was “strange ... [parades were] allowed to create disturbances without any interruption by the Police

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Report by J.T. Jones, 14 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁶¹ Ibid.

... while any activities on the part of those who disagree ... were “immediately stopped by the police.”⁶² On learning of the demonstration, the *Journal* condemned the “School children ... marched around the Pass towns.” The expression was “not an inspiring spectacle” in their community.”⁶³ It represented yet another blow against the labour dispute and its effects on residents. If parade organizers hoped the demonstration fostered strike support, the editor adamantly believed organizers were mistaken. A section of the community only drew further away from supporting the labour dispute because of the presentation. The editor accused the women who led the parades as being “utterly misguided ... accomplish[ing] nothing useful” with their actions.⁶⁴ Coleman’s *Journal* editor was utterly dismayed at the “leaders [who were] placing children on the front line,” summing up the actions of North, Roman, and Johnson as nothing other than “display[ing] poor qualities in leadership.”⁶⁵

RCMP continued to respond to the issue of parades after it appeared some residents had begun to pass their breaking point, resorting to collective counter-confrontation tactics. “A parade of Bellevue children of both sexes between the ages of 4 and 14 ... [was] assisted by a few local women set for Maple Leaf ... [where] residents did not take the perceived infraction lightly.”⁶⁶ When the parade of children arrived in the town, “they gathered outside a group of houses, the owners of which ... [were] opposed to the local radical element.” Residents “commenced to shout

⁶² General Manager to The Hon. J.E. Brownlee, copy of letter, 12 July 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶³ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 30 July 1932.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Henderson, 20 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA

and boo” back at the youth and the women leading the street demonstration. A police officer then “ordered the leaders to move on and the parade broke up without further disturbance.”⁶⁷

Daytime activity was only one way that ardent strike supporters intervened into the lives of residents of the community. They also used disruptions during the night to impress dissatisfaction on miners who crossed the union. Since the May pickets, West Canadian continued receiving miners requests, asking to be signed on for work.⁶⁸ When these workers’ actions were discovered by MWUC adherents, perceived betrayal was answered by implementing charivari-like justice. Miners who chose to work became victims of sleep deprivation as they had “their houses disturbed during the night by the striking pickets.”⁶⁹ Concern especially intensified when general threats of setting houses on fire in the night were made.⁷⁰ Some residents who opposed the strike also believed that strike supporters were even twisting the purpose of the police inside the Pass for nefarious intentions. On a Sunday evening in July, RCMP received a complaint from one Mrs. Gize. Gize was wife of a striking miner and she complained of a “threat made by ... Frank Russell, of Blairmore, and of the men signed on, that he would burn down the[ir] garage.”⁷¹ The RCMP believed that Gize’s husband was “actively connected with the Murphy-Stokaluk faction” but the alleged threat was enough to make immediate inquiries.⁷² Once learning of the threat of incendiarism, at “about three or four A.M.,” authorities reacted and Russell found himself abruptly

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Since 4-5 May 1932, pickets of much smaller size had continually appeared in front of West Canadian’s property line.

⁶⁹ General Manager to The Hon. J.E. Brownlee, copy of letter, 12 July 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁷⁰ re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by E.B. Butcher, 19 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁷¹ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by J.T. Jones, 11 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁷² General Manager to The Hon. J.E. Brownlee, copy of letter, 12 July 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

“wakened by the Police, who demanded to know who was in his house” before proceeding to search his residence. But RCMP officers found “no one in the house but his wife and child.”⁷³ If the danger was real, Russell’s threat indicated anger building towards the union and their members. If the risk was invented, it showed the lengths that strike supporters were willing to go against those like Russell who opposed the union.

By mid-July, RCMP decided to try and stop the day and night parades. Inspector Duncan sent a short letter to Edmonton which read “the time has arrived ... [to] authorize the prohibition of all parades ... as a means of preventing a serious breach of the peace.”⁷⁴ About a month earlier in the strike, officers were confronted by residents claiming that if demonstrations did not end, they would “use firearms” if necessary.⁷⁵ After getting the Premier of Alberta’s consent to handle the issue in which they saw fit, RCMP ‘K’ division headquarters in Edmonton decided to permit Duncan’s request. Notices were placed in the region, reading:

Parades of any kind whatsoever are prohibited in the Crows’ Nest Pass area by order of the Attorney-General of the Province of Alberta

Any person taking part in any such parade will be liable to prosecution and to the full penalties provided by law

Signed
K. Duncan
Inspector R.C.M. Police
Blairmore, Alberta.⁷⁶

At the same time as the notices were placed in the towns, Mounted police took precautions to avoid any potential violent eruptions, ordering “the bars at the Bellevue Inn and the Canadian

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ K Duncan Inspector to ‘K’ Division, Radiogram Rush (1), Attorney-General, Folder 4A. PAA.

⁷⁵ K Duncan Inspector to ‘K’ Division, Radiogram Rush (2), Attorney-General, Folder 4A. PAA.

⁷⁶ Notice, Attorney-General, Folder 4A, PAA.

Legion club rooms closed for the remainder of the night.”⁷⁷ Not all parade organizers acquiesced without protest. Angela Romin defied the ban and led another children’s parade but was stopped and served with a summons by Constable Butcher. Frustrated, Romin announced to Butcher that banning parades would not stop the ideas they were teaching to the youth, indicating "she was going to teach the children all the more songs to sing at ... meetings” instead.⁷⁸

Miners began writing into the *Journal*, publicly voicing frustrations with the strike. Among those opposed to the dispute were miners who felt the work stoppage was called illegitimately and under false pretence. After being on strike for just over five months, one anonymous Bellevue miner wrote in to the *Journal* to explain why they, and some others, were discontented. A sympathy strike had been called in Bellevue because of a “boy being sent out of the mine.”⁷⁹ Some workers were unimpressed when the union had “forced the breach a little wider by asking that other grievances be settled.” They felt coerced to continue striking and on the whole felt deceived. Moreover, MWUC leadership pledged to create a district-wide general strike. The Bellevue miner was displeased when “Murphy and Stokaluk promised ... months ago they were going to get all the mines 100 per cent behind us” and then failed to follow through” The Pass’ other coal towns like “Fernie, Michel, Corbin, Hillcrest and Maple Leaf” refused to strike. The union’s lack of capability shifted the dynamics for those who struck in sympathy since the potential union influence generated by a regional general strike had not materialized. It instead only strained those who went on sympathy strikes. For the miner, with a MWUC promise of a full

⁷⁷ “All Parades are Banned, Strike Area. Attorney-General’s Department Issues Order, Notices Posted,” report, July 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁷⁸ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by J.T. Jones, 18 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁷⁹ “Correspondence,” *Blairmore Enterprise*, 2 June 1932.

general strike, those who had been drawn into the dispute were “poor suckers [who] took it all in.” He, and others, wanted out.

The miner noted a lack of influence the union showed in its inability to persuade other coal towns to go on strike, and bitterly complained about the economic support given to the MWUC. Workers, for the past two years, had been paying membership dues. The worker believed the union had roughly “wasted between forty and fifty thousand dollars of the miners’ money” since they could not offer anything back to strikers. They could not break down the collieries’ refusal to negotiate, nor could they rally a general strike. Perhaps the idea of a general coal mining strike was never feasible. MWUC, after all, did not represent all coalminers in the district and the UMWA had a foothold in several mines. MWUC’s relationship with the UMWA was antagonistic since the national organization essentially formed because of problems miners had with the international union. But the MWUC could not even convince mines that they did represent to strike. The miner urged other striking miners to “Wake up ... and [to] drive these parasites out.” The anonymous miner saw a simple solution. If the national union could not adequately handle their affairs, if the union failed to follow through on strategies, the Crowsnest miners needed to “handle ... [their] own money.”⁸⁰ Using hindsight, the worker argued union dues could have been used more effectively. Local miners could have “fed all ... [the] men and families as long as this strike had lasted” had they not given their money to the union. The miner also brought up the unpleasant mood the union created in the community, disagreeing when union leaders called men who chose to publicly disagree with MWUC strategy as scabs. The distressed miner argued workers had “a two-year agreement on the same old terms,” so those wanting to work were not

⁸⁰ Ibid.

really scabs, and there was no more point to strike.⁸¹ The strike dissenter laid the accusation that the strike continued only because organizers would “be losing good incomes” if miners went back to work.⁸²

Other miners attacked the union and the strike on the basis of its association with Communist organizations. In spite of the union insisting that their right to associate with whomever they wanted in no way affected their representation of miners in the dispute, at least one miner disagreed. They saw the union’s past actions of dropping in and out of larger worker organizations as suspect, as the MWUC favoured only those with communist ties. From the point of view of workers who opposed the national union, “The Communist Party of Canada formed the All-Canadian Congress of Labor ... to get control from the American Federation of Labor.” The MWUC was part of the ACCL. “But when the Communists found that they could not control the organization they themselves built ... they decided to smash it by withdrawing the M.W.U. of Canada from it.” The miner went on to say, “Now we find the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada affiliated via the Workers’ Unity League, to the R.I.L.U. (Red International of Labor Unions) with headquarters in Moscow.”⁸³ The worker found it hard to believe that the union’s affiliations did not affect how they strategized in the Crowsnest labour dispute. The worker questioned the “True nature of this so-called Canadian Union.” As “one of the Canadian-born coal miners” the miner felt “Forced out of coal mining in my native country by foreigners,” not foreigners inside the Crowsnest community but foreigners directing the prerogatives of the MWUC. He believed “The Mine Workers’ Union of Canada ... [was] a tool of Moscow.” The writing miner clarified that he was not just against the MWUC, but they were against any union with national or international

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ “Excerpt from Calgary Herald,” report, 12 May 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

aspiration. Such a union could not be as effective on the local level for work issues: “Coal operators and the Canadian miners [were] allow[ing] themselves to be the political football of Moscow and Washington” and they were guilty of “Controlling or interfering with ... Canadian miners.”⁸⁴ If this were to continue he predicted the industry’s downfall.

For many, it appeared the strike had a negative effect on the community. The dispute’s intensity had spilled out from simply a disagreement between employee and employer, embedding itself as a series of confrontations between miners and a daily feature in the lives of community residents. Though RCMP were present in ‘full force’ for the major pickets, the number of officers declined in intervening periods. Subsequently, several residents decided to form a citizens’ league. The creation of citizens’ leagues in earlier labour disputes had been a major catalyst of change. Kramer and Mitchell found that the Citizens’ Committee of 1000 (CC1000), formed in consequence to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, played a major role in the formal resistance and subsequent resolution of that dispute. The historians find that the head of the CC1000 corresponded and often influenced the federal government’s actions during the major labour stoppage.⁸⁵ In contrast, the citizens’ league in the Crowsnest held less sway to affect the dispute through political intervention. They did send one letter to the federal government, but they appeared to be uninterested and the letter was forwarded to Alberta’s attorney-general. The Crowsnest Citizens’ league also tried unsuccessfully to have Alberta’s Premier Brownlee end the strike with provincial intervention. Nevertheless on some issues, their efforts were successful. They complained about parades being conducted in the towns, and subsequently the demonstrations became prohibited by the RCMP, much to the chagrin of MWUC officials and supporters. It is possible parades were prohibited more as a result of RCMP. On the whole, the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Kramer and Mitchell, *When the State Trembled*.

citizens' league was not politically influential and instead concerned itself with attempting to reduce strife brought by the strike.

A few weeks after enough of Coleman's miners rose against MWUC to oust the national union, citizens' leagues started to form in the towns.⁸⁶ Tired of tumult generated by some of the more zealous MWUC supporters, Coleman residents called a meeting in order to talk about what they believed was a shift away from 'good' values, a shift away from 'good' citizenry. Some immediately pointed to ethnicity as a cause for what they were witnessing. The government of Canada had done little to 'Canadianize' immigrants, and this task was left up to private organizations to surveil, regulate, and instruct new Canadians.⁸⁷ The labour dispute had brought to the fore specific actions which challenged their assumptions on what constituted 'proper' behaviour. Violence and intimidation threatened the community to a point where it could no longer remain unaddressed. Those who attended the meeting passed a motion:

We, the Coleman Citizens' League, do hereby declare our adherence to Canadian law and institutions. It is our purpose to maintain the observance of law and order and to keep the peace. We further declare our disapproval of, and pledge ourselves to lawful oppose any person or organization, who or which in manner teaches sedition or revolutionary theories, or who urge the use of violence, or in any manner disturbs the peace, and such other matters of public welfare that may come before the meeting.⁸⁸

As a member of the Coleman's league, Mayor G. Pattinson, stressed "it was time the English-speaking people asserted themselves" in the country.⁸⁹ Avoiding the notion that any English-speaker held blame in the 'civil unrest', the league targeted only foreigners' actions they considered inappropriate to citizenship. However ironic, the league strenuously suggested that they did not want to stigmatize foreigners, instead, they wanted to embrace them. Coleman's

⁸⁶ Byfield, *Fury and Futility*, 76.

⁸⁷ Avery, *Dangerous Foreigner*, 142.

⁸⁸ "Citizens Organize to Combat Influence of Revolutionary Agents Mining Towns Crows Nest Pass," *Coleman Journal*, 16 June 1932.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

league wanted to “include in its membership all who desire to see law and order maintained, no matter what their nationality may be.”⁹⁰ The strategy appeared welcoming but was also invasive. League officials could define citizenship in a rather uncontested environment. As self-proclaimed experts, any contests to their idea of citizenship from new ‘foreign’ members could simply be dismissed. Interpreting Canadian citizenry as an immutable concept, the league expected the country to turn into “a polyglot boarding house for people from foreign lands” without their assistance. League members argued that individuals who did not support the league were not taking “their part in the building up of our land.”⁹¹ By creating a league in which everyone was encouraged to join, its leaders employed a highly strategic tool for surveillance. On one hand, league leaders could supervise those willing to join, ensuring new adherents lived up to the prescribed notions of citizenry. On the other hand, league leaders would become aware of anyone in the community disinclined to join, subsequently being able to watch these individuals with increased levels of scrutiny.

A range of residents came out in support of the newly-formed league. One of the issues quickly addressed was the legitimacy in forming such a league. Citizens’ leagues were, since 1919, synonymous with strike breaking. The Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 was, for instance, effectively extinguished by the CL1000.⁹² Reverend J.W. Smith, a member of the league, tried to address the leagues’ inherited reputation, suggesting they should demonstrate solidarity with miners. They each shared a common link, the community, and they needed to work together to achieve positive change for their region. What was good for miners was good for the Crownsnest. Instead of letting miners go through their struggles alone, Smith urged that the citizens’ leagues’

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Citizens Mass Meeting, Opera House, Hearing Stirring Addresses by Visiting and Local Speakers,” *Coleman Journal*, 23 June 1932.

⁹² Kramer and Mitchell, *When the State Trembled*.

influence might be able to help. The league member stressed that their organization could offer assistance “by constitutional methods, “improving legislation” related to the coal industry.”⁹³ Miner William Lees who also spoke at Coleman’s first league meeting defended the organization “from a miner’s viewpoint.” He argued that Coleman’s citizens’ league formed after the town’s mining strike was overturned and after Gillespie and others successfully formed a ‘home local’ in a legitimate fashion. Lees understood why “labor disputes in the past ... would not have welcomed the organization of a citizen’s league, and had it been an ordinary labor dispute, they [miners] would tell those outside of the miners’ ranks to keep their hands off.”⁹⁴ But in Coleman, opposition could not claim as such. However unhappy some might have been at the result, by all intents and purposes, the strike was properly settled. The Coleman League, argued the editor of the *Journal*, had “not organized ... till two weeks after the miners had returned to work.”⁹⁵ While Coleman’s league could defend their creation, leagues in Blairmore and Bellevue could not boast as much.

Several residents believed leagues promoting Canadian citizenry became necessary in the region. The dispute had pushed its way into the psyches of the mining community, and imposed a sense of unease for many. Residents needed to push back against forces brought about by the union’s labour dispute. Lees complained that “people not allied with the Communists could not go anywhere in Blairmore or in Bellevue without being intimidated.”⁹⁶ Simply belonging to the league was not enough. They asked its members for vigilance and “did not want men to belong to

⁹³ “Citizens Mass Meeting, Opera House, Hearing Stirring Addresses by Visiting and Local Speakers,” *Coleman Journal*, 23 June 1932.

⁹⁴ “Citizens Organize to Combat Influence of Revolutionary Agents Mining Towns Crows Nest Pass,” *Coleman Journal*, 16 June 1932.

⁹⁵ “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 23 June 1932.

⁹⁶ “Citizens Organize to Combat Influence of Revolutionary Agents Mining Towns Crows Nest Pass,” *Coleman Journal*, 16 June 1932.

the League who stay[ed] with a leg on each side of the fence ... afraid to show where they stood.”⁹⁷

Since developing respectable citizenry was a goal, the league looked beyond adults as subjects of concern and also focused on the community’s youth. Observing what appeared to be an ‘unsettling’ influence, league advocates could not ignore how the region’s children were being used in the strike. Reverend. A. E. Larke was shocked by children’s parades which seemingly endorsed dissidence to law and order. The league had witnessed the significant impact that went along with ‘misguided’ teachings. They stressed “Assimilation of the younger people especially must be a foremost consideration of the League.”⁹⁸ Larke argued “the Communist party, through its Young People League, realized the value of this method.” The citizens needed to adopt this methodology in order to effectively combat the ill-effects of unsavoury influence.⁹⁹ The reverend put forward a question: “If no efforts were made to offset this [influence of dissent and disorder], then how could it be expected that the young people would know anything better?”¹⁰⁰

Rather than keeping their ideas on the citizen’s league in the ideological realm, the league planned to use national holidays to make their efforts tangible. For Larke, “they would provide opportunities for promoting national sentiment, and co-operation among the people ... fostering a more friendly spirit.”¹⁰¹ Coleman’s league formed in mid-June and Dominion Day was immediately approaching. The holiday, according the *Journal*, had not been celebrated, “since 1927.” It was an opportunity to define their concept of citizenry. The citizens’ league had adopted the public celebration of Dominion Day as their own. In doing so, the event carried both an

⁹⁷ “Citizens Mass Meeting, Opera House, Hearing Stirring Addresses by Visiting and Local Speakers,” *Coleman Journal*, 23 June 1932.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ “Citizens’ League Committee Appoint District Executive,” *Coleman Journal*, 23 June 1932.

obvious and subtle function. The obvious function was for Dominion Day to be used in celebrating the nation. The implicit function of the public celebration was a means of surveillance. By endorsing the event, league members were claiming it as their own, and by doing so they could observe who participated and who did not. The league had stressed that Crowsnest Pass residents could no longer idly stand by and undertakings needed to be shown in the community. In pushing residents to action, the league urged true citizens to arrange for “decorations ... [to] be displayed on ... residences.” These participants could be easily identified. By contrast, so too could those who did not. Starkness and lack of participation in Dominion day could be interpreted by league members as ‘troublesome’ residents, ones who needed to be watched carefully in the future. Even if strike advocates felt that they were citizens—which most likely they did—they were forced into a concession. They could not participate in the event without a semblance of appearing to cooperate with an organization suspected of strike-breaking.

If the league’s creators expected unwavering community support, they soon found out not everyone was going to unconditionally follow. While acknowledging that “tolerance ... [had] been strained to the limit” by individuals with questionable actions and behaviour, the *Journal’s* editor warned the league’s members to tread carefully.¹⁰² In defining what made or did not make a citizen, and by essentially declaring that those who did not join their league were not ‘true citizens,’ the league nurtured a scenario that promoted, or at the very least bordered, on intolerance. The idea of intolerance prompted the league’s formation in the first place. Ardent supporters of the MWUC alarmed residents when they stigmatized those who disapproved of their union and the strike. The editor cautioned the league that it would be “very easy for supporters ... to slip into similar methods which characterized the ‘Red’ campaign of abuse” if they did not also

¹⁰² “Notes and Comments,” *Coleman Journal*, 16 June 1932.

adequately oversee their own conduct.¹⁰³ The *Journal*'s editor publicly reminded the league that their creation was to provide a "wholesome influence in promulgating ideals of Canadian citizenship among those who have been misled."¹⁰⁴ The editor was critical of the league if their only agenda was to combat the idea of Communism. If the league professed to be a 'true' organization that promoted citizenry, it had better be prepared to explore the several ways which needed improvement. Good citizenry had several fronts infringing on the wellness of their community which needed to be addressed; not only antagonism between individuals. The editor pointed out that their community's businessmen, "in trying to develop ... [their] own assets, transfer[ed] their [monetary] support elsewhere."¹⁰⁵ Investment in the community, to the editor, constituted an aspect of good citizenry. The newspaper also encouraged support for those who had inducted new ventures in the region like "A Blairmore man ... [who] invested money there in an amusement hall." Moreover, the citizen's league could focus on "develop[ing] a really attractive park at the lake."¹⁰⁶ Because leagues inherited a reputation of opposition with workers, the town's newly-forming organization needed to prove that they could move beyond this simple relationship and into many areas of concern.

Dissenters made arguments on several fronts that justified, for them, a call to end the strike. For one, strike opponents pointed out what they felt were flawed points of negotiation the union raised with the colliery. Some opponents also actively and publicly promoted the industrial feud's finish by questioning the MWUC as well its leaders' apparent sordid past; their reputations, conducts, and affiliations prejudiced the strike's legitimacy. Finally, Crowsnest residents also

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

considered the dispute's tendency to prompt antagonistic exchanges inside the community. The actions of ardent union promoters, for some, did little to increase support for their cause and instead swayed sympathy away from it. Pro-strike parades, late night charivari-like events, and threats of violence and vandalism each widened rather than closed the gap between dispute supporters and its dissenters. Dissenters did not only weigh on whether or not to back the stop-work strategy based on the progress made by MWUC officials during contract negotiations; they also assessed it on the conduct which ardent rank-and-file strikers and their supporters embraced. For anti-strike advocates, the Crowsnest strike was only as legitimate as the behaviour of its participants. The perspective of several community members revealed militant strikers were problematic to the atmosphere of the district. Local resistance formed both informally, as residents threatened to defend themselves and their property against danger, and formally, in the creation of a league designed to combat the apparent ill social effects caused by the strike. The latter was largely ineffective. On the local level, with the exceptions of creating a mandate and promoting Dominion Day, the citizens' league made no (publicized) overt actions that influenced the strike's proceedings. As far as efforts to intervene by prompting the government—both provincial and federal—to action, representatives of the league were more or less powerless. Government officials did not respond to league requests as its members would have liked. For instance in answering league appeals, Premier Brownlee of Alberta responded to the secretary of Blairmore's league that it was “impossible for the Government ... to satisfy both sides.”¹⁰⁷ While the end of the strike occurred alongside the league's presence, several other factors stimulated the dispute's finality other than the league itself. These circumstances are analyzed in the subsequent chapter.

¹⁰⁷ J. Corbett Secretary of Citizens' League Blairmore to Brownlee, letter, n.d., Attorney-General, Folder 4A, PAA.

Chapter Four: To Settle a Strike

In Coleman, miner opposition piled against the union less than ten days after the May pickets. Local miner David Gillespie was a major force behind Coleman's withdrawal from the MWUC. Gillespie, "for many years secretary of Coleman local of the miners' union," formally organized miners against the national union.¹ When the MWUC underwent a regime shift in 1930 that favoured a radical approach to economic relations, new union leadership removed Gillespie from his office. Nevertheless, the miner still carried influence. He spurred a movement away from the MWUC when he demanded a ballot be taken in Coleman at a union meeting which read "Are you in favour of going back to work under the old agreement—Yes or No." On one hand, the ballot was subtle as it did not ask whether miners agreed or disagreed with the MWUC and the strike. Rather, Gillespie formed a ballot question that gauged the mood of strikers. On the other hand, it was also blatant. While the ballot did not confront the MWUC, it was well-known the union was being stonewalled in their negotiations with the International & McGillivray collieries, even though both offered employment on the same terms as the 1930 agreement. The results showed that 292 miners were in agreement to return to work under the same conditions, 237 were opposed, and only one ballot was spoiled. In consequence of the poll's outcome, miners "congregated on the corners" of the streets talking and arguing about the ballot. It showed that Coleman miners were not unanimous about the strike and the union. Conversations turned confrontational as adamant MWUC supporters interpreted the results as a direct threat to the national union. One worker "named Churla called John Anderson Sr., some scathing names, which Anderson stood for a short time." But the taunts soon "enraged" Anderson and he "sailed into Churla" looking to settle their disagreement physically. Anderson's

¹ "Street Disorders on Friday," *Coleman Journal*, 19 May 1932.

son, Jimmy, noticed the skirmish and “came along at express speed, and taking the place of his father,” fought Churla.² The ballot represented the beginning of the end for the MWUC influence in Coleman.

For Coleman miners the end of the strike loomed overhead; however, it would not be a process without controversy. The workforce was divided not only on how to reach an answer but who they wanted to lead them. An antagonistic episode in May mired the prospect of a smooth progress towards a resolution. While most Coleman miners ultimately found themselves back on the job, some were not as lucky. In Bellevue, paralleling efforts by Coleman’s workers, a section of Bellevue coalminers also attempted to bring an official end to the strike in July. But unlike the outcome in the neighbouring town, Bellevue’s strike continued to stall for several more months. During that time, it was discovered West Canadian company officials had added another element into the mix, a recommencement of coal production. Union officials responded in turn by rallying strike supporters for a picket demonstration like the one in May; but, with their own additional element, assistance from outside the Pass. Reflecting on the physicality at the pickets of May, RCMP intervened on the day of the newly-planned picket and set into motion the conclusion of the strike at West Canadian’s mines. By September, lines of communication were opened with Vissac as well as an offer for a contract. The union officials’ recommendation to take the settlement did not go over well with all miners, dividing workers who wanted the agreement with those who thought it was not enough.

Coleman’s vote was only one way miners began to demonstrate discontent with the union. Some individuals in the Pass showed their displeasure in other, more hostile, forms. On

² Ibid.

the same night the ballot results were read, a cross was burnt near Blairmore “on Goat Mountain,” coinciding with notices scattered “in the town bearing the words: ‘Reds, Beware!’”³ Also, the day after the vote, “John Stokaluk, secretary of the M.W.U.C. alleged that he was shot at as he was driving his car through the slide between Frank and Bellevue.”⁴ Some Pass residents had apparently passed their breaking points in the Crowsnest, fed up with the union, the strike, Murphy and Stokaluk.

Reading the May ballot results as an indication that the union no longer held majority support in Coleman, Gillespie and other Coleman miners formed an ad-hoc committee and scheduled a meeting with the general managers of Coleman’s McGillivray and International mines. The *Journal* reported that “At this meeting the committee were told that the operators were willing to open the mines on the basis of the old agreement.”⁵ Gillespie would have likely been pleased with the quick coming to terms. For about two and a half months, the MWUC had been trying to resolve the dispute of three mines at once. West Canadian Collieries and Vissac’s oppositional stance made the feat next to impossible. While the International and McGillivray mines received the new committee amicably, they added a caveat to the agreement for a return-to-work. The general managers made it clear that “none of the ‘Reds’ would be taken on” in this agreement.⁶ The unpleasant atmosphere ardent MWUC supporters had developed against some miners, by calling them scabs, blacklegs, etc, had broken bonds of work solidarity in the community and the committee was prepared to agree to the managers’ terms.

³ Caragata, *Alberta Labour*, 116.

⁴ “Brief Review of Events Leading to Strike in Crows Nest Pass,” *Coleman Journal*, 19 May 1932; Ted Byfield, *Fury and Futility: The Onset of the Great Depression, 1930-1935 Vol. 6 of Alberta in the 20th Century* (Edmonton: United Western Communications Ltd., 1998), 76.

⁵ “Free Fight in Opera House Upset Meeting Tuesday Morning,” *Coleman Journal*, 19 May 1932.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The initial push away from the national union had been swift, and Coleman miners used both the ballot's momentum and the meeting with colliery managers to start the official process of removing the MWUC. Only five days after the poll, a takeover took place with Gillespie at its helm, as the miner and his supporters commandeered a union meeting on the nineteenth of May. The hall's seating for the meeting was somewhat divided into factions, with just under four hundred in attendance.⁷ Those on the hall's right hand side were called the 'moderates,' a term given to those not entirely behind the MWUC or its leaders. On the left sat those who supported the MWUC, the 'reds.' But seating of men based on support for and against the MWUC was not a steadfast rule. Centre seats of the meeting hall were filled with both groups.

The meeting, from its start, was a show of strength for the newly forming home local. They took to task unseating the prominence of MWUC support. Gillespie believed that a Coleman miners' meeting signified that those who were not town miners had no right to be invited in. Previously, union meetings in the community's towns had open access for union miners, regardless of where the meeting was held or what mine an employee worked in. Bellevue and Blairmore miners who supported the MWUC could attend Coleman's meetings. Gillespie argued local MWUC representatives were permitted to enter, but Murphy, Stokaluk, and supporters from neighbouring towns were not welcome at the meeting. This tactic of Gillespie and company did not go over well with workers who supported Murphy, Stokaluk, and the union. One Coleman miner, Dimetrius Oleshko confronted William Wilson, who stood at the hall's front door and was asked to make sure it was "only employees getting in."⁸ Oleshko scolded Wilson, remarking "you dirty son of a bitch scab, what are you doing not letting a lot of

⁷ Testimony of Alexander Irvine, *King v. Belik*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁸ Testimony of William Wilson in "His Majesty the King -and- Dmitrius Oleshko: Preliminary Hearing," 19 August 1932, File No. 1470 (hereafter *King v. Oleshko*), FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

these other fellows get in?”⁹ Wilson, with the backing of a few other miners at the hall’s entrance, told Oleshko that they were just asked to be at the door to make sure only Coleman miners got in and that they did not know much else. Frustrated, Oleshko entered into the hall. With union leaders and supporters from neighbouring towns barred from the meeting, Gillespie and others used the assembly to formally take control of Coleman’s mining affairs.

Billie Holly had been the branch’s president, and—for Gillespie—the MWUC-supporter needed to go. Miner Mike Blazenko remembered real trouble “started when they [strike dissenters] put a vote ... of non-confidence” on the whole local committee put in place by the MWUC.¹⁰ The vote revealed Coleman miners were not unanimous, but Gillespie and dissenters had enough backing to effect major changes in Coleman’s union. James Anderson, scrutineer for the non-confidence vote, recalled the ballot was taken through “a show of hands.” “Between a hundred and ninety and two hundred [voted] for the non-confidence ... and a hundred and seventy-three ... [voted] against it.”¹¹ As soon as the vote of non-confidence was taken, anti-MWUC proponents “voted through Bill White as president and Gillespie as secretary.” The meeting soon “got into an uproar” as both MWUC supporters and dissenters let opinions fly on the turn of events. Joseph Bodisch, a Coleman miner, remembered some like worker Sandy Irvine said things like “Chase the reds out now!”¹² Others who opposed the overthrow looked on the vote differently. Billie Holly, ousted from presidency by Gillespie, sarcastically yelled out they had “better appoint Whiteside and Kelly to be secretary and president.” Whiteside and Kelly were the managers of Coleman’s International and McGillivray mines.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Testimony of Mike Blazenko, *King v. Oleshko*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹¹ Testimony of James Anderson in “His Majesty the King -and- Carl Belik: Preliminary Hearing,” 27 May 1932, File No. 1483 (hereafter *King v. Belik*), FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

¹² Testimony of Joseph Bodisch, *King v. Belik*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

Meeting strife escalated into violence and each group pointed to the other as its cause. Carl Belik started booing at Gillespie and his supporters. Knowing quite well why Belik was booing for, Alexander Irvine nonetheless glibly asked Belik why he was booing.¹³ According to Irvine, Belik, without responding, “turned around and poked ... [him] in the eye,” cutting him.¹⁴ Angered, Irvine retaliated and “struck him back ... on the head.”¹⁵ Irvine judged his “incident with Belik ... set fire to the whole meeting[’s]” devolution. Chairs on the ground were immediately picked up by myriad miners and launched like missiles, sailing through the air in all directions. After punching Belik, Irvine got “hit on the head with three chairs” thrown from different parts of the room.¹⁶ According to Robert Hill, another miner in attendance, Pete Popinuk was “the first man who picked a chair up” with the intention to throw it at someone.¹⁷ On seeing the “squabble” between the two miners, Hill went “over to protect one of the men.” Seeing Hill, Popinuk threw a chair at the miner, “hitting [him] over the head.” As soon as the first “chair was lifted a bunch of the miners got up on their feet” and a large brawl ensued.

RCMP officers had been stationed outside the miners’ hall, in their words “watching to see that there would be no breaches of the peace.” Authorities suspected the meeting might turn disruptive when they saw some people were refused entry. Sergeant James A. Simpson noticed “the crowd started leaving the hall in a rush,” so the officer and a few others went in to find out what happened. Simpson found miner “Jack Nakoff ... with a large plank in his hand,” swinging

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Testimony of Robert Hill in “His Majesty the King -and- Pete Popinuk: Preliminary Hearing,” 28 May 1932, File No. 1485 (hereafter *King v. Popinuk*), FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

it haphazardly over the heads of miners in the hall.¹⁸ Nakoff had evidently ripped the twelve foot plank from the hall's stage.¹⁹ While the board was only a "half-inch ... finishing board," officers were especially concerned about the end of the board that had "nails sticking out."²⁰ Cst. Simpson dismissed the idea that Nakoff "endeavoured to strike [anyone] with the nails" refusing to believe "for a moment that that man picked that thing up, knowing that the nails were in it, purposely to do damage."²¹ The wielded instrument, nevertheless, posed a danger. Jonathan Houghton, Coleman's Chief of Police, then saw Nakoff "strike Jimmie Anderson."²² Houghton remembered thinking that if he "comes down with that board on the top of Anderson's head there ... [was] going to be some serious damage done."²³ When the plank struck Anderson, the miner spun around and tackled Nakoff and "they both went down on the floor." Anderson, who voted in favour of non-confidence, had been trying to help miner Bert Garrett free himself from "a couple of guys." One had been "holding him around the waist" while the other "one [was] hitting him with the chair." In commenting on Nakoff hitting him with the plank, Anderson sarcastically remarked Nakoff certainly "was not try[ing] to hit the floor with it."²⁴

Coleman miners quickly exited the hall by any means. Doors were used, but windows were hastily "smashed" open as miners withdrew through them and onto the street. After the carnage, the hall was in shambles with "Twenty-eight to thirty chairs" destroyed and most

¹⁸ Testimony of James A. Simpson in "His Majesty the King -and- Jack Nakoff: Preliminary Hearing," 28 May 1932, File No. 1484 (hereafter *King v. Nakoff*), FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Testimony of Jonathan Houghton, *King v. Nakoff*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Testimony of James Anderson, *King v. Nakoff*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

windows smashed to bits.²⁵ The melee represented a dramatic shift in the dispute's turn of events. A majority group of Coleman miners had both officially and physically ousted the MWUC from control of the local union, much to the chagrin of the national union's leaders and supporters. Resistance to Gillespie followed, but the blow to the MWUC in Coleman had done irreparable harm to the national union. Coleman's vote to replace the MWUC with a local union had been close, but a new majority had been formed.

Coleman's MWUC advocates called in support from neighbouring towns to show their disapproval at what had transpired. "305 men and 55 women" answered the call and "marched in from Blairmore and Bellevue" and protested "Gillespie's Local Union."²⁶ Opposition continued to be a visible presence in the days following the leadership shift. Parades aired "slogans on banners carried by the demonstrators ... [that read] First Against Discrimination — Down with Gillespie's Home Local — Fight Till Victory." Scholar David Wray points out that banners were often used in labour demonstrations "to counteract attempts to subsume them [workers] into a dominant ideology," that is, banners were used to by some workers to protest conditions placed on them from outside their own class.²⁷ But banners could also indicate tensions inside the working class. In an effort to reclaim the authority they had lost, on 25 May 1932 former strike leaders tried rallying support in more of an official way. Conducting a ballot of their own, MWUC asked "if men were in favor [sic] of discrimination." Much to the dismay of poll-takers, participation was not very significant. It became apparent the tide would not be stemmed and strike leaders, begrudgingly, acquiesced to the union reformation and "called off the pickets" at

²⁵ Ted Byfield, *Fury and Futility: The Onset of the Great Depression, 1930-1935 Vol. 6 of Alberta in the 20th Century* (Edmonton: United Western Communications Ltd., 1998), 76.

²⁶ "Meeting this Afternoon," *Coleman Journal*, 19 May 1932.

²⁷ David Wray, "The Place of Imagery in the Transmission of Culture: The Banners of the Durham Coalfield," *International Labor and Working-Class History* No. 76 (Fall 2009): 147.

Coleman's mines and encouraged "picketers ... to apply for work."²⁸ One hurdle remained for MWUC-supporting miners. Since Gillespie's committee had agreed to let the managers decide what workers they wanted for their mines, not all miners made the cut and "about 50 were refused work."²⁹ Gillespie and the new union, as Warren Caragata finds, were quite willing to assist in helping the company choose. As men arrived at the mines reopening, an unidentified Coleman miner indicated for officials who was acceptable and who was not; repeatedly pointing out and indicating "that's a red, that's a red" to those who showed great resistance in the union change.³⁰

In other Crowsnest towns, miner resistance against the MWUC also organized. But unlike in Coleman, where opponents of the MWUC held a precarious but firm majority, dissenters in the town of Bellevue lacked enough following. Witnessing Gillespie push the MWUC out of Coleman, Joseph McLean and other Bellevue miners formed the Bellevue Miners' Association (BMA), hoping for similar results. Their public launch was not as strong and the BMA lay in the shadows for a few months after Coleman's MWUC oust. In July, McLean felt prepared or compelled enough to attempt removing the MWUC and called a meeting at Bellevue's Odd Fellows hall only "for the employees who had joined" their association."³¹ Up until then in the town, strike advocates had effectively extinguished efforts challenging the union, forcing dissenters to the community's periphery. Two weeks before the BMA called their first meeting, those who opposed the "Murphy-Stokaluk faction" had

²⁸ "Provincial Executive of Local Union Signed Agreement—White and Gillespie Given Unanimous Vote of Confidence to Carry on," *Coleman Journal*, 26 May 1932.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Caragata, *Alberta Labour*, 116.

³¹ Testimony of Joseph McLean in "His Majesty the King -and- John Price et al.: Preliminary Hearing," 22 July 1932, File No. 1471 (hereafter *King v. Price*), FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

previously been using a “vacant building, at one time a Presbyterian Mission house” to discuss the local mining situation.³² These “strong Union Laborites” had “no sympathy with the doctrines preached” by the MWUC.³³ But advocates of the national union were well aware of the meetings hostile to their labour organization. On a July morning, the community awoke to discover the building had burnt down to the ground in the night. Though “no definite proof” was found, some believed the event was more than sheer coincidence.³⁴ Those who believed the meeting spot was the victim of “Incendiarism” only needed to look at the building’s charred remnants as a basis for their suspicion. “The evidence of coal oil or some other inflammable agent ... was unmistakable.”³⁵ Likely provoked by the event, McLean called a meeting on the ninth of July “for anyone who wished to come in to hear ... [their] side of the case.” Suspecting that any meeting notices “wouldn’t be allowed to stay on the post” for long, McLean “notified a few men to come” and asked them to spread the news by word of mouth.³⁶ Not only miners of the Bellevue Miners’ Association attended. Some “Blairmore men and two or three from Coleman” also heard about the meeting and made their way to Bellevue. If McLean hoped to keep the meeting somewhat secret, he failed. With the assembly scheduled for 1:30 in the afternoon, a crowd of opposition formed outside the hall earlier, the sidewalk “cluttered with people” and protestors spilling out onto the street.³⁷ When McLean arrived at the hall just before

³² General Manager of West Canadian Collieries Limited to The Hon. J.E. Brownlee, letter (copy), 12 July 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Testimony of Joseph McLean, *King v. Price*), FMSCCF, Roll 10.

³⁷ Ibid.

the meeting started, “over one hundred” stood in his way, jeering at him. By the time the meeting concluded, “over double” the earlier number faced miners exiting the hall.³⁸

Somewhat mirroring Gillespie’s indirect strategy, McLean argued that the meeting was not necessarily directed against the MWUC. Rather, it was only to discuss how “To go back to work on the old scale wages.”³⁹ Despite indicating that he was not necessarily against the MWUC, the union’s tactics had alarmed McLean. He had been a miner since he was “ten or eleven years of age” and had “never went on picket” until the MWUC struck earlier that year. He was surprised when picket line antics carried over into the community, shocked that “repeatedly, hourly, daily” he heard miners being called scabs and other vulgar terms simply because they did not wholly agree with the union.⁴⁰ In spite of obvious undertones directed toward undermining the union, McLean believed miners had a right to discuss their own employment circumstances openly and without intimidation. McLean was “proud of the fact that ... [he] had never been a scab.”⁴¹ Nevertheless those outside the hall called the miner and the others attending the meeting precisely that. During the two and a half hour meeting, the protestors outside made a “continual howl,” especially when a miner arrived late and had to make his way through the crowd to the hall’s doors. Charlie Harrison, walking through the crowd, got more than an earful from some outside. The miner was approached by a protestor who “reached over ... and ... grabbed ... [Harrison] by the throat.” But before the act got out of hand, an officer surveying the scene prevented the crowd member from doing any more to Harrison.⁴²

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Testimony of Harry Jepson, *King v. Price*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

Similar to the part played in the May pickets, women in the crowd outside of the hall reminded miners that actions outside union consent were not without consequence. Watching the event unfold, Noble McDonald, manager of the Bellevue mines, saw one of the miners who tried to get through “having quite an argument with a lady” as he passed into the hall. Besides seeing shouting women, miner Harry Jepson remembered that “some girls or women [were] doing a little spitting” as miners left.⁴³ The action irritated Jepson because, he argued, “usually when ... [people] spit they spit on the ground, not on somebody.”⁴⁴ Just as in the picket, when miners crossing had few ethically or morally approved public recourse against women, miners could do little as women spat on them. Historian Sue Bruley finds that public shaming of presumed scabs appeared a prominent feature in some labour disputes.⁴⁵ The crowd of women at the hall infuriated some like McLean. When asked whether his wife was there that afternoon, his response indicated his frustration. The presence of women outside the hall challenged his assumptions about proper conduct for women in public; he answered, “No, she was at home where all women ought to be.”⁴⁶

Besides being spat on by women, Jepson complained that “someone tried to kick ... [him] right in the behind” as he made his way out of the meeting.⁴⁷ While a somewhat minor episode, Jepson’s experience fared far better than others who had altercations because they decided to attend the BMA meeting. Violence against strike dissenters proved a major issue for

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ see Sue Bruley, “Women,” in *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout: The Struggle for Dignity*, ed. John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, and Keith Gildart (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), 238.

⁴⁶ Testimony of Joseph McLean, *King v. Price*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

⁴⁷ Testimony of Harry Jepson, *King v. Price*, FMSCCF, Roll 10, PAA.

Henry Desert and his three stepsons Victor, Emile, and Henry Blas who attended the assembly in Bellevue. The four were miners who worked in the Blairmore mines but they responded to the “invitation ... for all the former employees of the West Canadian Collieries Limited” issued by McLean.⁴⁸ They were driven down in separate cars and when the meeting ended at 3:30 p.m. they thought they were going to be driven back but one of the drivers was not yet ready to leave Bellevue. Instead of waiting, they decided to walk home instead. The four started down the main highway towards Blairmore when they noticed several people in the back of a truck passing by. One of the brothers, Victor, heard shouts and jeers directed toward them from the passing vehicle. Blas heard miner Emile Roman, one of the people in the truck, boo and shout “Dirty scab, son of a bitch” at the four as they continued walking down the side of the road. The four ignored the pack and continued walking “until ... [they] got to the Bellevue C.P.R. Crossing.” Likely hoping to avoid another incident, they instead decided to “walk on the [rail]track to go home.” But while walking the railway tracks, the four encountered “Roman ... waiting ... with five girls” ahead of them. Roman intimidatingly shouted to the stepfather and his sons, “Come on and we’ll fix you up.”⁴⁹ The family continued walking towards the group and when they got closer Roman “called ... [them] a dirty son of a bitch, and scab, and a cock-sucker.” Victor took exception to the language Roman used “In the presence of ladies,” and told Roman that “he should be ashamed talking like that.”⁵⁰ Roman continued insulting them and urged his allies to get physical with the family, “telling the girls to throw rocks” at the four.⁵¹ If foul language jarred Victor’s sensibilities, when the women began “picking ... [rocks] off from the track” and

⁴⁸ Testimony of Victor Blas in “His Majesty the King -and- Emil Roman, et al.: Preliminary Hearing,” 21 July 1932, File No. 1481 (hereafter *King v. Roman et al.*), FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

throwing them at four, their behaviour likely exasperated him even more. Victor remembered seeing the young women “hit ... [his] brothers and stepfather ... in the legs and back” with stones. Roman approvingly egged the women on, shouting “Kill them, girls; kill them.”⁵² Some stones thrown were small, but others, as Henry Blas recalled, were “as big as cup[s].”⁵³ Between volleys, Roman closed in on the family and “kept on shoving ... [them] With his shoulder” and threatened the Blas’ stepfather, saying “he would kill him with the stick” he was holding.⁵⁴

Perceived betrayal against the union provoked feelings of exasperation and indignation for several strike supporters. With their presence in the town, law authorities had managed to minimize most of the episodes that held potential to turn serious if left unchecked. But police could not be everywhere, and the areas between the Crowsnest towns proved to be a space uncontrolled by authorities. The tracks that Desert and his step-sons were on soon led to a bridge that crossed over a small creek. When the family stepped onto it, “a crowd of men” emerged “from the brushes from all directions and ... crowded in behind” the three brothers and Desert.⁵⁵ Earlier witnessing the family attending the BMA meeting, the crowd accused the four of “scabbing.” One member “threw a rock” at the small group before the remainder of the crowd converged and attacked the father and his sons. Since the skirmish took place on the bridge, the location made it initially difficult for Desert and the Blas’ to escape. Roman grabbed Desert by the waist while miner Pete Platka jumped onto Desert’s back, “poking and punching him in the head.” Desert, for a time, managed to stay on his feet despite Roman at his waist and Platka on his back. But, Victor saw two others “make for ... [his] stepfather” and thought it best to

⁵² Testimony of Henry Blas, *King v. Roman et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Testimony of Victor Blas, *King v. Roman et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

intervene. The stepson stopped one strike supporter by hitting them “in the face ... With a stick.”⁵⁶ At the same moment, Henry Blas also went to help his stepfather but had a rock “about four inches wide going to a point” thrown at his head for his efforts.⁵⁷ With nefarious intentions, one miner only referred to as “Mr. Edl, from Frank” moved toward Victor.⁵⁸ Instead of punching Victor, Edl appeared to be using the weight of his body to move Victor around, and the Blas suspected the miner was “trying to force ... [him] into the river from the bridge.” There was little threat of being drowned since the creek’s depth was only “about two feet, one and a half in places.” But the creek bed was “all rocks and boulders.”⁵⁹ Had Edl succeeded in pushing Blas off the bridge, the “danger of getting killed by falling on ... [the] head or breaking a limb” posed potentially serious consequences for Victor.⁶⁰ Though Edl brought Victor “within a foot from the edge,” the Blas brother said he regained his composure, stopping the miner from flinging him off the bridge. Attackers also swarmed Emile Blas, overpowering and knocking him onto the bridge, “Kicking him while he was on the ground.” Victor said he tried to help Emile, but Roman stopped the upright brother. “A much taller man,” Roman had grabbed Victor “by the throat” and put him in “a headlock,” punching and poking him in the face. Seeing the family was obviously outnumbered, Henry’s “idea was to get to a phone” and he dashed for the closest town, Frank. All the while a group of men took chase, throwing rocks at him during his run. The lone Blas encountered many houses but the residents, wanting to avoid involvement, “ordered [him] off the[ir] places.” At one home, Blas almost managed to get help when a lady in the house “half-welcomed” him inside. But a man chasing Blas arrived at her door and “spoke Slavish” to the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Henry Blas, *King v. Roman et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁵⁸ Testimony of Victor Blas *King v. Roman et al.*, FMSCCF, Roll 9, PAA.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

older woman. Blas did not know what had been said to her but the once welcoming woman's attitude quickly changed as "she got the broom [out] and told ... [him] to get out." Henry's delay at her home meant "the rest of them had gained ground," but nevertheless Blas was able to make it to Frank's hotel and immediately phoned the police.

By mid-August, as the dispute was about to enter its sixth month, West Canadian's general manager added to worker grievance. Though negotiations had halted, the mine in Bellevue had begun producing coal, much to the dismay of strikers. Why Vissac decided to recommence mining operations could have been due to several factors. Since the beginning of May, when West Canadian had unsuccessfully attempted Bellevue mine's reopening, the colliery had started financially assisting workers who crossed the picket. Miners opting to work had expected the mines to stay open, but as the mine subsequently closed again, these workers were left without a support network. Striking miners were assisted by the MWUC. Vissac reported that the miners who crossed the pickets had "been expelled from the red union," and with that lost striker aid. Vissac felt a sense of duty to "protect all the men who went to work."⁶¹ A "total of 57 men" were left without any relief and the colliery official had decided to supply daily relief payments to the miners.⁶² Thirty-four of the men were "without children" and each were allotted "75¢ per day."⁶³ To the remaining twenty-three "men with family," the colliery provided "\$1.00 per day" to each miner regardless their number of dependants.⁶⁴ Vissac initially deemed that the assistance did "not make a big expense," especially considering the aid's persuasive effects.⁶⁵

⁶¹ LSF 2578, report, 25 May 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Colliery relief, the manager believed, helped “to get more men on ... [the] side of the company.”⁶⁶ After one hundred days of relief payments—just under \$5,000.00 handed over to employees—it is possible West Canadian was looking to offset relief costs by August. Perhaps the official overestimated the relief’s symbolic effects.

West Canadian’s agreement with the CPR might have also factored into the decision to produce coal. When Vissac corresponded with the railway’s fuel agent, neither might have expected the labour dispute to last as long as it had. Humphreys may very well have decided to enact the caveat he gave to Vissac, that their arrangement would not last forever. Finally, changing of the seasons may have been another influence for West Canadian’s choice to start producing coal. Spring and summer inside Alberta’s coal industry were notoriously slow periods. Warm weather meant consumers used less coal. In autumn, cooler temperatures drove consumer demand higher, as customers looked to heat their houses and businesses. Autumn also brought increased freight traffic as grains harvested needed to be shipped.⁶⁷

When the dispute started, West Canadian Collieries had agreed to prohibit the production of coal while the strike unfolded. In return, the union agreed to allow West Canadian workers inside company mines for maintenance work. Continually maintaining mines was critical since neglect posed dangerous consequences. Several hazards developed with a mine’s disuse. Maintenance needed to watch timbers used for firming up shafts and rooms, and made sure pillars were not broken under strain of the roof or degraded by seeping water. Similarly, large deposits of water needed to be removed to avoid water damage to the mine’s integrity. Ventilation was also kept at operating levels, ensuring prevention of large buildups of methane

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ David Bercuson, *Alberta’s Coal Industry, 1919* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 1978), x.

gas.⁶⁸ The danger of gas was usually minimized by diluting it with fresh air and then pumping the diluted mixture out of the mine with even more air forced into the shafts.⁶⁹ Gas formation was sometimes unavoidable. Miners called one type ‘firedamp,’ a gas continually emitted from coal as the solid mass was unearthed.⁷⁰ Maintaining underground safety conditions was in the best interest of everyone and the mine’s firebosses were tasked with the responsibility.⁷¹ Strikers allowed firebosses onto company property with little aggravation from their skeleton picket line, which the MWUC had operated since the larger May pickets.

Union officials were blindsided when they discovered Vissac had begun authorizing coal production in small amounts. MWUC lenience in letting firebosses pass through pickets without provocation was at an end. Rallying the strikers at an open-air meeting, Stokaluk emphasized that miners had “adopted too pacifist [a] line during the strike.”⁷² The union leader revealed firebosses were producing “over 1000 tons of coal ... at Bellevue.”⁷³ Some women had responded to the threat earlier. In July, Angela Romin had begun placing a good deal of thumbtacks on “the company road between their gate and the washhouse,” likely hoping the tires of company trucks would blow out.⁷⁴ Stokaluk’s address marshalled great support according to Sgt. Jones who watched the event, commenting that the “meeting was an enthusiastic one.” Stokaluk condemned the colliery’s actions and tried to contact Vissac through mail, but the

⁶⁸ Ibid; Andrews, *Killing for Coal*, 140-147.

⁶⁹ Patching, *Western Canada’s Coal*, 51.

⁷⁰ Crowsnest Historical Society, *Crowsnest and Its People*, 245.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report, August 16, 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by J.T. Jones, 18 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

general manager refused to reply.⁷⁵ Silence only frustrated Stokaluk further. The union secretary said strikers “would be fools if we did not take action to stop them” from bringing coal out of the Pass’ mines.⁷⁶ Stokaluk effectively rallied the miners, saying “If Mr Vissac is not yet convinced that you are a good bunch of fighters then in a short while he will be.”⁷⁷ Continuing his tirade, Stokaluk declared they were “not afraid of Vissac the Police or anything.”⁷⁸ Despite protests and veiled threats from the union, Vissac refused to stop bringing coal from the mines’ depths. Stokaluk decided to appeal to the firebosses, writing letters to each of them asking they stop immediately, or at the very least, meet with the union leader. Silence again met Stokaluk.⁷⁹ The union leader promised retribution, deciding to target them “before they go[t] to work in the morning, and also ... [at] night.”⁸⁰ Twenty picket captains were assigned to picket the firebosses’ homes. The RCMP observed that each picket captain “had at least sixteen men detailed to picket a certain house in town.”⁸¹

The earlier May pickets were rather successful for the MWUC since they effectively stopped Bellevue mine’s reopening. Stokaluk suspected that an even larger picket would also affect the dynamics of the strike in the union’s favour. The MWUC leader began boasting at union meetings that he was going to bring in people from outside the Crowsnest Pass to picket

⁷⁵ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by J.T. Jones, 11 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁷⁶ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by J.T. Jones, 16 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by J.T. Jones, 9 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁸⁰ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report, 12 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁸¹ Ibid.

alongside striking miners in order to create an event so large, so disruptive, that colliery officials would be forced to rethink their decision to continue producing coal.

Threats to bring in outsiders greatly alarmed authorities. Police likely suspected a non-resident presence would affect the dynamics of maintaining order in the strike. In contrast to picketers who belonged to the community of the Crowsnest Pass, outside strike advocates held no salient bonds to restrain actions between them and local dissenters. While violence and intimidation had occurred in the Pass, there was likely a general understanding, however minimal, that at the strike's end miners would need to live alongside each other again inside the isolated community. Animosity may have developed, may have pushed the boundaries of relationships to the edge, but the reality of working and living together nevertheless remained. Moreover, if everyone knew one another, it was simple to seek justice—either formally or informally—against each other. On the other hand, outside picketers called into the Crowsnest Pass had no such restraints. They would have been called into the Pass to solely show support for the union's protest. Given the marked difference of opinion inside the Pass as to whether residents supported the strike or not, outside picketers could potentially clash with more vigour and zeal against residents who opposed the dispute. And since outside picketers were strangers, it would be more difficult for RCMP officers to locate and arrest any who might breach law and order. In the past, RCMP Inspector Keith Duncan usually waited for authorization by RCMP officials in Edmonton before directly intervening in the strike. But necessity for action could not wait and Duncan “moved extra men and horses to Blairmore Sunday evening,” one day before the planned event⁸². The police inspector also held a suspicion that the picket would turn violent because of ulterior motives. The RCMP official believed the resolve to amp up picketing directly

⁸² K. Duncan to Officer Commanding 'K' Division, letter, 15 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

related to the union leaders' reputations. The strike had stalled for over six months, with West Canadian insisting that it did not want to deal with MWUC leadership and continued to call for new representatives in work negotiations. The officer surmised that MWUC officials "lost a certain amount of prestige recently."⁸³ "Some sort of clash [would] weld their followers together, and produce the necessary enthusiasm to carry on."⁸⁴ Duncan's assessment was echoed by others. Jones, for instance, also estimated that the upcoming picket was "being made by the Union Officials in the hope ... the disturbances that will arise will be a means of again establishing their 'solidarity' on its former footing."⁸⁵

The increasing police presence did not go unnoticed by the union and that evening "a member of the Strike Committee, W.H. Knight, sought an interview" with Duncan.⁸⁶ The idea of a picket being formed against firebosses proved unpopular with a large number of striking miners. Some, like Knight, believed the action would only deteriorate conditions further. Outsiders held no accountability to the mining community or the strikers and the scenario held potential to go very awry. Knight ultimately predicted that a physical episode would ensue and he was "convinced that in a clash ... the strikers would come off 'second best.'"⁸⁷ While chatting, the miner confided to Duncan that he believed a "delegation sent up by the strikers to interview the Premier" of Alberta was their best answer to resolve the labour dispute.⁸⁸ At this

⁸³ "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore," report by Butcher, 10 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁸⁴ "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore," report by Butcher, 10 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁸⁵ "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore," report by J.T. Jones, 11 August 1932, accession #1983.214 Folder 7A, Provincial Archives of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

⁸⁶ K. Duncan to Officer Commanding 'K' Division, letter, 15 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

earlier meeting with Premier Brownlee, strike delegates “claimed to have been told by him that he would look into the matter of discrimination” and he was willing to visit the Pass to try and unofficially arbitrate the situation between the miners and the colliery.⁸⁹ Duncan admitted to Knight he was “unaware of any such intnetion [sic] on the part of the Government.” The officer then spoke bluntly, “if such was the case, by continuing picketting [sic], and the demonstrations ... planned, for Monday morning, that they would be doing the most foolish thing possible.” Duncan suspected that “if the Government had any intention of intervention, behaviour of this nature would immediately prevent it.”

While Duncan only spoke his opinion on the matter to the miner, Knight understood the inspector’s words in a different context. He relayed Duncan’s impression as fact to other strike leaders. The next morning, as the picket began to form with “approximately 500 pickets out at Bellevue,” both the “President and Secretary of the M. W. U. C., F. Leary and J. Stokaluk,” came to see Duncan. The union representatives immediately asked Duncan whether what Knight had told them was true. “If they continued the picket, all chance of the settlement of the strike was at an end.”⁹⁰ Surprised at the way Knight took their conversation, Duncan explained to the two that what he had said to Knight was only “an expressed opinion.” Alarmed at the potential consequence to the planned picket, strike leaders conversed between themselves and again approached Duncan. Leary and Stokaluk “expressed their willingness to withdraw the picket” so long as the RCMP would honour a request. The two asked Duncan to both “meet them later, in the day, and hear their views” in order to send a message to the provincial government about the strike and their concerns. Duncan, concerned with dismantling a potentially violent picket, agreed “to see that their interpretation of the present difficulties was placed before the proper

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

authorities ... for whatever consideration they cared to give them.” The inspector “made it quite plain” that he was “not speaking with any authority from any Government Department” and that he could only give those in government their message. He could not be expected by the striking union to affect “whatever consideration they [the government] cared to give them.” If provincial authorities chose to ignore the union, that was their prerogative. Duncan could only promise to submit their concerns. Understanding Duncan’s role and influence, union leaders agreed and “The picket was consequently withdrawn.”

As agreed, Duncan later “met four members of the Union,” but was cautious of their meeting. Based on his experience with Knight, the RCMP inspector felt that “these people are so prone to misinterpret and misquote,” that he “took the precaution of ... having the conversation taken down in shorthand.” Instead of trying to relay in his own words what the union had said at the meeting, Duncan would send the transcript to the government. Stokaluk took little time in explaining the crux of the strike: “it is the question of discriminating fifty men, twenty-five from Blairmore and twenty-five from Bellevue. That is the only issue at this time. If we could get this discrimination list abolished the strike would be over tomorrow.” Stokaluk explained that the “company picked out the names” of miners who had shown “the courage to take up their grievances” and punished them for it. Union leaders understood West Canadian could not “employ all the men” given the economic conditions they all faced. Yet, the colliery’s proposed plan of action to settle the matter of who to hire and who to layoff worried the MWUC. Stokaluk stated that the MWUC would “not refuse to discuss a question of lay off,” but they firmly believed in the practice of seniority. Showing a willingness to negotiate layoff terms, the union was also willing to begrudgingly cede to the “matter of inefficiency” as a determinant in employment at West Canadian’s mines. This meant that if the colliery found that a miner did not

produce coal tonnage of comparable amounts to other workers, the company would have the right to dismiss that miner. The labour organizers feared this type of layoff. The union had witnessed its implementation with underhanded intentions in the past. The union took care to mention that “Men have worked for the company for years and were efficient” yet they were “laid off for union activities” under the guise of inefficiency in the mines.⁹¹ The decision to accept inefficiency as a cause for layoff showed a willingness to trust the colliery but only if a clause like that in a contract was used properly.⁹² Colliery officials could easily put miners who they saw as troublesome into mine rooms that had smaller seams or more obstacles at getting the coal to the surface. A damaged rail track section, or an area inside the mine that needed more maintenance in general, slowed miner efficiency. John Dugdale, another union representative at the meeting, saw the mine as a place where work assignments needed to be rotated between miners. Having miners work in the same assigned area each shift held potential to result in large differences in individual miner output. So Dugdale added that a “fair share of work for everyone” was another union demand.

In exchange for the inspector bringing the union’s message to the provincial government, Duncan asked for “no pickets” until the report was delivered to the Premier.⁹³ Union representatives expected an immediate turn-around from Brownlee. Earlier in the strike, the premier indicated to “the committee he would be ... [there] in twenty-four hours if he could settle the strike.”⁹⁴ MWUC leaders knew the Premier was staying in Pincher Creek on business, not far from the Crowsnest. The union wanted to refrain from picketing only for the time they

⁹¹ Meeting Between K. Duncan and Mine Worker Union of Canada Representatives, meeting transcript, 15 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

knew it took for a person to travel from Pincher Creek. To this Duncan objected, insisting the union “give him ample time” since the Premier was “a busy man and ...may have other things to attend to” in Pincher Creek and surrounding areas.⁹⁵ Union leaders hesitated on prolonging any suspension of picketing for too long, admitting to the inspector that striking miners “get restless” when they had nothing to do.⁹⁶ Duncan understood and proposed that instead of stopping pickets until Brownlee arrived the MWUC “declare a state of neutrality for at least a week.”⁹⁷

Immediately a meeting attendee objected, insisting a week was far too prolonged a period. Duncan decided to offer an alternative, one to suit both the union and authorities. The meeting between police and union came about because of Stokaluk’s threat to bring outside forces into the Pass to picket. It was this situation that was the utmost concern of the RCMP inspector. RCMP had been watching the pickets after the larger ones in May with some regularity. The latter pickets had never really been as confrontational since there was an understanding between colliery and union to permit firebosses on the premises and since there were no miners trying to cross the line. Duncan suggested the practice of picketing could continue while they waited for Brownlee to arrive, so long as participants were from the Pass. If “law and order” was kept, Duncan saw no objections to the act of picketing.⁹⁸ Satisfied, the union agreed to Duncan’s proposition.

After Duncan’s report reached the Premier’s office, Brownlee issued a response to the RCMP. Answering only days after the meeting between Duncan and the union, the Premier informed the inspector that he had “arranged to go to Blairmore on Friday August 19.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Duncan to Jones, letter, 17 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

Brownlee did not “wish to meet a large delegation,” or have a public meeting with all the strikers and instead preferred “to discuss the matter quietly” with only pertinent union executives. The meeting between union representatives and the Premier went well. The union brought concerns about the dispute to Brownlee, after which the Premier agreed to meet with Vissac in private to present the union’s petition. When Brownlee returned to discuss with the union the conversation he had with Vissac, union leaders seemed to have their worries over the issue of blacklisting alleviated. The Premier relayed that West Canadian’s general manager accepted the proposition “that there would be no discrimination.”¹⁰⁰ Satisfied that he had worked out the main issue in the labour dispute, Brownlee left the Pass thinking he had effected change. Optimistic that the dispute was reaching its end, an MWUC-committee contacted Vissac but negotiations stalled yet again. The company official denied making a statement to Brownlee about removing the blacklist.¹⁰¹

Incensed by the apparent double-cross by Vissac, union leaders immediately moved to rally the miners. They held a mass-meeting on Friday August 26 where speakers like Frank Leary boasted that “miners were not as anxious to settle the strike as the Operators believed.” Their earlier plan to picket and “prevent the fire bosses from producing coal for the market” reared again. Stokaluk tried inciting strikers, saying “sooner or later the miners would have to fight and they would not be liable for their actions as the blame would not be theirs.”¹⁰² Stokaluk told striking miners at the meeting that he would send a wire to Brownlee regarding the impasse in negotiations. If he did not receive word from the Premier in one day, the strike leader would

¹⁰⁰ “Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Bird, 28 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

bring out a “militant picket at Bellevue on Tuesday morning, with firebosses in their crosshairs.”¹⁰³ By the events that followed, it appeared Brownlee did not respond to Stokaluk.

In the same way authorities had a sense of unease about the earlier mass picket threat a few weeks earlier, police concern grew about what exactly a ‘militant’ picket’ encompassed. Union speeches became more threatening, but RCMP authorities were unsure of what to make of the addresses. It was true negotiations were botched. MWUC leaders estimated that provincial government intervention was the best strategy to resolve the strike, but apparently they overestimated its effectiveness. Vissac continued his persistence in stonewalling MWUC representatives, leaving some miners with a sense of frustration with their union. Instead of unwaveringly treating the threat of a militant picket at its face-value, Insp. Duncan figured that authorities needed to “possibly consider” union leadership had “not been able to work up sufficient enthusiasm amongst their forces to take the steps they desire against the mine officials.” Rather than attribute the context of the speech as paralleling the general atmosphere of striking miners, the officers suspected that it was a last ditch effort by MWUC leaders to encourage the maintenance of solidarity in the face of growing striker disappointment. Leaders asked a lot from striking miners. Picketing fellow miners was one thing. Picketing firebosses was another. Bluntly, Duncan believed that as “stupid as most of these people are, they have sufficient acumen to realize that when the strike is eventually settled, conditions ... [could] be made very unpleasant for them by the officials, and therefore they are, I think, somewhat reluctant to actively interfere with them.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones, 28 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹⁰⁴ “Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Bird: Attached Comment by Duncan to ‘K’ Division, 30 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

Worker enthusiasm had noticeably waned, according to RCMP officers, in the summer months. Throughout the strike, MWUC managed to sustain strikers and their families during the dispute through the Workers International Relief (WIR) which supplied food rations to miners. The WIR reached out to groups like farmers who sympathized with the miners' cause, who in turn provided supplies as the dispute continued. RCMP had been using informants to find out some of the union's particular strike circumstances. It was a strategy authorities often employed during industrial disputes.¹⁰⁵ By mid-July, Cst. Bailey discovered from one informant that "the radical element of the strikers ... [had] run short of grocery relief and funds."¹⁰⁶ MWUC received some assistance from locales as far away as eastern Canada and Newfoundland, but it was marginal and the union mainly relied on closer areas for support.¹⁰⁷ The informant went on to say that local farmers had "no more to give or consider[ed] that they have already done their share" for the union.¹⁰⁸ The MWUC also reached out to other Alberta coal communities for support, but a truck sent to Lethbridge for foodstuffs in the same week returned empty.¹⁰⁹ In a July meeting, a member of the strikers' relief committee despondently revealed "they could not hold out for more than a month under present conditions."¹¹⁰ By the beginning of August, Sgt. Jones discovered the situation regarding food rations remained of paramount concern. A report the officer received divulged that "among the rank and file of the strikers there ... [was] some

¹⁰⁵ Steve Hewitt, *Riding to the Rescue: The Transformation of the RCMP in Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1914-1939* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006), 109.

¹⁰⁶ "Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore," report by Bailey, 12 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹⁰⁷ Crowsnest Historical Society, *Crowsnest and Its People*, 252.

¹⁰⁸ "Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore," report by Bailey, 12 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

discontent over the small supplies of relief ... available.¹¹¹ Observing union “relief ... [was] not coming up to expectations,” Jones noted that the strikers had begun “manifesting a lack of enthusiasm in the strike”¹¹² Another friction point also cropped up between rank-and-file miners and the leaders of the union regarding other supplies. Several strikers started complaining union leaders were not sharing in the strike’s burden regarding some stock: “although their leaders ... [had] plenty of tobacco, none ... [was] issued to ... miners who were sacrificing the most during the dispute.”¹¹³

Despite suspicions that the union leader’s threat for a ‘militant’ picket against the colliery was just talk, the Mounted police nevertheless tried finding out more MWUC’s intentions. The task proved difficult. Union leaders had tasked two men with authority counter-surveillance, “watch[ing] where the Police [went] ... and to whom they talk[ed]” with.¹¹⁴ Police became quickly aware. Sgt. Jones noted that “There ... [was] a man at Blairmore detailed daily to watch S/Const Connor’s movement.”¹¹⁵ The union also tasked a miner to follow the sergeant. In Bellevue, Jones had tried meeting up with his informant but “as soon as ... [he] entered the town three men left their places, and dodging in between buildings kept track of where ... [the officer] went.”¹¹⁶ The tactic proved effective at limiting union information filtering to the police. Jones

¹¹¹ “Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones, 5 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹¹² “Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones, 7 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹¹³ “Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones, 28 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹¹⁴ Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones, 28 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

¹¹⁵ Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones, 31 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

was “unable to get in touch” with his informant.¹¹⁷ Jones, as well as other officers in the Pass, complained that they found it “increasingly difficult to get information at both Bellevue and Blairmore” about the union’s position. The “receipt of information ... [was] often delayed” in order to “protect the source of it.” For Insp. Duncan, it was the MWUC’s intention to catch the police “unaware” of the upcoming picket.¹¹⁸ The union looked to prevent authorities from bringing an increased police presence in the Pass to efficiently watch over the ‘militant’ picket. In that respect, Duncan admitted the counter-surveillance technique worked. On one hand, Duncan decided “it would be absurd ... to keep the necessary number of men at Blairmore, awaiting the convenience of the strikers” to picket. “On the other hand, sudden pickets in regard to which we have no notification could not be handled by the [Crowsnest] detachment alone.”¹¹⁹

Fortunately for the RCMP, the strike had begun to suddenly shift to its resolution. Vissac and MWUC representatives of Bellevue and Blairmore finally arrived at an agreement on 5 September 1932, catching many striking miners off guard in the days leading up to its signing. On the first day of September, “J Krkosky Jr and S Bobrosky of the Blairmore local visited Mr Vissac to ascertain if the settlement proposals were still open” to which the colliery official indicated they were.¹²⁰ The two miners informed union officials and union leadership decided to endorse the settlement. Harvey Murphy explained to strikers why the union leadership’s position dramatically shifted direction in September. The labour leader frankly felt it was the best outcome MWUC was ever going to get from West Canadian Collieries. The proposed signing of

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore,” report by Jones: Attached Comment by Duncan to ‘K’ Division, 31 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass Strike) at Bellevue and Blairmore, report by J.T. Jones, 1 September 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

a contract on conditions offered to miners earlier in the dispute angered adamant strike supporters. The idea that the strike could have been settled months earlier likely entered the minds of some of the rank-and-file. With the thought that miners had continued to strike for, essentially, nothing, frustrations at union meetings boiled over. Union members bickered among each other as local miner concerns were mixed. Blairmore's MWUC local president John Price and its secretary J. Dugdale had "quite an argument" about supporting the national union leadership's endorsement of the contract. One local MWUC union leader even ultimately refused to sign it on the fifth. Adding to the unfolding turmoil, Stokaluk started blaming some of the strikers for the MWUC's decision to back Vissac's terms. Had strikers been willing to picket, he argued, more often and with more force the union's power to negotiate would have substantially increased. Miners at the meeting "were reprovved by ... Stokaluk for not turning out on the picket line," and likely for their conduct when they did.¹²¹ The appearance of discontented picketers added weight to the union's cause. Contentment did not. Miners leisurely "engaging in games of horseshoes in the open space between the road and the Company's fence" while on picket probably did not help a prescribed appearance of discontent.¹²² Picket participation had been a problem for union leaders as early as July when strike leaders threatened to "cut off rations" for lack of contribution.¹²³ Dissenters at the meeting sparred back, accusing Murphy and Stokaluk of "selling out."¹²⁴ Nevertheless, the union leadership's decision had been made. They were satisfied that Vissac's promise to drop the issue of blacklisting would be honoured. The next step

¹²¹ "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass Strike) at Bellevue and Blairmore, report by J.T. Jones, 26 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹²² re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass Strike) at Bellevue and Blairmore, report by J.T. Jones, 24 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹²³ "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass) Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore," report by J.T. Jones, 12 July 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7A, PAA.

¹²⁴ "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada (Crows Nest Pass Strike) at Bellevue and Blairmore, report by J.T. Jones, 2 September 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

was to put it to a vote and, begrudgingly, enough Blairmore and Bellevue strikers ceded to the conditions of the settlement.

The strike was over. Through one-hundred and ninety-five days, many residents attempted negotiating a definition of working class coal mining life in the Crowsnest by assessing arguments and actions of others. The events of the strike indicated a unanimous definition went undiscovered. As in many strikes of the 1920s and 1930s, the implementing of crude arguments casting a section of workers as communists or ‘reds’ abounded.¹²⁵ But oppositional arguments against the MWUC also went beyond simply red-baiting, and assessed the impact the national union’s decision to strike had on the ambience in the towns of Bellevue, Blairmore, and Coleman.

When the RCMP stepped in to avoid the repercussions of a major picket, they challenged a simplistic assumption frequently assigned to authority figures in disputes. They responded without regard for the colliery, upsetting the label as an ‘arm of the company’ so often employed. One prominent West Canadian official was visibly upset at the police’s intervention. After finding out about the deal struck between authorities and union leaders, Vissac stormed into the detachment’s office in Blairmore with a newspaper and an article that indicated Mounted police had intervened in the picket, saying “I want to know if it is true, and if it is not that it be contradicted.”¹²⁶ When Jones failed to reply to Vissac, the official demanded the sergeant “report his protest to ... [his] superiors” and then swiftly left the detachment. When Duncan heard of the

¹²⁵ Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1989), 71.

¹²⁶ J.T. Jones Reg No. 5304 to Officer Commanding Lethbridge, letter, 16 August 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 4A, PAA.

issue, the inspector only commented “I fail to see any necessity for Mr. Vissac’s attitude.”¹²⁷ Their intervention was both non-confrontational and conciliatory toward the MWUC. With Duncan’s willingness to send union addresses to the provincial government, authorities shifted their context in the strike. National union organizers could no longer attribute RCMP presence in the Crowsnest as entirely opposite to that of MWUC efforts. Neither could they blame the government of Alberta for lack of involvement. The premier had followed through on their assurance to try and aid in the dispute’s resolution. Issues only remained with West Canadian Collieries and Vissac. It did not help the union’s cause that actions by MWUC leadership and some ardent strike supporters did little but entrench Vissac’s repulsion to negotiate. When MWUC pit committee seemingly lied to the official’s face in February, Vissac had few available choices that both maintained company reputation and order. Moreover, antics directed against Vissac only strengthened his resolve. Vissac disclosed in mid-June that “500 men, women, and children paraded ... particularly in front of my house.”¹²⁸ The official had to come to terms with his position: “I cannot be a popular man with them, as I cannot be their friend.” Union malevolence launched at Vissac pushed him to extreme determination as the general manager underwent “abuses ... never experienced before.”¹²⁹ In composing a report that would be read by other company officials, Vissac wrote that “For the first time in the history of our company I want to get rid of the agitators.”¹³⁰ MWUC leadership was finally forced into accepting conditions offered by Vissac, despite some protest in the rank-and-file.

The strike ended in two different ways for miners inside the Crowsnest Pass. On one hand, Coleman’s miners had achieved resolution by the official removal of the Mine Workers

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ LSF 2578,” report, 17 June 1932, LS Folder, WCC, GA.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Union of Canada. With Gillespie at the helm in a newly formed local union, Coleman's miners had made concessions detrimental to the career of some of their miners in exchange for an immediate return to work. On the other hand, The MWUC retained control over the organization of labour for those miners who worked inside West Canadian's Bellevue and Blairmore mines. By all intents and purposes, MWUC officials and their supporters had effectively suppressed challenges towards the union and found themselves signing contracts in September for miners to return to work. Nevertheless, the signing had come at a cost. West Canadian miners were not unanimously satisfied with the top-down union urging to return to work even if union officials had looked at the offer, and who they faced, and they truly believed it was the best they were going to get. The strike was officially over, but its effects, its divisions, its animosities continued to last inside the community.

Conclusion

In the strike's final days, the decision to return to work might have been a first step towards returning to normality, but it had not dulled the edge of some miner-to-miner engagements. Antagonism continued and led to a physical clashes. In one instance, two days before the contract was signed, miner Bert Simons was confronted by a group of workers. Simons who supported the signing found himself "slugged by some heavy instrument, rendered unconscious, and kicked unmercifully about the face and body."¹ Years earlier during the Great War, Simon's left eye had been lost in combat and he subsequently wore an ocular prosthesis to fill in the empty space. On 3 September 1932, "this glass eye was kicked into his head by his assailants [breaking into] several pieces which had afterwards to be extracted in Bellevue Hospital." The strike's conclusion had deepened a rift between miners that no pen could sign away.

Attempts at a reconciliation between WCC and a group of workers were made after the labour dispute ended. Workers had asked Vissac to "withdraw ... prosecutions ... entered at the instigation of the company."² He said he would remove "its interest in furthering ... prosecutions" including the "case of Harvey Murphy."³ The prosecutions against Stellamahovich, Lucas, Fantin, Sefcik, Polski, and Bazille were stayed; however efforts to prosecute Murphy continued, and Vissac seemed satisfied that the company had "seen that Murphy had been sentenced to three months hard labor," believing it would "serve as an example

¹ Samuel Rowe President of the Blairmore Miners' Association & P.M. Lafferty President of the Bellevue Miners' Association to J.E. Brownlee Premier of Alberta, letter, 30 September 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 4A, PAA.

² "re: Mine Workers Union of Canada Strike at Bellevue and Blairmore, report by Jones, n.d., Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

³ Ibid.

to extremists.”⁴ The issue of blacklisting remained controversial. Miner Walter Chuchla recalled that many miners did not get a job back and “They were discriminated.”⁵ Yet, when Sgt. Jones asked of Vissac the situation with the miners, the official indicated that “Among the number who have not been given employment, are men who were not in any way active in their support of the strike, but owing to the policy of the W C Collieries in placing them by seniority they find themselves out of a job.”⁶ By the middle of September, “95 men at Bellevue ... and 80 at Blairmore” had not yet been taken on.⁷ Market forces, personality differences, and a seniority policy all combined to make Vissac believe that a new “list would contain between 150 and 175 names” who West Canadian Collieries could not ever hire back.⁸

Locally, The MWUC strike also entirely shifted the scope of local politics for years to come. Residents who ardently supported the strike refused to back away from the idea that change was possible. Not long after the dispute, Blairmore residents made steps toward what they believed could improve their overall quality of lives. They used a local election to affect change and voted in an unorthodox mayor and town council. It was clear that the town’s new officials supported the plight of their working class and were undeterred to symbolically show it. They would come to rename the town’s main street to Tim Buck Boulevard, after the popular

⁴ “Situation Ouvriere,” report, 8 November 1932, LF Folder, WCC, GA.

⁵ Walter Chuchla, interviewed by Larry A. Ewashen, 16 February 1983, transcript, M-6833, Larry Ewashen Oral History Project Collection, GA.

⁶ “re: Mine Workers Union of Canada Crows Nest Pass,” report by J.T. Jones, 14 September 1932, Attorney-General, Folder 7B, PAA.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

general secretary of the Canadian Communist Party of Canada. The new name of their town's park, Karl Marx Park, also drove this point home.⁹

But the strike was more than a local matter. Historian Warren Caragata notes that 76% of strikes called in Alberta during the Great Depression involved mining.¹⁰ One hundred and ninety five days long, the 1932 Crowsnest Pass strike is a key labour dispute in Albertan and Canadian labour history. The dispute was a product of the general conditions in the country in the early-1930s. Poor economic circumstances prompted working class radicalism in many people as disappointment with the economy grew. But at such an early moment in the Great Depression, radicalism met conservatism and national unions clashed with calls for local ones.

The Crowsnest Strike was also important because in it there is evidence of a specific type of protest that would become increasingly applied in the early-1930s. Inside the Pass' strike, the MWUC's threat to bring other workers into the dispute to support the miners provoked a swift response by the RCMP and Brownlee, a response ultimately linked to the strike's resolution. In the end, while this strategy of a solidarity strike never happened inside the Crowsnest, the results it brought looked promising. Even with just a threat to bring others in to protest, the dispute ended. It is likely more than a coincidence that only a few months later in 1932 the December Hunger March of 1932 in Edmonton occurred with a type of protest centered on bringing thousands of unemployed farmers, farm labourers, and other workers across Alberta into downtown Edmonton to try and convince Premier Brownlee to affect change.¹¹ Moreover, this strategy of class protest would be applied a few years later on a national level, the On-To-Ottawa

⁹ For more information on Blairmore after the 1932 Crowsnest Pass strike see Kyle Franz's MA thesis "Painting the Town Red: The 'Communist' Administration at Blairmore, Alberta, 1933-1936" (master's thesis, University of Lethbridge, 2007).

¹⁰ Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979), 110.

¹¹ Byfield, *Fury and Futility*, 86-99.

trek of 1935 exemplifying the approach.¹² In this way, the Crowsnest Strike is a key strike in Canadian history as it is linked to the development of a specific type of protest that the working class implemented in hopes to insulate their lives against the detrimental effects brought by the Great Depression.

An adequate breakdown of working class participation in the Crowsnest Pass strike requires class analysis. The relationship Crowsnest miners and their union had with company officials remains a paramount feature of the industrial dispute. But an emphasis of this framework leads to the obscuring of several other features of the strike. My framework has allowed me to develop critical elements of the strike.

In examining the collieries' relationship with their main customer, the CPR, I draw attention to the customer having a two-fold effect on the strike. On one hand, it appears that the railway was implicated in West Canadian's decision to send a notice to the union that the contract would not be renewed. This company action in turn prompted the MWUC to call a strike. On the other hand, the agreement Vissac made with the railway's fuel agent enforced, even promoted, the company to avoid negotiating with the union. The agreement between the railway's fuel agent and West Canadian's general manager enabled the strike to continue without repercussion to the colliery and their commercial business.

By moving beyond analyzing the strike solely in terms of company and union, I also draw increased attention to women like Stellamahovich who had an active role in the strike. Their presence on the picket went beyond simply demonstrating a visible united front against West Canadian. It was a strategy to minimize potential employment repercussions imposed

¹² Ibid, 100-117.

against striking miners. By being a main physical force confronting picket crossers, women made it difficult for West Canadian officials to blacklist overly aggressive picketing miners. It also shows that the participation of women both inside and outside the picket lines created tensions within the community about gendered assumptions. Women who assisted the MWUC bewildered the responses of miners opposed to the strike. In most cases, gendered assumptions of masculinity constrained men's public behaviours, and anti-strike miners held little culturally acceptable recourse against being spat on, having clothes torn from their bodies, having rocks thrown at them, or being physically hit by women. Conflicts inside of a class cannot be understood without accounting for gender.

By solely using a labour-capital framework to analyze the Crowsnest Pass strike, some historians have situated the MWUC officials as representatives of the 'labour' category. In consequence, alternative representatives of labour, as well as their actions, are attended to with less rigour. The democratic choice made by the miners of Coleman to substitute the MWUC for another labour organization is seen as a weakness. In interpreting the outcome in Coleman, Caragata defines the choice as a deficiency, noting that "A majority of the Coleman strikers ... caved in."¹³ The notion that Coleman miners caved is relative. Caragata's point about the town's miners stems from surveying the dispute from a perspective sympathetic to the MWUC. He uses Seager's history of the Crowsnest strike to frame the dispute.¹⁴ This strike analysis by Seager was part of the historian's larger project on the MWUC which looked at the perspective of the union's officials in the 1920s through the 1930s. From a perspective favouring the MWUC, the decision made by Coleman's miners seems as though they did cave, since the national union was removed from power; however, from a perspective sensitive to Coleman miners, the decision to

¹³ Caragata, 116.

remove the MWUC demonstrated a want to retain local control over their mines' unions. Each group believed they, and not the other, best represented the miners' interests. But neither union was the end-all solution for all the Crowsnest miners.

Analysis of MWUC opposition has also seemed to remain fixed in the historiography of the strike. For instance, in the most recent literature that includes opposition to the strike, historians Alvin Finkel and Eric Strikwerda in their chapter of *Working People in Alberta* describe that opposition formed against the MWUC based on ethnicity. Anglo-Canadian miners in Coleman went back to work while Blairmore and Bellevue European workers held out at West Canadian because of discrimination.¹⁵ Finkel and Strikwerda source Caragata's monograph and the latter historian mainly mirrors what Seager wrote on the strike.¹⁶ But strike opposition went beyond the miners of Coleman's removal of the MWUC, and I suggest that it went beyond ethnic arguments. For a fuller understanding of local opposition to the strike, I draw attention to several features that occurred in the dispute. Firstly, dissatisfaction with the MWUC organizers produced opposition. The union had assured a united front approach, that is, all their unions would go on strike. But they could not impose the strategy on the others branches, leaving some miners in the Crowsnest disheartened at a lack of follow-through. Secondly, some attributed challenges based on conflicts over gendered assumptions. When women physically participated in the strike, or taught questionable behaviour to children to the strike, their actions caused strife for those who held the role of women up to a different set of expectations. Finally, when strike resistance began to form, suppressive episodes against individuals who dissented against the strike also added to further defiance against the MWUC. Intimidating practices of late-night

¹⁴ Caragata, 154.

¹⁵ Alvin Finkel et al, *Working People in Alberta* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2012), 105.

charivari episodes against strike opponents, the violent beating of the Blas family, suspicions of vandalism each weighed against the strike for some. Underestimating the impact these incidents had on individuals in the community in their choice to oppose the strike is to leave a only partial rendering of the strike and opposition that formed in the working class community.

In studies of labour strikes, dispute analysis should not only seek to define efforts which endorse a union from those that oppose it. Where possible, inquiry should also indicate both how responses emerge and from whom they originate. Without this recognition, dispute responses become blurred, and the lines of pro-union support converge into one overarching strike discourse. On one level, an approach that arranges all pro-union member support is valuable. After all, it is in its union members—whether rank and file or union official—that the concept of a labour organization manifests in the physical sense. But in some cases this approach can also be problematic. Inside of strikes, actions may fall well outside the concept of approved union activity. These types of incidents challenge the impression that belonging to a group means representing it. While a goal of acceptable resolution may be shared, individuals employ different means to achieve it. A division can exist between a union's organizers and its rank and file. A qualitative account of strike discourse draws attention to how individuals can respond to disputes differently. Recognizing and analyzing strike responses accomplishes a desirable aim. Pro-union rank and file supporters become main actors in their disputes. Their actions significantly impress upon the shape a dispute takes, as much as negotiating efforts of union officials. Deepening analysis of pro-strike discourse sharpens focus on workers whose lives were affected by disputes and enriches the goal of writing history from the bottom up.

¹⁶ In their footnotes, Caragata uses Seager's thesis and sources from the *Calgary Albertan* and the *Edmonton Journal*.

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