

Episode 4 The Vancouver Island Coal Strike

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:20] [Theme music intro] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that aims to bring British Columbia's rich labour heritage to life. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We've touched on the great Vancouver Island coal strike in our very first podcast. It featured Joe Naylor, the legendary labour leader from Cumberland, who was in the forefront at that long, bitter strike. Now, we are taking a closer look at a conflict that was one of the most protracted, violent and hard fought strikes in BC's long labour history. The Vancouver Island coal strike took place more than 100 years ago. It lasted two years, from 1912 to 1914. Those who took part never forgot it. Thanks to interviews conducted by oral historian Howie Smith in 1975, when veterans of the strike were still alive, you will hear some of their stories in their own words. And not just the men. You will hear from women, too. None were more powerful than what the legendary Mother Jones, known far and wide as the miners' angel, wrote in her autobiography about the plight of the Vancouver Island coal miners after visiting them in 1914.

Lucie McNeil voicing Mother Jones' statement [00:01:38] Men's hearts are cold. They're indifferent. Not all the coal that is dug warms the world. It remains indifferent to the lives of those who risk their life and health down in the blackness of the earth, who crawl through dark, choking crevices with only a bit of lamp on their caps to light their silent way, whose backs are bent with toil, whose very bones ache. Whose happiness is sleep and whose peace is death.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:10] From the 1870s on, miners had fought strike after strike to force the hard nosed coal barons to recognise a union. Thanks to strike breakers, blacklists, anti-union courts and the forces of so-called law and order, they lost them all. Finally, in 1911, the miners invited in the tough, experienced and deep pocketed United Mine Workers of America to make one last all out attempt to bring the mine owners to heel. The strike began as a flare up over safety. The mines were terrible places to work, dark and dangerous. Deadly mine explosions, usually the result of gas build-up were far too common. The death toll was heartbreaking.

Ann-Marie Zak voicing anonymous newspaper account [00:02:57] You don't forget. When you see 30 graves all dug in a row waiting to be filled with the men you've known all your life, wouldn't you fight and starve if need be. If when your man left the house, you didn't know how he was coming back?

Henry Gibson [00:03:12] The conditions in the mine wasn't too good. It was all open lights.

Ben Horbury [00:03:16] It was open lamps. Just a little teapot, fish oil lamps they used. Howie Smith: And open flame? Yeah. You went into your place. You held your lamp halfway between the roof and the floor. If you put it down, it went out in black damp. That's a heavier than air gas. And if you put it up, you lit the gas, the explosive gas on fire.

Bob McCallister [00:03:44] Yes, there was gas before maybe 1901, I think there were 60 odd killed at Number Six Mine, right alongside of the Village Office there.

Henry Gibson [00:03:55] When that explosion took place, at Number Six, it was a month before they got anyone out. There wasn't a soul. It took them a month. They had to flood the mine to get the bodies. Every man was killed in it, in Number Six Mine. Howie Smith: And it was that kind of condition that the men were objecting to?

Bob McCallister [00:04:12] It was building up again in all four mines, see? The time of the strike, well, they were still open lamps.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:22] By 1912, after hundreds of coal miner deaths, the government had bowed to pressure. Miners appointed by the workers were now allowed to inspect the mines and report possible dangers. Except, when Oscar Mottishaw and Isaac Portrey reported finding gas in the Number Two Mine at Extension near Nanaimo, Mottishaw was fired. He managed to find a new job in Cumberland, but when management learned his history, he was fired again. On September 16th, 1912 miners protested the company's action by staying home on what they called a one day holiday. Ellen Bowater, later Ellen Greenwell, was 19 and living in Extension at the time.

Bailey Garden voicing Ellen Greenwell [00:05:12] They would tell men to do a thing, like report that gas, and the minute they reported it, they were fired. Well, that was enough to show me just then that there was something wrong. There must be something wrong when a committee is hired to report something, and when they report it, they fire these men. There must be something wrong with the bosses side, mustn't there?

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:31] The day after the miners' one day protest, the mine owners locked them out. Within days, 1600 miners in Extension, Ladysmith and Cumberland were off the job. The war was on. This was no longer about Oscar Mottishaw. This was a bruising, no-holds-barred, bare knuckled fight to force the mine owners to recognise the United Mine Workers as the miners' union of choice. The notorious James Dunsmuir had sold his family's mines two years earlier, but the new owners were every bit as ruthless. Right off the bat they evicted the striking miners from their company owned homes, forcing them into tents or anywhere else they could find a place to sleep.

Bob McCallister [00:06:18] We moved down to what they called Strikers' Beach. Lived in tents the first winter. We got enough lumber to put a floor in and a three foot wall. The kitchen stove, it was sittin' out on an old road next to main highway. We built a lean-to over it, and that's where we cooked all winter, dug a well and a lot more. We weren't the only ones. But the next spring, things didn't look good so we got a little more lumber and built a place for us to live, and we stayed there and the other ones too stayed there.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:51] Some single men took to living in boat houses.

Bob McCallister singing [00:06:54] Batchin' in a boat house in the middle of Comox Lake. Batchin' in a boat house with nothing but hard beefsteak. When the keg of Pilsner beer was a bachelor's only cheer. Oh, it's lovely batchin' in a boat house . There was batchelors batched in floating boat houses out here.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:07:21] At the same time, the mine owners threw all their energy into keeping the mines running. That meant strikebreakers. Vulnerable Chinese and Japanese miners were threatened with eviction and deportation if they did not keep working. Strikebreakers were also brought in from beyond Canada's borders. Many didn't realize the strike was on, but they were guarded by government and private security forces. Tensions ran high.

Bob McCallister and Henry Gibson [00:07:50] The company was bringing strike breakers from Britain. Howie Smith: All the way from Britain? All the way from Britain, and they were bringin' Blacks from the United States. Howie Smith: And did the strikers, the

striking miners, ever confront the strikebreakers when they came in? You couldn't stop them. They had thugs from the States with pistols stuck on the side here, you know. The company had their own police. They hired them. Then there's the provincial police, see. Later on, 1913, they brought around 500 soldiers from the 72nd Battalion in Victoria, brought them up.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:08:27] The miners greeted the soldiers sent in by Attorney General William Bowser with derision and song.

Music: 'Bowser's Seventy-Twa' sung by Rika Ruebsaat and Jon Bartlett [00:08:35]
Oh, did you see the kilties boys? The laugh would nearly kill you boys, the day they came to kill both great and small. With bayonets, shot and shell, to blow you all to hell, did Bowser and his gallant seventy-twa. Then hurrah boys, hurrah, for Bowser's seventy-twa, it's the handy, candy, dandy seventy-twa. 'Twill make the world look small, run on by Colonel Hall, and Bowser with his gallant seventy-twa. They stood some curious shapes, these boys, they must have sprung from apes, these boys. Dressed up in kilts to represent the law. My conscience it was grand, hurrah for old Scotland and Bowser with his gallant seventy-twa. Then hurrah, boys, hurrah, for Bowser's seventy-twa, it's the handy, candy, dandy seventy-twa. 'Twill make the world look small, run on by Colonel Hall, and Bowser with his gallant seventy-twa. They could not stand at ease, me boys. They had no strength, believe me boys, some had to stand upon their guns or fall, and many a mother's son had never seen a gun but, mind you, they were Bowser's seventy-twa. Then hurrah, boys, hurrah, for Bowser's seventy-twa...

Jack McCallister [00:09:24] They marched a thousand men from Nanaimo, from Victoria to Nanaimo, and they split that battalion in half. 500 stayed in Nanimo and they brought 500 up here. Closed the schools, put us kids out of school on the streets and put the machine gun up in the yard. Howie Smith: They had machine guns here?

Bob McCallister [00:10:21] Oh yeah, machine guns at the Post Office. And up at the Village Office. And in the schoolyard. That was Bowser's government. Howie Smith: So they had machine guns at the post office. Does that mean that every time you went to mail a letter, there were soldiers? Oh, no. They didn't bother, but you didn't stick around. And if they saw two or three standing talking, they'd yell, 'come on, git', on the main street here. Oh, yes. Howie Smith: That must have made things pretty tense in town here. Yeah, but still old Joe Naylor held the people, held the boys down. Howie Smith: There wasn't too much violence then? There were no violence. Not in here, but only 'till they had that kind of a riot, when that there engineer come down the main street with the old gramophone horn, hollering 'come on, boys, get into it while the water's boiling'.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:09] Several months after the union expanded the strike to all mines on the Island, the frustration of watching strike breakers going to work day after day to keep the mines operating became too much. Union tempers exploded on the night of August 13th, 1913 [sound of smashing glass]. In Ladysmith, Chinatown was ransacked. Homes of strikebreakers and mine supervisors burned to the ground. Tensions ran even higher in Extension where scabs liked to taunt the strikers. Some were armed. There were fears they were going to use guns to drive the strikers from their camp. They rushed to the mine to head off an attack. Ellen Greenwell remembers what happened next.

Bailey Garden voicing Ellen Greenwell [00:11:54] [muffled sound of rioting in background] They must have had their guns loaded. Oh, yes. One guy here by the name

of Baxter got shot right in the arm. I was lucky. I was running right back up the hill, but I didn't get shot.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:12:04] Rumours spread quickly that six strikers had been shot and killed. Although the rumour was untrue, large crowds of furious miners headed to Extension. Homes owned by company supervisors, strikebreakers and Chinese immigrants were plundered and torched. Some supervisors had to walk for miles through the dark woods to escape the miners' fury. It was a wild night! Meanwhile, there were the women. They had played a large role from day one. Through the union's Women's Auxiliary, they organized strategy meetings, raised funds and engaged wholeheartedly in the fight. As strikebreakers and their police escorts went into work, they stood on the side and heckled them. Two women were fined \$20 each for having the nerve to call the pit bosses 'scabs'. Another time, in Ladysmith, two women of Scottish descent accosted two husky but nervous young strikebreakers, grabbed their dinner pails and smeared their faces with the jam sandwiches inside. The women were said to have shouted,

Ann-Marie Zak voicing Ladysmith woman [00:13:09] No, you blasted ninnies. Go home and see if yer own mothers will ken you.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:13:14] But the best story of all involves the bold action of Minnie Axelson to get her husband out of jail. The tale is told by Lempy Guthrie, wife of local union president Sam Guthrie.

Katie Gartlan-Close voicing Lempy Guthrie [00:13:27] There was a little sweet fellow. He was one of the strikers. Oh, he was the most unassuming little quiet man, but I guess he thought, we have to go have a drink and feel better. So I guess he had one too many and he was feeling so happy he was going around in the street singing 'I Belong to Glasgow'. And then the strikebreakers, they thought that was wonderful. And they patted him on his back and said, 'go on and keep singing'. Of course, when he started singing 'hooray, hooray, we drive the scabs away', well, that just finished him, you know. So they got the police and took him to jail. And then when he was taken to jail, some of the strikers went up to the union house where the Women's Auxiliary had a meeting and his wife was the Chairman. She was a great big amazon woman, and somebody whispered to her that your husband's in jail. So she just said, 'well, the meeting's adjourned'. So she went out the back way and she grabbed an axe and away she went up the hill to the police station. All the women followed her. So she went in then and she said, 'Mr. Connor' - that's the policeman. She said, 'you have my husband in jail here.' And he said, 'yes, I have Mrs. Axelsson.' 'Well,' she says, 'you better let him out.' 'Oh, no,' he said, 'I can't do that, because after all, he did break the law. You know, he created a disturbance.' So she just showed him the axe. Well, you know, that just finished him. He got so scared, he just jumped down from his chair. 'Sure, sure, Mrs. Axelson. I'll get him out. This was all a mistake anyway.' So then they let him out and she grabbed him. And it was so funny, you know, he was so tiny and she was so big. And here she grabbed him by the arm, just like a little chicken with a little head. And they're marching down the street and all the women follow and the strikers all joined in. And that's how we started the riot, you see.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:11] After their night of rioting, with the outburst out of their system, strikers resumed peaceful picketing. That wasn't good enough for the government. They ordered the militia into Nanaimo and Ladysmith. 213 strikers were arrested. One of them was Ellen Greenwell's 17 year old brother, Willie Bowater.

Bailey Garden voicing Ellen Greenwell [00:15:32] My brother, they had him up for arson. They had his pal up for attempted murder. The biggest lies that God ever put breath in! My brother even saved the people's house that was against him and said that he burnt their house down and the house was never burnt down. Do you know that they let my brother out of jail -- he was in jail for six months and was never let out -- they let him out the day before Christmas on \$10,000 bail, all them years ago. And Ernie Morris, his pal that was up for attempted murder. They never did let him out. He got out when the real trials come up. That was some trials. You can believe me. For three months. From January till March, we went every week to New Westminster. That's where they tried them. And them was some trials, you can believe me. I'm going to tell you, that was a hell of a hole for men from Vancouver Island to go to. I was up in that witness box on every case from Extension. And the old judge, oh, he was an old bugger. I can see him now, big red face. He said, 'you know that there Miss Bowater, she's about the brazenist, brassiest thing I ever seen in my life.' Anyhow, when my brother come up, they had him four hours in the witness box, a kid of 16, four hours on arson. But the jury disagreed and he went back. But he got off the next time, just like that. At last, they got so sick and fed up with him, they threw the whole thing out. They got sick of those scabs telling lies.

Music: 'Nanaimo Jail' performed by Jon Bartlett [00:16:53] Nanaimo jail, Nanaimo jail! Full of good union men. They are good men, they are true men, fighting for the UMWA...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:17:04] As the strike continued into 1914, with no end in sight, the United Mine Workers turned to another woman to bolster their spirits, none other than the famous Mother Jones. Well into her 70s, she was known far and wide for her unwavering support of working miners. She preached a fierce, anti-capitalist gospel of resistance and socialism wherever she went, which was usually wherever miners were on strike. She agreed to travel north from Colorado to Vancouver Island. The thought of the white haired firebrand in BC frightened Canadian immigration officials. They barred her from boarding the ship in Seattle that would take her to Victoria. Mother Jones, however, had friends in high places. None other than the U.S. Labour Secretary intervened on her behalf. And the next day she arrived triumphant in Victoria. Mother Jones received a rapturous welcome in Nanaimo. She described the event in her autobiography.

Lucie McNeil voicing Mother Jones' statement [00:18:08] A regiment of Canadian kilties met the train squeaking on their bagpipes. Down the street came a delegation of miners who wore the badge of the working class, their overalls. I held a tremendous meeting that night, and the poor boys who had come up from the subterranean holes of the earth to fight for a few hours of sunlight, took courage. I brought them the sympathy of the Colorado strikers, a sympathy and understanding that reaches across borders and frontiers.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:18:40] But not even Mother Jones could change the desperation of the miners' situation. The gathering war clouds in Europe hampered mobilization by the BC labour movement in support of the miners, and the union was running out of money. In July of 1914, the United Mine Workers made the painful decision to cut off strike pay. A month later, the striking miners voted to end their strike. After 23 months of heroic struggle by up to 3700 coal miners, one of whom tragically died in prison, they voted to end their long, bitter strike. Because of company blacklists, few were hired back.

Bob McCallister and Ben Horbury [00:19:25] Well, that was all there was to it. The strike was lost. When the strike pay was cut off, the men started to go back to work. Howie Smith: Did that break the local here then? Oh, sure it did. Oh, yeah. It finished the local.

Howie Smith: So did you try and get work right after the strike? Oh, yeah. You go down there and, just, you know, no, I don't need nobody. Well they was full up, they had lots. But they had a blacklist hanging up on the wall with a paper over it. Howie Smith: So they weren't going to hire the miners who went out on strike? There were some got back, you know, but an awful lot didn't get back, see. Howie Smith: Was the strike a total loss, do you think? You'll never get a raise that will pay back, your loss. But in another way, you've got to strike to keep things on a balance.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:23] The coal miners of Vancouver Island had to wait another 20 years before they were able to organize the mines and win a union contract at last. It took even longer for the scars of their defiant two year battle to disappear. For years afterwards, families remembered who had been on what side. Well into the 1950s many on the union side refused to associate with those who had scabbed. There was never a strike like it, before or since.

Music: 'Are you from Bevan' perfomed by Phil Thomas and band [00:20:53] It was way back in 19 and 12, our gas committee was put on the shelf. First we walked out, next we were locked out, then by a foul we were all but knocked out. Our union miners faced guns and jail. Hundreds of us were held without bail. By August 1914, our labour they were courting, but they blacklisted me. Are you from Bevan? I said from Bevan, where those fields of stumps they beckon to me. I'm glad to see you, tell me how be you and those friends I'm longing to see. If you're from Union Bay, or Courtenay or Cumberland, any place below that Bevan second dam. Are you from Bevan? I said from Bevan, cause I'm from Bevan too!

Rod Mickleburgh [00:21:55] The miner voices you heard were from Ben Horbury, Henry Gibson and Bob and Jack McAllister. Quotes from the women of the strike were read by volunteers. Thanks to Lucie McNeil for providing the voice of Mother Jones, Bailey Garden for the voice of Ellen Greenwell. Ann-Marie Zak read the anonymous quotes and Katie Gartland-Close was the voice of Lempy Guthrie. Our thanks to Simon Trevelyan for helping to provide a copy of 'Bowsers Seventy-Twa' performed by Rika Ruebsaat and Jon Bartlett. Jon also sang 'Nanaimo Jail'. 'Are You From Bevan' was performed by Phil Thomas, accompanied by Barry Hall, vocal and guitar, and Michael Thomas, mandolin. In December 2020, the BC Labour Heritage Centre unveiled a bronze plaque to commemorate the Vancouver Island coal strike. It can be found in Dallas Square in downtown Nanaimo. Our partner in this plaque was the Nanaimo, Duncan and District Labour Council, along with support from the city of Nanaimo, the Boag Foundation and WorkSafe BC. There have also been lesson plans developed on the strike for use in secondary school curricula. You can learn more at <https://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/island/>. Finally, thanks to the Labour Radio Podcast Network for including us among so many other amazing shows focussed on working people. This is your host for On the Line, Rod Mickleburgh, signing off on behalf of the podcast team, Bailey Garden and Patricia Wejr. See you next time.