Handout #7b: Big Strike Student Readings

GROUP ONE READINGS HANDOUT

The Big Strike: Stories from strikers

Document #1

These Were The Reasons…Stories of union organizing in British Columbia
A film by: Howie Smith
Produced by: BC Overtime
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Chapter 2: The Big Strike
Singing:
"Batchin' in a boathouse
In the middle of Comox Lake
Batchin' in a boathouse
With nuthin' but a hard beef steak
With a keg of Pilsner beer
It was batchers'… batched in floatin' boathouses"

Smith: "Why did they end up in a boathouse on the lake?"
Answer: "All this land belonged to the company"

New speaker: "We moved on to what they called 'Striker's Beach', in tents the first winter. There were lots more, we weren't the only ones…"

Smith: "To keep the mines open during the strike, scabs were brought in under police protection. The mines were kept partially open, but the strike continued. The owners called for even a bigger show of force…"

Voice of Jack McAllister, miner's son: "They marched a thousand men from Victoria to Nanaimo and they split them…500 stayed here in Nanaimo and 500 up here… Closed the schools, put the kids out of school and onto the street, and put machine guns up in the yard"

Smith: "In the face of machine guns and the poverty brought on by a two-year strike, the miners were forced back to work. Without a union to back them up, some miners couldn't get their jobs back."
Voice of miner: "well they had a blacklist hangin' up on the wall, with a paper over it. There was some got back you know, an awful lot didn't get back."

Document #2

ARE YOU FROM BEVAN
by Phil Thomas **Sung by** Paddy Graber
Audio Link: http://pnwfolklore.org/AreYouFromBevan.html
The song tells in brief the story of a two-year episode in the long struggle of The coal miners of Vancouver Island to have the major mine owners accept their right to form a union. Recorded by Phil Thomas on "Where The Fraser River Flows."

Well, hello, stranger, how do you do?
There's something I'd like to say to you.
You seem surprised I recognize;
I'm no company stool but I just surmise
You're from the place I'm longing to be.
Your smiling face seems to say to me
You're from the island, your land and my land,
So tell me can it be-

Chorus
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!

Now it was way back in 19 and 12
Our gas committee was put on the shelf.
First we walked out, then 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,
But by August 1914 our labor they were courting,
But they blacklisted me

"In the song a man - no longer a coal miner on the island - hails another whom he remembers from one of the colliery communities in the Cumberland area. He recalls the incident which precipitated the two-year dispute, the firing and blacklisting of the miners' representative on a Gas Committee at one of the Dominion Collieries' mines. He then tells of the men's reaction in Cumberland in September, 1912, where the blacklisted miner had sought work only to be turned away by the management. They took a joint "holiday" to protest this discrimination and

to discuss what further they should do. The next day the management ordered them to take their tools from the mine unless they would sign individual two-year contracts. The song then refers to the "foul" that nearly knocked them out. The "foul" was collusion in strike-breaking activities between the provincial government of McBride and Bowser and the owners of Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd. The strike-breaking included: employment in Cumberland of imported miners and Chinese labourers whom the employers were able to intimidate; turning a mine and its townsite into an armed camp with special police and eventually with militia; condoning of armed strike-breakers at Extension, near Nanaimo, when there was no evidence to suggest that the strikers were armed or intending to arm themselves; arrest by duplicity of men gathered in Nanaimo in peaceful assembly; and finally maintaining military rule over the entire mining area to ensure that no union organization could possibly succeed." From Philip Thomas, Songs of the Pacific Northwest

Pacific Nothwest Folklore Society

Document #3 Raising the Ghost of Joseph Mairs

"Raising the Ghost of Joseph Mairs" by Quentin Dodd, *The Tyee*, January 16, 2004.

Around the grave of a labour martyr, people in Ladysmith will remember grim B.C. history, and call for renewed spirit.

View full article and comments:
http://thetyee.ca/News/2004/01/16/Raising_the_Ghost_of_Joseph_Mairs/

Joseph Mairs has been dead nearly a century. This Sunday people will gather beside his grave in Ladysmith cemetery to lay a wreath and send a wake-up call. The social contract hard won by B.C.'s labour movement decades ago, they say, is fast unraveling. Getting it back will take determination and sacrifice - the kind of grit shown by Mairs, who died at the age of 21, imprisoned for his role in the "Big Strike" by Vancouver Island miners between 1912 and 1914.

The memorial event, to be held from 11 a.m. to noon this Sunday, was introduced as an annual program by the Nanaimo, Duncan and District Labour Council last year. The organizer is Alastair Haythornthwaite of the International Association of Machinists.

Haythornthwaite sees large and powerful companies and the government backing away from the unwritten social contract requiring them to safeguard the well-being of workers "on the front line" and society as a whole.

"People in BC are getting in a situation where that contract--formed after World War II when it was agreed to look after members of the military who had gone off to fight--is being broken," said Haythornthwaite.

"To turn that situation around, we need the spirit of self-sacrifice. It comes down to the spirit of self-sacrifice versus the spirit of opportunism where people advance themselves rather than others.

"These people in the strike back before the Great War were up against the most powerful odds. As with the labor movement standing up to business and government today, (coal-mine baron James) Dunsmuir was backed by the provincial government, backed by the federal government. Only through the self-sacrifice of the miners was there any hope to change the situation."

Haythornthwaite said that come wind, rain, snow or sleet, the wreath-laying will take place at the cairn of Joseph Mairs in Ladysmith Cemetery almost 90 years to the day since the young miner died in Oakalla Prison Jan. 20, 1914.

Mile-long funeral procession

Until now largely overlooked in B.C. labour history, Mairs died from inadequate medical attention in prison less than three months into a 16-month sentence for taking part in what was then legally called "an unlawful assembly" - one of the mass demonstrations being staged against efforts to break the on-going strike. When Mairs was buried, several hundred people attended his mile-long funeral procession and hundreds bought a card showing a photograph of the prize-winning cyclist to raise money for the memorial. The small monument is engraved with the words: "A martyr to a noble cause - the emancipation of his fellow man."

At the time, in the Legislature, a left-wing MLA laid the blame for Mairs' lingering death squarely at the feet of Premier Sir Richard McBride and the province's prison system.

Mairs was born in Scotland and likely came to Canada with his parents sometime between 1908 and 1912. He and his father went to work at the Extension Colliery run by Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd. at Ladysmith, on southern Vancouver Island.

The Dunsmuir part of the company name referred first to Robert Dunsmuir and then to his son James who inherited his father's coal mines on Vancouver Island when Dunsmuir senior died in 1889. The mines made the younger man the richest man in BC but little credit was given to the workers on whose backs the empire was built, and James Dunsmuir is quoted as telling the 1903 Royal Commission on Labour Unrest he'd rather close mines than be told how to deal with the men who worked them.

Asked whether it had occurred to him that corresponding obligations came with enormous wealth, Dunsmuir is cited as replying: "No, sir. Not from my standpoint it doesn't."

Strikers herded into camps

Dunsmuir had sold off most of his operations by early 1910 but the cruelly-repressive regime he helped foster in the mining industry continued in both Canada and the United States. The Extension Colliery and the nearby Union Mine became the flash-point for the Big Miners' Strike in mid-September 1912 when two United Mine Workers of America activists were summarily fired - allegedly for reporting gas in one of the mines.

The miners responded by declaring a one-day "holiday" and demanding that Canadian Collieries recognize the union, already at the centre of a massive battle with the mining industry in the United States.

Instead, the company locked out the workers, precipitating a strike which would not be ended by the miners until August 1914, after the outbreak of World War I and two months after the union withdrew its financial support following the bloody Ludlow Massacre of April 20, 1914 in the United States.

The aptly-named slaughter by the National Guard took place at the mining-strike tent city of

Ludlow, 18 miles north of Trinidad, Colorado, starting with machine-gunners opening fire on the canvas encampment. Thirteen people were shot dead in that part of the incident but it did not end there. When night descended, the militia moved in and set fire to the tents, thinking that the occupants had fled. They evidently did not know that two women and 11 children had been hiding beneath a cot and had not escaped with the other strikers. They all died but no charges were ever laid against the guardsmen.

That was three months to the day after Mairs died. By May 1913 the strike on Vancouver Island had spread to the other coal mines, with the mine owners and the government turning to strikebreakers and increasing force to try to keep the mines open.

"Nanaimo and Ladysmith came under what amounted to military occupation for almost a year, with hundreds of residents herded into camps fenced in by barbed wire," reports Haythornthwaite.

"When Canadian Collieries evicted miners and their families from company homes and imported strikebreakers," says an entry to the Dictionary of Canadian Biography by Simon Fraser University labor lecturer Mark Leier, "union miners organized strong picket lines. The province sent in constables, and by August scuffles were breaking out."

Guilty plea a death sentence

According to report, on Aug 13, 1913, the strikers virtually took over Nanaimo. That was too much for the provincial government, who promptly sent in a shipload of militia a day or two later. Mairs was arrested along with 40 miners and others in a further demonstration of civil unrest deemed a riot in the nearby community of Ladysmith Aug. 15, which involved stone-throwing, window-smashing and other resistance and protest action. He and more than 200 strikers from the Nanaimo and Ladysmith area were then held in custody without bail pending trial.

Mairs, who was suffering from a pre-existing internal health condition from lesions from a previous encounter with tuberculosis, chose a speedy trial by judge alone and pleaded guilty in the hope of receiving a short sentence.

Documentation shows though that on Oct. 23, after the rioters had spent more than two months in jail, provincial judge Frederic William Howay sentenced Mairs and 22 others not seen as either leaders or as just having been on the periphery of the Ladysmith riot a further 10 months' jail -- for a total of a year's imprisonment. He also fined them $100 for being involved in the demonstration.

"Mairs was taken to Oakalla Prison Farm, where he was put to work clearing land," says the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. "Described by the warden as a 'good, quiet prisoner', he was

transferred to the prison's kitchen on 12 Jan. 1914."

The transfer came too late. Two days later, Mairs complained of severe stomach cramps and was given hot-mustard pills, cod-liver oil and salts by an inmate who served as a medical attendant. The severe medication did not help and Mairs' condition worsened. After a further four days, the visiting prison doctor diagnosed him as having "acute indigestion", in spite of being told that Mairs had had surgery in Glasgow in 1907 or 1908 for a bowel obstruction.

The doctor later testified that Mairs did not complain of being in pain though. He merely prescribed "a stomach medicine" and then the next day administered an enema. Mairs died the day after that, Jan. 20.

"An autopsy revealed that he (had) had tuberculosis of the intestine," says the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. "Obstructed by adhesions and undoubtedly weakened by the mistreatment (in prison), his bowels had ruptured, and Mairs died of peritonitis."

Mairs' decision to plead guilty in court to avoid a long sentence which he feared he would not survive, proved ironical. By a cruel twist of fate, his father, who had also been arrested at the same time, chose to plead guilty and so risk a longer jail term - and was subsequently acquitted and escaped jail. He visited his son in jail after he took ill, just a day or two before Joseph jr. died.

At Oakalla, says Leier, Mairs' death led to a coroner's recommendation to the government to have a fulltime doctor for the prisoners, rather than one who just dropped in every few days. The government implemented that shortly afterwards.

…

Quentin Dodd, a frequent contributor to The Tyee, is a journalist based in Campbell River.

GROUP TWO READINGS HANDOUT

The Big Strike: Stories from Families

Document #4

When one of the men reported gas in 1912 the company found an excuse to lay him off. They considered him a trouble-maker.

The miners decided on a one day protest strike, but found themselves locked out and told they could only get their jobs back if they signed individual contracts under the old non-union conditions. On May 1, a strike affecting all the Vancouver island coal mines was called, a strike for the fundamental right of the workers to belong to the union of their choice, which in 1911 had become the united mineworkers of America.

“The continued presence of the special police was intended to provoke violence. There were inevitable encounters with the scabs. In these incidents, the miners’ wives were very active, several of them getting themselves into trouble with the police by poking umbrellas into the scabs and otherwise harassing them. The story is told that when women of Cumberland, finding that this kind of tactic didn’t pay, organized a more subtle mode of offense. They got some accordion players and a procession led by the musicians and sometimes by women dancing the highland fling would play the strikebreakers to the mine entrance and await them to play them back again.” *Compassionate Rebel*, Steeves, p. 20

It was no wonder the women were militant. Too many of them were left widowed with a number of fatherless children to raise and no help to feed them. The company paid for the burials.

As one woman said, “you don’t forget when you see thirty graves all new dug in a row waiting to be filled with men you’ve known all your life. Yes, I remember when we had a funeral here every Sunday. But wouldn’t you fight and starve if need be if when your man left the house in the morning you didn’t know how he was coming back—on a shutter dead or with his back broken.”

By August tensions were mounting with more acts of violence. The miners sent a message to Attorney General Bowser promising to keep the peace if the special police were withdrawn. His answer became famous in labour history:

“When day breaks there will be nearly a thousand men in the strike zone wearing the uniform of His Majesty.”

Lt. Col. Hall, in command of the whole Civil Aid Force as it was called, arrived personally with the Victoria force of over 400 troops, while the Vancouver force of 300, including the 72nd Seaforth Highlanders went to Cumberland and fifty camped at the Nanaimo wharf. They arrested 179 miners and imprisoned them without bail. The conditions in the jail were shocking. The wives complained they were only allowed five minutes with their husbands, and the food was

disgusting, the blankets filthy and lousy, with as many as three men in a six by nine cell and one bucket. When complaints went to Ottawa, the federal minister of justice said that holding men without a conviction was a gross injustice, but he couldn't do anything about it, but in Victoria premier McBride told a delegation of 60 women that the responsibility rested with Ottawa! …

Life grew more and more difficult for the miners' families. As one man recalled,

"Mother backed Dad up to the limit on his stand to go on strike and never once complained although things were tough. We had the best country in the world, good gardens, lots of fish, deer (we called it government veal), all kinds of shell fish and no pollution. I picked coal on the slag heaps between Nanaimo and Reserve mine at five in the morning to make sure we had heat in the house".

And they made their own fun and recreation,

"The women were with the men. They used to have a dance every week. Up in Cumberland the union built a hall during the strike and we had a dance sometimes three times a week. The women would bring sandwiches. They didn't much worry about clothes; you went with what you had."

But as time dragged on it became clear that enthusiasm was at a low ebb, especially as there was a general recession in the whole province. The BC Federation of Labour proposed a general strike late in 1913, but too many unions opposed the actions. However, on May 1, a May Day rally of over 5000 was held at five acre lots in Nanaimo with women and children dressed in their patched best clothes.

The courts were as harsh in their treatment of the accused miners as the companies and the military. … By the time the assizes ended [Judge F.W.] Howay was well on his way to filling the jails, and his parting words were, "Fully 90 percent of the women ranked with the men in their disregard for property and life,", he asserted, berating the strikers because "I find your women singing *Drive The Scabs Away*".

During the trials in Ladysmith, Mrs Charles Axelson was one of the first witnesses to be called by the prosecuting attorney. Asked if she was the ringleader of the unlawful assembly, she vehemently denied it, but admitted she joined in the singing. Judging by her rough uncouth appearance, the attorney naturally assumed her to be as simple as she looked and decided to teach her and the other strikers a lesson. "Would you oblige us with a verse or two of the song the strikers were singing?" "Why certainly your honour," she replied. She simply turned the tables on the lawyer! She had a lovely trained voice and in a short time she whole large audience wholeheartedly joined in. The judge tried in every way to stop them and had great difficulty in restoring order. There were laughs and boos and the whole proceeding was turned into an empty farce. Prisoners, witnesses and spectators burst forth in round after round of applause.

With the presence of so many police, the mines were able to stay open especially as the Chinese and Japanese workers were threatened with deportation if they did not sign individual

contracts. This in turn exacerbated racial tensions, a situation which would be repeated again and again in BC's history by employers' divide and rule tactic. Women workers too, would be used in the same way to try to keep wages down.

From Their Own History: Women's Contribution to the Labour Movement in British Columbia. Betty Griffin and Susan Lockhart, United Fisherman and Allied Workers' Union/CAW Seniors Club.

GROUP THREE READINGS HANDOUT

The Story of the Boss

Dictionary of Canadian Biography
DUNSMUIR, JAMES, machinist, entrepreneur, industrialist, politician, and lieutenant governor; b. 8 July 1851 at Fort Vancouver (Vancouver, Wash.), son of Robert Dunsmuir* and Joanna (Joan) Olive White; . d. 6 June 1920 at the Cowichan River, B.C., and was buried in Ross Bay Cemetery, Victoria.

Born during his parents' emigration from Scotland to Vancouver Island, James Dunsmuir would experience his family's rise from a crude miner's log cabin at Fort Rupert (near Port Hardy, B.C.) to a life of wealth, prestige, and power. He received his early education in Nanaimo schools, and as he was growing up, the Dunsmuirs' circumstances improved steadily. His father eventually obtained the position of mines' supervisor for the Vancouver Coal Mining and Land Company. In the tradition of coalmining families, where sons patterned their careers after their fathers', James began apprenticeship as a machinist at 16, spending two years at the Willamette Iron Works in Oregon. During this period his father discovered the rich Wellington coal-seam north of Nanaimo, staked his claim, and, with the financial support of a group of naval officers, created Dunsmuir, Diggle Limited in 1873. Suddenly James's prospects had dramatically improved. Broadening his education, he attended the Dundas Wesleyan Boys' Institute in Dundas, Ont., for some higher learning and polish, before enrolling in 1874 to study mining engineering at the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College in Blacksburg, Va.

While in Virginia he met Laura Surles, whose brother attended the college. After their marriage in 1876, the young couple returned to Nanaimo. The Dunsmuirs' status was demonstrated when the coastal steamer *Cariboo Fly*, made a special trip from Victoria to Nanaimo with the bridal party. James became mine manager for his father and Laura quickly integrated herself into the local élite, often favouring its members with songs at concerts. ..Throughout the period a host of servants assisted in raising the rapidly growing family.

During the next half decade, although production remained steady, the position of the company changed dramatically. It consolidated coal lands in the Comox valley to the north, and it acquired a charter and huge land grant for the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway, which it built in concert with California entrepreneurs. Robert bought out the original partners in the Wellington mine and renamed the company R. Dunsmuir and Sons in 1883. ….

Meanwhile, in April 1889, Robert had suddenly died. Had the sons been expecting to assume total command of the business, their hopes were thwarted, since he had left all his shares and

voting power to his wife. Frustrated and increasingly embittered, for the next 17 years James worked relentlessly to wrest control from his mother and sisters. It was more than a struggle of generations: it was also about keeping wealth within the family and a matriarch's determination to maintain the rank of her eight daughters. In 1903 James had the humiliation of being sued by his mother for control of the San Francisco sales office, and spending three days on the witness-stand as the Dunsmuirs' family affairs became headline news. Yet, through it all, he persevered, and he succeeded. He was confirmed as the sole owner of the Wellington colliery, the Alexandra colliery in the South Wellington district, and the San Francisco office and as the major shareholder of the Union Colliery of British Columbia and the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway. With his purchase of the California shareholders' interests in the railway and the Union mines in October 1902, he finished bringing the empire entirely into his own hands….

Dunsmuir reached the pinnacle of Vancouver Island society with a move from Nanaimo to Victoria in the early 1890s and the construction of a new residence, Burleith, a show-piece complete with electricity and every modern convenience. In an era of stone-turreted mansions and flamboyant lifestyles, croquet tourneys (at which James excelled), private yachts, and recognition of growing leisure as a benchmark of success, the Dunsmuirs set a standard few could match. From the inaugural ball at Burleith, at which 300 guests waltzed among the potted palms and flowers, to the strawberry socials and the recitals on the Steinway grand parlour-piano, the Dunsmuirs' style matched their status as British Columbia's richest family.

...On the question of Asian immigration, Dunsmuir's record is more complex. He was the province's largest employer of Asian labour, and during the election campaign of 1900 had promised to remove the Chinese workers from his operations in the Nanaimo area. …Dunsmuir seems to have appreciated the severity of public discontent on the issue. He warned Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1900 that agitation would grow to "undesirable prominence" unless the federal government increased the poll tax on Chinese immigrants. …. Yet the signals are mixed. As an employer, he had fought in court against government restrictions on the hiring of Asians, … but he deducted between 50 cents and one dollar per month from "each Chinaman working in and around the mines . . . to cover part of the costs of carrying the Chinese case" to this highest court of appeal. Secretly, while lieutenant governor he negotiated with the Canadian Nippon Supply Company for the importation of up to 500 more Japanese workers, an order the company was unable to fill. It would appear that business considerations generally triumphed with Dunsmuir when there were choices to be made.…

"There is no individual in British Columbia respecting whom public opinion is so hopelessly divided as over Honourable James Dunsmuir. . . . If short-range critics and sycophantic friends in

his entourage are now at hopeless variance, what likelihood is there of the masses forming a correct view of him?" This conundrum … remains unanswered today. Both contemporaries and later interpreters have either eulogized him or pictured him as a tyrannical icon of bloated capitalism, depending on their view of the world. ….

By the time James had begun to assume control of the company in the 1880s, some workers … were insisting upon independence and dignity. Coalmines were dirty, noisy, dark, and dangerous places, and the gaseous Vancouver Island mines were among the most hazardous in the world. As settings for risky work done by unusually independent-minded people, they bred or attracted some of the most militant labour. Writing in 1890, a Wellington miner informed the Dunsmuirs "that we are not slaves, but a free people, and, as such, we cannot allow ourselves to be tyrannized over." Although not all workers agreed, the most radical, infused with a Marxism that had made them aware of their exploitation and provided them with the dream of power, began to see capitalists as evil. The owner-manager of the largest firm in British Columbia and the province's richest man, Dunsmuir easily became a target. Adamantly opposed to unions of any kind and ever ready to fire their organizers, he did little to quell the rising tide of discontent. In this respect he was in step with other employers, who in the United States chose a belligerent stance and in Vancouver in 1903 formed an employers' association that advocated firings, blacklists, and employment of strikebreakers.

The Dunsmuirs, father and son, used all these tactics and also, like many of their Canadian counterparts, easily persuaded the provincial government to send the militia to keep the peace while strikebreakers continued to mine coal. Central to every labour dispute in the Dunsmuir empire was the demand for recognition of a union, but no Dunsmuir ever capitulated. …

Retiring to the life of an English gentleman at Hatley Park, in Esquimalt, he devoted his remaining years to fishing and estate management. An Edwardian mansion of 50 rooms on 640 acres, complete with modern dairy and slaughterhouse, Hatley Park was complemented with the 218-foot steel yacht *Dolaura*, which had a dining room that could seat 24, and a fishing lodge on the Cowichan River.. Such a retreat was not unusual in this period, nor was his obsession with hunting and fishing. Describing himself as "a common working man," like other managers of his generation Dunsmuir compensated for his removal from the physical labour and skill of the workplace with an attempt to find manliness in sports such as hunting and fishing. He also took up golf with a focused determination to excel.

The compensation, however, does not appear to have been sufficient. Increasingly isolated and lonely, he experienced little happiness in his final years. With his eldest son devoting his life to globe-trotting in an alcoholic stupor, a second son a victim of the sinking of the *Lusitania* in

1915, and his daughters, who generally had married into British-based, upper class, military families, leading frivolous lives, there was to be no worthy third generation of Canadian Dunsmuirs. The lifestyle and Old World pretensions so carefully cultivated by the family disintegrated before his eyes. After his death at his fishing lodge in 1920, the children squandered the fortune in one generation.

For a few years James Dunsmuir had been the richest and allegedly the most influential man in British Columbia, with the authority that derives from corporate power. He did not create singlehanded the labour climate, but he did contribute to its strident militancy with his strong-arm tactics. Similarly, although he did not make the racist attitudes in the province, his large-scale employment of Asians, whom he often used as strikebreakers, intensified the debate. Yet, as a successful Vancouver Island entrepreneur who dominated the local economy, he also created communities and provided living wages to thousands. His retirement coincided with the decline of the island's economy as the focus shifted to the lower mainland. Admittedly he had exercised his power during auspicious times, but he was a talented businessman whose wealth and influence exceeded that of his father.

Clarence Karr, © 1998–2013 University of Toronto/Université Laval
http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio.php?&id_nbr=7349

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GROUP FOUR READINGS HANDOUT
Stories of workers divided

The Chinese Strikebreakers

Within a week of locking out the protesting employees, Canadian Collieries compelled its Chinese employees to agree to its terms. While the Chinese were opposed to their existing working conditions, they voted in favour of returning to work.

Chinese immigrants in BC faced much discrimination at this time. Primarily young men seeking to earn money to support their families, they lived in meagre conditions and avoided frivolous spending. However, few of them could ever afford to return home. In Cumberland, they became indebted to the coal company, who paid their $500 head taxes to enter the country.

Other miners resented these hard-working Chinese labourers who were willing to work for less money. These "foreigners" they insisted, stole jobs from white workers, and they would not spend most of the money they earned in the mining communities. As the Chinese had difficulty understanding English, white miners also believed they made dangerous employees because they could not read warning signs posted in the mines (in fact, few miners could understand these notices - even many of those that spoke English were illiterate). When an explosion at Nanaimo's Number One mine killed 148 persons in 1887, whites believed the Chinese miners were responsible for this reason.

Entrepreneurs capitalized on the indigent Chinese immigrants, despite people's opposition to their employment. Individual contractors would hire them to mine sections of coal for very low wages, then sell the coal at a great profit. Dunsmuir and Sons, who owned mines in Cumberland, Ladysmith and Extension before Canadian Collieries purchased them in 1910, employed Chinese labourers for lower wages than others who performed the same tasks. Robert Dunsmuir refused to exclude them from working underground, even though workers' associations considered them to be dangerous.

By becoming strikebreakers, Chinese miners became objects of further discrimination. Just as Dunsmuir had employed them against others' will, now Canadian Collieries used them to undermine the strike effort.

Unfortunately, most people in the communities probably did not see the Chinese workers as pawns manipulated by the coal company. The employment of Chinese labourers served to divert opposition away from the coal company, the true culprit of unsafe working conditions.

Document #7

Imported Strikebreakers

Several weeks into the strike, it became apparent that the "holiday" and lockout was going to last a long time. The UMWA was willing to spend most of its reserve funds, paying each striker four dollars a week or more for those with wives and children, until the coal companies recognized the union. The companies were ready to lose much revenue rather than speak to union representatives. Neither the BC nor federal governments would intervene to bring an end to the strike, except to send in special police, and later, militia to "preserve order."

The coal companies were able to prolong the strike in their favor by importing strikebreakers. Before May 1913, Canadian Collieries had tried to supplement workers who remained on the job with imported labourers, but with little success.

After the UMWA issued a general strike call on May 1, placing all of its Vancouver Island members on strike, the coal companies stepped up their campaign. They recruited workers from the prairies, Britain, the United States, and later, Vancouver and Victoria. At times during the general strike, their mines operated at full capacity. In 1913 and 1914, they produced roughly one million tons of coal each year, about two thirds as much as in 1912.

The immigrants were usually not informed that a strike was taking place on Vancouver Island until they arrived. Some turned back as soon as they heard the news, but others continued on, doing their best to tolerate the censure in the mining communities.

Like other strikebreakers, the immigrants confronted angry protestors who sometime resorted to violence and vandalism in the streets, on their way to and from work and at home when they were trying to sleep.

Imported workers were sent to live in company homes originally built for the mining families who now demonstrated. Canadian Collieries had forced its striking miners and their families out of their homes.

Since there were no other residences in the mining communities, the strikers had to set up tents or build makeshift houses. Suffering strikers must have resented the imported workers even more for moving into their former homes.

Document #8

"Traitors"

Not all the Vancouver Island miners decided to join the UMWA and its strike. Some felt they could not afford to leave work. Others who had joined the protest earlier gave up, seeing the cause of union recognition as futile. In each case, strikers saw these persons as traitors.

Violence

Before August 1913, the UMWA had persuaded strikers to limit their protests to peaceful demonstrations, but tensions between strikers and the BC Provincial Police were growing. The special police, it seemed, served more to irritate the protestors than to protect the strikebreakers. A confrontation between a mounted policeman and an unarmed protestor had sparked a small riot in Cumberland in July, but the opposing groups backed off afterward.

"Nanaimo. Okalla Troop of the BC Mounted Police, 1913" BCARS [A-03138]

The last straw came on August 11, when the Western Fuel Company reopened its No. 1 mine in Nanaimo using strikers it had persuaded to return to work. Protestors threw stones at the new strikebreakers and fireboss as they returned from work, and jeered at the special police and coal company officials. Unresolved, the conflict spread to South Wellington, Ladysmith and Extension.

In the ensuing riots, hundreds of strikebreakers' and company officials' homes were looted and several burned. Strikers particularly targeted Chinese workers' homes, but they also raided those belonging to white strikebreakers and managers. Mine equipment and buildings were also vandalized and destroyed.

"Extension. Burned coal cars and pit-head building during the strike, 1913" BCARS D-03313

"Extension. Chinese miner's home looted during the strike, 1913" BCARS D-03308

"Extension. Mine Manager Cunningham's burned home during the strike, 1913" BCARS D-03316

The angry mobs also went after the strikebreakers themselves. Some of the strikebreakers took refuge in the woods or in other people's homes. Others fought the strikers with whatever weapons they could find. Still others promised not to return to work if the strikers would let them go.

Perhaps most distressing of the hardships faced by the strikebreakers, was the disgrace. They and their families would be remembered as "scabs" in their communities for many years to come. As one Cumberland man observed seventy-five years later, "It's not remembered who was on strike mostly, what's remembered is the guys who worked. And they're never forgotten. Everybody knows them."

Document #9
First Nations workers in the Big Strike

The evidence of First Nations workers in and around the Vancouver Island coal fields is fragmentary and discontinuous. Between 1860 and 1880 their role is problematic. It appears that they were employed only in some locales, primarily as stevedores and occasionally as surface labour. [Some studies] suggest that the miners were predominantly of British and American extractions. A few miles away, the Harewood coal mine in 1875 is said to have employed some 623 miners and mine workers. Of these, 396 were Europeans, 176 were Chinese, and some 51 were First Nations. There was a wage differential between European miners and others, although it is unclear whether this was due to different scales for the same jobs or not.

According to another source, by 1912:

The Native Indians had been the first miners. Two generations of them had worked in the mines, many of them underground, although only one, Johnnie Matchie, had ever held a miners certificate—and that had been taken away from him….
It is unclear what role native Indians played in the labour movement of the Nanaimo area. …It would be of interest to know if Indian workers were involved in the Nanaimo coal strike of 1912-1914. According to one account, the employers attempted to induce Indian workers in the Nanaimo area to act as strikebreakers, and when they refused they were blacklisted from future employment. It is difficult to evaluate this claim, but it is true that Indian coal handlers at Nanaimo are no longer mentioned in the reports of the Department of Indian affairs after 1912.

From Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia 1858-1930. By Rolf Knight, New Star Books, Vancouver, 1996