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NOLAN REILLY

## The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919\*

On 19 May 1919 news of the Amherst general strike spread throughout Nova Scotia. “So far as it can be learned”, the *Sydney Record* declared, “it is on practically the same lines as the one which has been paralyzing the city of Winnipeg for several days past”.<sup>1</sup> Another editor worried that this eastern “replica of Winnipeg labour troubles” might spread to other towns in the Maritimes.<sup>2</sup> Strike leader Frank Burke did little to alleviate these fears when he “championed the One Big Union idea” before a large meeting of local workers the next evening and predicted that “the time would be here speedily when the Union would have full power from the Atlantic to the Pacific”.<sup>3</sup> By the time of this speech, striking workers in Amherst had already closed the town’s eight largest industries and local mechanics and civic workers had also joined the strike. For the next three weeks the life of the community was dominated by the general strike. Throughout Amherst, “the new ‘One Big Union’ buttons” became “conspicuous not only on the streets, but also in many establishments, worn by the employees . . . in sympathy with the men”.<sup>4</sup> Most of the town’s workers and their families attended daily union meetings to discuss the progress of the strike. In speeches and petitions the strikers advanced their demands: recognition of the Amherst Federation of Labor — popularly known as the One Big Union —, improved wages and working conditions, and a shorter working day. At first the employers refused “to deal in any way or form with the One Big Union as a whole”, but after several weeks of often bitter negotiations they granted some, although certainly not all of their employees’ demands.<sup>5</sup>

Vying for public attention with the more dramatic episodes of class conflict that occurred in western Canada in 1919, the Amherst events received scant notice outside the Maritimes. Most contemporary commentators viewed the Amherst strike either as a sympathy strike to support Winnipeg workers or as a spontaneous protest against low wages and poor working conditions. Historians

\* For their critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper, the author would like to thank David Frank, Greg Kealey, Sharon Reilly, and David Sutherland.

1 *Record* (Sydney), 21 May 1919.

2 *Post* (Sydney), 20 May 1919.

3 *Daily News* (Amherst), 21 May 1919.

4 *Eastern Federationist* (Pictou), 31 May 1919.

5 *Daily News*, 22 May 1919.

have treated the general strike in much the same manner.<sup>6</sup> In part, this disinterest stems from the highly specialized regional interests of Canadian historians. While there have been a number of studies of western Canadian radicalism, the writing of Maritime and central Canadian working-class history has lagged behind.<sup>7</sup> But recent work suggests that what David Bercuson and others have seen as western exceptionalism in the early twentieth-century history of Canadian working class radicalism may well have been a more generalized phenomenon. The political and organizational form of this activity varied from region to region and the tendency to divide the country into radical and conservative groups of workers perhaps misses the variety of working class responses to post-war industrial capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

The Amherst general strike resulted from the interaction of two broad historical processes which began prior to the First World War. First, the impact of the de-industrialization that accompanied the centralization of power and wealth in central Canada affected Amherst's working class in immediate terms as working conditions, wages, and living standards fell behind those of other Canadian workers. Particularly ominous for local workers were the signs pointing toward the complete economic collapse of the town. Second, the local labour movement, partly because of previous failures, began to move toward a more radical response to these economic developments. In 1919, the merging of these two forces forged a new working class solidarity in Amherst, which found

6 David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto, 1978); Ernest R. Forbes, *The Maritimes Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal, 1979).

7 See, for example, David Frank and Nolan Reilly, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), pp. 85-113; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926" (PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979); Don Macgillivray, "Industrial Unrest in Cape Breton, 1919-1925" (MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1971); Robert Brym and James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1979). For an assessment of Canadian working-class historiography, see David Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Examination of the New Labour History in Canada" (unpublished paper delivered at the Conference on "Class and Culture: Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past", Montreal, 1980); Gregory S. Kealey, "The Working Class in Recent Canadian Historical Writing", *Acadiensis*, VII (1978), pp. 116-35; Gregory S. Kealey, "Labour and Working-Class History in Canada: Retrospect and Prospect" (unpublished paper delivered at the Conference on "Class and Culture: Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past", Montreal, 1980).

8 David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto, 1978), and "Labour Radicalism and the Western Frontier: 1897-1919", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII (1977), pp. 154-75. For other studies of western Canadian radicalism, consult Gerald Friesen, "'Yours in Revolt': The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Labour Movement", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, I (1976), pp. 139-57; A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto, 1977); Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston, 1968).

expression in the rise of the Amherst Federation of Labor, the renewed interest in socialist ideas and, of course, the three week general strike.

In 1919 Amherst's economy was in crisis. Like the rest of the Maritimes, the town was confronting the final effects of its integration into the national economy. Throughout the early years of the twentieth century, Amherst thrived on a manufacturing economy that produced railway rolling stock, steam engines and boilers, woollen goods, boots and shoes, enamel ware, furnaces, pianos, and home and office furniture. The largest manufacturer in town, Rhodes-Curry & Co., employed 2,000 men to build railway cars and to meet the demands of its construction business. Robb Engineering, known nationally for its engines and boilers, hired 500 workers, and the shoeworks and woollen mill each had 200 employees.<sup>9</sup> Between 1901 and 1906, Amherst's total value of production soared from \$1 million to \$4.5 million and the population doubled to reach almost 10,000.<sup>10</sup> The town bore the distinction of being one of the region's most important and rapidly growing manufacturing centers, and became known throughout the Maritimes as "Busy Amherst". Following the 1907-1908 recession, however, Amherst entered a period of decline that intensified over the next 15 years. The flood of central Canadian manufactured goods into the region and the extension of metropolitan financial control over the region's economy spelled disaster for the town.<sup>11</sup> In 1909, in the first and most important of a series of industrial mergers in Amherst, the million dollar Rhodes-Curry & Co. was linked with two Montreal concerns to form the Canadian Car & Foundry Co. The serious 1913-1914 depression signalled yet a further weaving of local manufacturing into the national economy. Industries severely reduced staff and at least one factory in Amherst closed permanently. Although this pattern was repeated across the country, few towns faced the total ruin of their manufacturing sector that was confronting Amherst.

The demands of the First World War brought an artificial buoyancy to Amherst's economy. Unemployment declined as men enlisted in the army and factories shifted to wartime production. The railway carworks concentrated on munitions, Robb Engineering built marine boilers and manufactured shells, the

9 Employment statistics are compiled from a variety of newspaper and government sources. See, for example, Nova Scotia, *Journals of the Assembly*, 1911, Appendix no. 15. Historical accounts of Amherst's two largest industries are available in *The Busy East* (March 1911) and Norman Ritchie, *The Story of Robb's* (Amherst, N.S., n.d.).

10 Canada, *Census*, 1911, vol. III, Table XI, "Manufactories of Cities having 5,000 inhabitants and over compared for 1891, 1901, 1911 by provinces".

11 A number of recent writings provide a general introduction to the economic history of Atlantic Canada: Brym and Sacouman, *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada*; T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes", *Acadiensis*, I (1971), pp. 3-28; David Alexander, "Economic Growth in the Atlantic Region, 1880-1940", *Acadiensis*, VIII (1978), pp. 47-76; David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation", *Acadiensis*, VII (1977), pp. 3-34.

piano factory provided shell boxes, and the woollen mill and shoeworks thrived on government contracts. The armistice of November 1918 brought an abrupt halt to this activity. Manufacturers warned of a prolonged "readjustment period" and prepared to lay off staff, as unemployment again became a serious problem with the return to Amherst of 500 war veterans. While many local residents worried about the ability, and in some cases, the desire of local business to make the transition to peace-time production, the most heated debates were reserved for speculation over the future of the crucially important carworks.<sup>12</sup> Before the war Canadian Car & Foundry had suspended operations at the Amherst Malleable Iron Co. and, in 1919, it announced the closing of plants in Halifax and New Glasgow. These actions were integral aspects of Canadian Car & Foundry's policy to concentrate production in central Canada. Supervised by Nathaniel Curry, former president of Rhodes-Curry, this policy threatened the existence of the Amherst carworks. As one observer remarked, "the days of the wooden cars" built in the Amherst works were passing as surely as the days of "wooden ships and iron men" had slipped into a bygone era. If Amherst was to remain an important center of the rolling stock industry, it needed modernization, especially equipment to construct pressed steel rolling stock. But while Canadian Car & Foundry modernized its Montreal facilities and constructed a new plant in Ft. William, it retreated from car building in Amherst.<sup>13</sup>

In 1919, the declining importance of the Amherst shops within Canadian Car & Foundry's corporate structure created three pressing problems for local workers: irregular employment, poor working conditions, and wage differentials favouring the company's Montreal employees. Finding steady employment was a serious concern for Amherst carbuilders. During the winter of 1918, the company operated with fewer than 200 men. Although this number increased to 800 in the spring months, this was still far below the 2,000 workers employed in 1905. Given the erratic employment practices of the company, even the men hired in 1919 had few prospects for steady work. Canadian Car & Foundry often raised the hopes of Amherst workers with announcements of massive hirings, followed several months later by equally impressive layoffs. Persistent rumours of one department or another being removed to Montreal further heightened the workers' anxieties.<sup>14</sup> Working conditions in the carworks also created tension. In 1919 moulder William Rackham complained to the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations of high gas levels in the foundry and claimed that the factory inspector refused to heed his complaints. The commissioners were urged to tour the plant and discover for themselves that conditions

12 Amherst *Daily News*, 4 January 1919; Town of Amherst, *Urban Renewal Study*, prepared by Norman Pearson and Canadian-British Engineering Consultants (Amherst, 1965), p. 12.

13 *Daily News*, 20, 21 June 1919; *Monetary Times*, *Annual Review for 1913*, p. 79.

14 *Daily News*, 21 June, 6 May, 17 June 1919.

“were far from being what the law demanded”.<sup>15</sup> Although such conditions were common, Canadian Car & Foundry’s decision not to direct new investment into its Amherst facilities undoubtedly aggravated the problem. The most contentious issue in 1919 was Canadian Car & Foundry’s decision not to extend to Amherst the agreement it reached with its Montreal employees. The Montreal contract recognized the International Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, and adopted the “Whitley Advisory Council idea”, the nine hour day with 10 hours pay, five day week, overtime pay, and layoffs by seniority. Considered a “fair and reasonable settlement” by the Amherst press and most local workers, all agreed that the contract should be extended to the eastern carmen, but the company refused to grant any concessions to its Amherst employees, except the nine hour day with no provision for 10 hours pay.<sup>16</sup>

The marginality of the Amherst shops to the financial health of the Canadian Car & Foundry strengthened significantly the company’s negotiating position. Concentration of railway car production in Montreal made it easier, and probably necessary, given the relative decline in productivity in Amherst, to resist the contract demands of eastern workers. Management believed that the long layoffs of the previous year and the threatened closure of the carworks, which finally occurred in the 1920s, would make the carmen reluctant to strike. Canadian Car & Foundry’s successful attempts to curtail union organizing in the years preceding the war, especially the 1914 defeat of the International Association of Machinists, further bolstered its determination to bargain hard in 1919.<sup>17</sup> But the carmen were equally determined to win a contract consistent with that of Montreal workers and partly because of their previous failures at union organizing, they began to move toward a broad based industrial unionism.

The same pressures that prodded the railway carmen toward a new form of union organization also affected other Amherst working-class families. In 1919 none of the town’s eight major industries appeared to have a particularly stable future. Managerial attitudes toward the employees of the Toronto controlled Dominion Manufacturing Co. and the Truro, Nova Scotia dominated Stanfield’s Co. varied little from those of Canadian Car & Foundry. Both Dominion Manufacturing’s 1914 purchase of Amherst’s Christie Woodworking Co. and Stanfield’s takeover of the Amherst Woollen Mill during the war were mergers to improve profits through reduced competition and were followed by a rationalization of productive capacity that detrimentally effected Amherst and

15 *Daily News*, 10 June 1919; *Eastern Federationist*, 14 June 1919.

16 *Daily News*, 13 May 1919. For information on the Whitley Council concept in Canada, see Bruce Scott, “‘A Place in the Sun’: the Industrial Council at Massey-Harris, 1919-1926”, *Labour/Le Travailleur*, I (1976), pp. 158-92.

17 “Strikes and Lockouts File”, Strike #1914 (15), RG 27, vol. 303, Public Archives of Canada [hereafter PAC].

brought the eventual closing of the facilities.<sup>18</sup> Next to Canadian Car & Foundry, Stanfield's was the most aggressive company in the pursuit of this policy. Stanfield's resisted any attempts to improve working conditions which were easily the most deplorable in Amherst and wages among the lowest in town. The employees' response was predictable, and between 1918-1920 they fought three bitter strikes and they were the last employees to return to work during the general strike.<sup>19</sup> In 1919 a number of important Amherst industries, including Amherst Boot & Shoe, Amherst Foundry, and Robb Engineering remained ostensibly locally owned and managed. These companies continued to struggle against the forces that had pushed other local industries into mergers, although Robb Engineering was already heavily financed by Montreal interests and the Amherst Foundry had proposed, but failed to complete, a union with a Port Hope, Ontario company. After the war, competition with central Canada's large scale "specialized factories" and a freight rate structure that was beginning to push local manufacturers even from traditional regional markets worried Amherst businessmen and during the general strike, local owners resisted the demands of their workers with the same determination as Amherst's absentee employers.<sup>20</sup>

In one way or another, the impact of regional underdevelopment touched the members of all classes in Amherst. For some individuals of the business class, like Nathaniel Curry, it brought participation in a financially attractive industrial merger and the continuation of a lucrative business career in Montreal.<sup>21</sup> Other manufacturers, like David Robb, who lacked Curry's shrewdness in the ways of high finance and probably retained some commitment to the region, faced the collapse of their industries before fierce central Canadian competition. Underdevelopment also posed a threat to the livelihood of many small businessmen, since factory closings and a declining population represented lost business to local merchants. Finally, the working-class families attracted to Amherst during the 1898-1908 boom faced a most uncertain future, since local industries offered little long term security and few immediate benefits.<sup>22</sup>

18 Dunn and Bradstreet, *Gazetteer for the Maritime Provinces* (July 1915), p. 370; A. Robson Lamy, "The Development and Decline of Amherst as an Industrial Centre" (Honours thesis, Mount Allison University, 1930).

19 *Daily News*, 22 May, 10 June 1919.

20 For an analysis of the problems facing Maritime capitalists in 1919, see Forbes, *Maritime Rights Movement*, esp. pp. 54-72.

21 *Monetary Times Annual Review for 1913*, p. 79: *Who's Who in Canada, 1919-1920* (Montreal, 1920).

22 *Daily News*, 21 June 1919.

Amherst's deepening economic crisis prompted a remarkable upsurge of local working-class activity in the immediate post-war years. In November 1918, while the Amherst Board of Trade sponsored armistice celebrations, labour spokesmen made their first public appeals to "workers of every grade" to join in the building of a new labour council. They argued that collective working-class action won industrial disputes and predicted "that so long as the employers can keep you [workers] in your unorganized condition, just so long will you be at their mercy".<sup>23</sup> This call for organization struck a responsive chord among Amherst's working-class population. In late November they formed the Amherst Federation of Labor, which by the end of the year had 700 members, making it the largest labour organization in the town's history. By April 1919, its ranks had doubled and, in the early days of the general strike, its membership must have numbered over 3,000.<sup>24</sup> Although it drew its leadership from among the town's skilled workingmen, the Amherst Federation of Labor's organization diverged significantly from that of the short-lived 1904 and 1913 labour councils chartered by the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada. The Amherst Federation of Labor rejected the exclusivism which had characterized the craft orientated pre-war movement and emphasized the organization of unskilled workers, the majority of whom had little trade union experience prior to 1919. The commitment to the unskilled went beyond union membership to include a genuine effort to reduce the wage gap between skilled and unskilled workers. In essence, the Amherst Federation of Labor was an independent industrial union that grouped the employees of Amherst's eight largest manufacturing concerns into one organization. The union also included building trades and civic workers, tailors, garage mechanics, the unemployed, especially the veterans, and even a restaurant owner, boarding house proprietor, and a local doctor. As former member Lester Doncaster recalls, it "was supposed to be One Great Union, just one Great Union of all the factories in Amherst".<sup>25</sup>

The initial structure of the Amherst Federation of Labor was relatively simple. Workers paid a "one dollar fee", which brought them the right to participate in the election of officers and all other affairs that came before the union.<sup>26</sup> Membership gave the workers, at least theoretically, an equal hand in setting contract demands, initiating strike action, and the ratification of all agreements reached with individual manufacturers. During a general strike the approval of all union members was required before any one group of employees could return to work. Yet, while the Amherst Federation of Labor functioned as a single body, special units were established in several of the factories. Dane Lodge, the first and largest of these units, was organized early and may, in fact,

23 *Ibid.*, 20 December 1918.

24 *Ibid.*, 3 January 1919.

25 Interview of Lester Doncaster by the author, Amherst, 1977.

26 *Daily News*, 20 December 1918.



have been organized simultaneously with the larger body. This lodge served as a workplace unit, giving special attention to the problems of union members employed in the carworks.<sup>27</sup> In May 1919 the Textile Workers' Union, a committee similar in purpose to Dane Lodge, was organized among the predominately female work force in the Amherst Woollen Mills.<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising that these units emerged first among the textile and carworkers since conditions in these shops made them the most militant in Amherst. In late summer 1918, before the formation of the Amherst Federation of Labor, both factories had experienced strikes of several days duration.<sup>29</sup> The presence of such organizations also accounts, in part, for the cohesiveness of these employees throughout the general strike. In June 1919 they were the last workers to reach settlements with their respective employers. Neither lodge, of course, had any independent status and they were bound by the decisions of the larger organization.

Although the Amherst Federation of Labor was the largest trade union organization in the town there were several locals of national and international unions. The railway freight handlers belonged to the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and some tradesmen supported the International Association of Machinists, Iron Molders' Union of America, and the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers' and Helpers' Union. The relationship between these unions and the Amherst Federation of Labor remains ambiguous. In the carworks, for example, most metal workers joined the Amherst Federation of Labor, probably while maintaining membership in their respective internationals. Throughout the general strike these skilled workers participated in the deliberations of Dane Lodge and other Amherst Federation of Labor activities.<sup>30</sup> A different situation existed in the Amherst Foundry where the moulders continued to support a strong I.M.U. presence. First organized in the 1890s, these moulders enjoyed the longest and most successful history of any Amherst union and, as recently as April 1919, had emerged victorious in a struggle over wage schedules. But although the Amherst Foundry moulders did not join the Amherst Federation of Labor, they struck in sympathy with the union.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand the metal-workers at Robb Engineering showed less support for the Amherst Federation of Labor. Robb's employed the largest concentration of metal-workers in Amherst, approximately 350 workers, perhaps one-half of whom were machinists and the remainder largely moulders and boilermakers. During the months leading up to the May confrontation,

27 *Ibid.*, 31 March 1919.

28 *Eastern Federationist*, 17, 24 May, 1919.

29 *Daily News*, 31 August, 9, 11 September 1918.

30 Interview of Lester Doncaster by the author, Amherst, 1977.

31 *Amherst Daily News*, 1 May 1919; "Strikes and Lockouts File", Strike #19 (92), RG 27, vol. 311, PAC; *Eastern Federationist*, 14 June 1919.

these workers gave what appeared to be lukewarm support to the Amherst Federation of Labor. Though they participated in the initial stoppage on 19 May, the men broke ranks with other workers and returned to work the following day. The reluctance of the Robb employees to follow the lead of the Amherst Foundry moulders and maintain a sympathy strike was influenced by several factors. First, and most significantly, the company's history of paternalistic management fostered at the very least the grudging loyalty of the work force into the 1920s. In fact, until 1919, Robb Engineering could boast that the company had never experienced a strike since its organization in 1891. This was a remarkable achievement since elsewhere metal-workers struggled against technological change and managerial reorganization of the work process. As early as 1909, the metal trades journal, *Canadian Machinery*, carried reports on Robb's experimentation with piece-work and the premium system, two important components of a managerial programme condemned by labour as "making of men what men are supposed to make of metals: machines".<sup>32</sup> Robb's dependency on shell contracts during the war also should have created workplace tensions, since munitions work often brought new initiatives by the employers in the areas of mechanization and the introduction of semi-skilled workers into positions controlled previously by tradesmen. This process of skill dilution generated numerous confrontations between management and labour in Canadian, British, and American metal shops. But at Robb Engineering these tensions never gave rise to a strike.<sup>33</sup>

David Robb embodied the paternalism that guided the company's industrial relations policies. Son of the industry's founder, active in local political and social affairs, and manager of Robb's for almost 20 years, David Robb was Amherst's most respected businessman. While guiding the company, Robb was reputed by some of his former employees to have "paid a fair day's wage", sponsored a sick benefit association, and maintained an apprenticeship program that "gave local boys a chance to get a skill and stay at home".<sup>34</sup> The company's economic problems were also important in keeping the men at work. Pushed from its traditional steam engine markets by large central Canadian suppliers of electric motors, Robb Engineering faced financial ruin in the pre-war years. After 1914, generous munitions contracts from the Borden government "gave 'Robbs' a new lease on life", but the company's problems returned with the

32 *Labour News* (Hamilton), 1 March 1912, as cited in Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Artisan: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century" (paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Saskatoon, 1979).

33 See Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Artisan"; Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-1914", *Canadian Historical Review*, LVIII (1977), pp. 423-58; James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London, 1973); David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (New York, 1979).

34 Interview of Robert McKay by the author, Amherst, 1976.

war's end and David Robb embarked on a new "staple line of production to fill the gap that must naturally follow the cancellation of shell orders". The Robb-Baker tractor was expected to be the industry's new source of riches and in 1919 it was ready for production.<sup>35</sup> The message for the employees was simple; only an immediate shift to tractor building could avert bankruptcy. This situation was well known to the workers because, as Robb told the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, he "showed his men his accounts, and demonstrated to them . . . the urgency of the contracts upon which it [the company] was working".<sup>36</sup>

The relatively harmonious state of industrial relations at Robb Engineering contrasted sharply with conditions at the Canadian Car & Foundry shops. To many Amherst residents, Robb's situation demanded the co-operation of management and labour to avoid the collapse of the company, which everyone feared. In the carworks the crisis seemed to be the creation of corporate policy makers, not uncontrollable economic forces, as the relatively financially secure Canadian Car & Foundry was preparing for a possible flight from Amherst in search of profits elsewhere. Such a program did little to instill any sense of loyalty among the company's Amherst employees and the carworks' history was dotted with bitter confrontations between management and labour, especially after the 1909 merger, when the general improvement in economic conditions gave rise to an upsurge in labour organizing. In the autumn of 1910 the carworkers formed Fair Play Lodge International Brotherhood of Railway Carmen of America (I.B.R.C.). While over 500 workers were brought into this industrial union, company hostility and internal strife brought its demise in early 1911.<sup>37</sup> After the I.B.R.C.'s collapse conditions in the carworks steadily worsened, as Canadian Car & Foundry used the recession of 1913 to introduce significant wage reductions for the workers. The rolling mill and sheetmetal workers struck on separate occasions but were successful only in limiting and not reversing wage reductions of almost 30 percent.<sup>38</sup> Buoyed by these victories, the carworks' management prepared for a major confrontation with its machinists, the company's only unionized workers, and in 1914 announced a 5 to 15 percent wage reduction for one-half of the company's 33 machinists. Rather than accept these changes, the members of the International Association of Machinists (I.A.M.) struck in a dispute that lasted for more than a year and that was never formally settled because the company continued production with non-union workers, forcing the I.A.M. to call off the strike.<sup>39</sup>

35 *Daily News*, 13 July, 29 August 1917, 9 October 1918, 4 January 1919.

36 *Ibid.*, 10 June 1919.

37 *Eastern Labor News* (Moncton), 18 February 1911.

38 "Strikes and Lockouts File", Strike #1914 (15) and 1914 (2), RG 27, vol. 303, PAC.

39 *Ibid.*, Strike #14 (23); *Eastern Labor News*, 9 August 1911.

The growth of conflict in the carworks during the pre-war years represented more than “simply conflicts over the size of the pay packet”.<sup>40</sup> After the turn of the century, it was the railway and metal-working industries in North America that sought to maximize profits through the assertion of greater control over the labour process. Management perceived the deeply held artisanal culture of their craftsmen and skilled workers as the major obstacle to the success of these plans and, in response to the artisans’ resistance to the erosion of workplace autonomy, tried to introduce efficiency schemes and mechanization programs to weaken the power of craft unions. The railway companies spearheaded this drive in North America and some of these changes were introduced into Amherst’s railway carbuilding shops at least as early as 1913. It is significant that the earliest strikes occurred in the metal-working divisions, which bore the brunt of management’s new assertiveness. Sheetmetal workers struck in August 1918 to protest working conditions and the firing of a moulder in early May 1919, for protesting the assignment of his helper to another job, almost sparked a general strike.<sup>41</sup> It was not only the metal-working trades in the carworks that felt these pressures. Writing to the *Industrial Banner* in 1914, painter Irvin McGinn asserted that attempts by Amherst employers to “mix-in . . . tradesmen and labourers of all classes” had turned many craftsmen “to the great and noble cause of unionism”.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately for these workers, their rate of organizational success was no better than that of the metal-workers.

The almost continuous conflict in the carshops, and the workers’ inability to maintain an effective craft union presence were important factors behind the growth of industrial unionism. Clashes with management prior to 1914 had demonstrated the ineffectiveness of craft unions in a factory employing as many as 25 different types of tradesmen and hundreds of semi-skilled workers and labourers. Appearing before the Mather Commission in June 1919, Frank Burke told the commissioners that the “all-grades principle” of the Amherst Federation of Labor was adopted precisely because “craft unions were too easily dismissed by the employers”.<sup>43</sup> Another prominent labour activist in Amherst, C.M. Arsenault of Pictou County, agreed that “craft unionism clings to the old ideas which are not keeping abreast of economic lines and advanced ideas”.<sup>44</sup> Tradesmen in the carworks responded enthusiastically to calls for a broad-based industrial organization. Eleven of the 13 men holding executive rank in the Amherst Federation of Labor between November 1918 and July 1919 worked for Canadian Car & Foundry; five of them were carpenters and four others

40 K.C.T.C. Knowles, *Strikes — A Study in Industrial Conflict* (Oxford, 1952), p. 219.

41 *Daily News*, 31 August 1918, 2, 3, 5 May 1919.

42 *Industrial Banner* (London), 1 May 1914.

43 *Daily News*, 10 June 1919.

44 *Ibid.*, 2 June 1919.

metal-workers. The president of the Amherst Federation of Labor, Frank Burke, a carpenter in the carworks; the vice-president, William McInnis, a moulder; and the recording secretary, Alfred Barton, another carpenter, had held executive positions in Fair Play Lodge, International Brotherhood of Railway Carmen prior to the war. This continuity of leadership in the Amherst labour movement was a crucial influence on the emergence of the Amherst Federation of Labor and it was not limited to the carworks. Others among the leadership cadre, like tailors Dan McDonald and John McLeod, had even longer records of involvement in local labour activities.<sup>45</sup>

The conditions that pressured workers towards new organizational forms were reinforced by a renewed interest in socialist ideas. Before the First World War, Amherst socialists maintained locals of the Socialist and Social Democratic parties, offered socialist candidates in civic elections, and joined other trade unionists in sponsoring a labour candidate in a 1909 provincial by-election.<sup>46</sup> The fracturing of the international socialist movement during the war discouraged many Amherst socialists, but by 1919 they had started once again to distribute radical literature, conduct street corner debates, and sponsor public forums. In February, a group of S.P.C. supporters invited Roscoe Fillmore, a prominent local socialist, to speak on "The Truth About Russia". In two lectures Fillmore accused the "capitalist press" of misrepresenting the revolution "because it was a purely working class movement" that meant "capitalist downfall everywhere if it succeeded in Russia".<sup>47</sup> This Amherst audience knew "little or nothing of the Russian situation", Fillmore observed, "and they drank it in like milk". Convinced that this "Amherst bunch contains the best blood of any part of the Maritime movement", Fillmore committed himself to organizing a new S.P.C. local among the "about 40 young energetic Reds" already in Amherst. This socialist presence was strongest in the carworks, where Fillmore found little difficulty in selling "a roll of *Red Flags* and *Soviets*".<sup>48</sup>

In April 1919, the sudden explosion of daylight saving time into a class question and the Amherst Federation of Labor's attempts to affiliate with the One Big Union reflected the increasingly militant mood of the working-class. Daylight saving first came to Canada in 1918 as a federal war measure. When

45 These biographies are compiled from town directories, the daily press, and various labour newspapers.

46 David Frank and Nolan Reilly, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), pp. 98-101.

47 *Daily News*, 24 February 1919.

48 R.A. Fillmore to Victor Midgley, 25 February 1919, Winnipeg Strike Trials Collection, The King vs. R.B. Russell, Provincial Archives of Manitoba [henceforth PAM]. The *Red Flag* and *Soviet* were S.P.C. publications.

the question of continuing the practice was left to the municipalities the next year, Amherst's town council convened a public meeting in April to discuss the issue. While merchants and manufacturers championed the idea, many workers, increasingly suspicious of any initiatives from the business people, opposed it. To demonstrate their opposition, 300 Amherst Federation of Labor members marched to the public meeting and "hooted down" daylight saving proponents. Roscoe Fillmore charged angrily that daylight saving was a capitalist plot to lengthen the working day. Other workers complained bitterly that because business people did not have to rise early in the morning, they were "not in a very good position to understand what the earlier time actually meant in the average workingman's home". As a result of this confrontation, and despite the best efforts of daylight saving proponents to revive the question, the issue, the *Daily News* reported, was squashed "flatter than the proverbial pancake".<sup>49</sup>

It was during this debate that the leaders of the Amherst Federation of Labor established contact with the western One Big Union movement. In a telegram to Victor Midgley, secretary of the O.B.U. Central Executive Committee, the Amherst workers inquired "as to what steps we should take to unite with the One Big Union".<sup>50</sup> Midgley replied two weeks later that the Maritimes had jumped the gun. The Central Executive Committee was only authorized to conduct a referendum among western trade unionists to determine if they wished to leave the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (T.L.C.) and form the O.B.U. Until then, the O.B.U. technically did not exist and had no "authority to issue or accept affiliations", although Midgley promised to keep his Amherst supporters in good supply with O.B.U. "leaflets and other propaganda".<sup>51</sup> In the western referendum held in May, approximately three quarters of the votes cast favoured replacing the T.L.C. with the O.B.U., whose supporters convened the new organization's founding convention on 4 June in Calgary. Several weeks later, the Amherst Federation of Labor voted 1185 to 1 to join the O.B.U.<sup>52</sup> This decision in favour of the O.B.U. marked the final rejection of affiliation with the T.L.C., which had been offered to the Amherst Federation of Labor in March 1919.<sup>53</sup>

The presence in Amherst of S.P.C. sympathizers may have provided the Maritimers with a link to the O.B.U. In the pre-war years Amherst socialists sustained an active S.P.C. branch that included such prominent Amherst

49 *Daily News*, 16, 17, 21 April 1919.

50 Alfred Barton to C. Stevenson, 10 April 1919, One Big Union Collection [henceforth O.B.U. Collection], PAM. Correspondence between the Amherst Federation of Labor and the O.B.U. is reprinted in Nolan Reilly, "Notes on the Amherst General Strike and the One Big Union", *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History*, 3 (Spring 1977), pp. 5-8.

51 Victor Midgley to Alfred Barton, 21 April 1919, O.B.U. Collection, PAM.

52 O.B.U. Vertical File 213, Special Collections, University of British Columbia.

53 *Daily News*, 22 March 1919.

Federation of Labor organizers as moulders William McInnis and Arthur McArthur, and Clarence Joise, a carpenter. Although it is not clear whether these men remained S.P.C. members, the S.P.C. did experience a revival in Amherst after the war and its activities gave the town direct contact with events in western Canada, where a number of S.P.C. activists such as Victor Midgley, R.B. Russell, and W.A. Pritchard, were involved in organizing the O.B.U.<sup>54</sup> The overlap in S.P.C. and O.B.U. personnel in the west was apparent to Amherst socialists and undoubtedly influenced them in the direction of the O.B.U. Yet, although this relationship may explain the Amherst socialists' interest in the O.B.U., it does not explain why the majority of Amherst union members followed suit. In fact, the decision of these Maritime workers to throw their lot in with a labour organization centered in western Canada is not as surprising as it may appear. First, similar to much of the west, Amherst lacked a strong craft union tradition. Except for the I.M.U., craft unions had been unable to protect skilled workers against the employers' assaults on their working conditions. Thus, in Amherst, the weakness of craft unions among skilled workers encouraged them to explore different forms of working class organization.

Another factor in the Amherst Federation of Labor's decision to affiliate with the westerners was the initial ideological eclecticism of the O.B.U. Because no single political position dominated the O.B.U.'s early activities, various socialist and syndicalist tendencies found a home in the union. Although this would change over the next few years, in the spring of 1919 the union's flexibility on political and industrial strategies opened the O.B.U. to many workers who otherwise might have rejected it. This was important in Amherst where the Amherst Federation of Labor's leadership was not influenced by the syndicalist tendencies popular in the west. In March 1919, Frank Burke headed the Amherst delegation attending a Halifax meeting of provincial labour leaders, which established a provincial federation of labour and discussed forming an independent labour party to contest the next provincial election.<sup>55</sup> C.M. Arsenault, Pictou County labour spokesman and editor of the *Eastern Federationist*, also advocated independent labour politics. In 1919, Arsenault spent many days in Amherst assisting in the Amherst Federation of Labor's organization and campaigning for the building of a labour party.<sup>56</sup> The industrial rather than craft emphasis in the O.B.U. also attracted local support to the union because the Amherst Federation of Labor was already an industrial union organized along the principles of One Big Unionism.

In the spring of 1919, local workers exhibited in their actions a solidarity that was unique in Amherst's history. Relatively minor issues exploded into hotly

54 David J. Bercuson explores the relationship between the S.P.C. and the founding of the O.B.U. in *Fools and Wise Men*.

55 *Eastern Federationist*, 8 March 1919; *Daily News*, 3 March 1919.

56 *Daily News*, 30 May 1919.

contested disputes. When a man was accused of stealing tools from his employer he was acquitted even though the judge in his charge to the jury "had no hesitation in saying that the accused was 'not a desirable citizen in the community'".<sup>57</sup> This episode and events like the daylight saving time dispute worried the editor of the *Daily News* because "though class consciousness has never been one of the particular manifestations of the workingman [sic] of this community, there is no question that it is showing a greater strength among them today than it ever did before".<sup>58</sup> On 1 May, events at the Canadian Car & Foundry almost precipitated a general strike when moulder Fred Reid was fired for protesting the assignment of his helper to another job. At a hastily convened meeting of the Amherst Federation of Labor, some members demanded a general strike to force the company to reinstate Reid. Although a majority of the workers at the meeting sympathized with Reid's plight, they decided to delay strike action since many of them had just returned to work after long layoffs. Another consideration of the membership was that Frank Burke and William McInnis were scheduled to leave shortly for Montreal to open negotiations with Canadian Car & Foundry officials and many Amherst Federation of Labor workers felt that strike action should be delayed until the results of these general bargaining sessions were known.<sup>59</sup>

The two Amherst Federation of Labor leaders travelled to Montreal on 15 May and, after several days of fruitless negotiations, climbed aboard an east bound train for Amherst, where a delegation of workers met them at the station to protest recent measures adopted by the carworks' management. While Burke and McInnis negotiated in Montreal, the company directors had instructed their Amherst manager to introduce the nine hour day without a provision for ten hours pay. The company's unilateral action particularly infuriated the Amherst Federation of Labor officials because they perceived it as an attempt to circumvent the union.<sup>60</sup> On Monday, 19 May, the carworkers milled around the gates to the Canadian Car & Foundry shops. The employees refused to begin the day's shift and "formed in parade marching through the principle [sic] streets" of Amherst to their meeting hall.<sup>61</sup> As the meeting commenced, many workers vented their frustrations with management but it was Burke who focussed their anger onto two issues: union recognition and wage differentials between eastern and central Canadian workers. Burke argued that the company precipitated the crisis by refusing to recognize that the Amherst Federation of Labor had "a

57 *Ibid.*, 11, 12 October 1918.

58 *Ibid.*, 21 May 1919.

59 *Ibid.*, 2, 5 May 1919.

60 *Eastern Federationist*, 24 May 1919.

61 *Ibid.*



right to be consulted on any changes of hours, or rules of wages, affecting the men".<sup>62</sup> Burke also demanded that the company extend to Amherst its agreement with Montreal employees for fewer hours with no decrease in take-home pay. After listening to Burke and several other Amherst Federation of Labor officials, the carworkers dispersed with a call for an emergency meeting of the union that evening.

News of the trouble at the carworks spread quickly throughout Amherst and the evening meeting was crowded with workers who "decided that employees of all industries in the town, including town employees cease work on Tuesday morning".<sup>63</sup> Although the strike was called to support Dane Lodge members, the employees of each industry were directed to meet separately to prepare additional demands to be presented to the town's employers along with the basic proposals for recognition of the Amherst Federation of Labor and the eight hour day. On Tuesday morning, every factory remained closed, building trades workers struck, and the town's outside workers left their jobs. In the evening, the Amherst Federation of Labor staged the largest working class rally in Amherst's history. "Between two to three thousand workers met at the Labour Hall", reported the *Eastern Federationist*, "formed in a line and paraded to the square".<sup>64</sup> After speeches by local and visiting labour spokesmen, Frank Burke recounted some of the background to the dispute and proclaimed the union's determination to stand firm until its demands were accepted by the manufacturers.<sup>65</sup>

The Amherst Federation of Labor's swift action caught many employers by surprise. After recovering from their initial "shock", they gathered at the Marshlands Club to evolve a common strategy and agreed unanimously to "absolutely" refuse "one and all to deal in any way or form with the 'One Big Union' as a whole". Throughout the first two weeks of the strike, this position remained firm except for one minor and very brief incident. Late in the first week of the strike, the owners of the Victor Woodworking Co. expressed their willingness to give a wage increase to their 75 employees and recognize the Amherst Federation of Labor. Pressure from other manufacturers, however, forced Victor's to reverse its stand. The small, locally owned business explained this change of policy as a decision not "to be the first squealer [sic]" among the employers and promised it would take direction from "the big fellows", Amherst's largest employers. In order to improve its tarnished image among other manufacturers, Victor's claimed to have installed a "new system" that required only five men to operate.<sup>66</sup>

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Ibid.*

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Daily News*, 20 May 1919.

66 *Daily News*, 22, 31 May, 10 June 1919; *Eastern Federationist*, 31 May 1919.

Although the employers agreed that union recognition was unacceptable, each industry used different tactics to get its employees back to work. Frank Stanfield, a principal owner in the Amherst Woollen Mill and director of the family's Truro textile mills, championed the intimidation technique. He refused to discuss the employees' demands, laid off his salaried staff, and announced that the Amherst plant was "closed down". Canadian Car & Foundry officials chose to ignore the strike, while the shoeworks and foundry managements agreed to meet with their workers, but not Amherst Federation of Labor negotiators. At Robb Engineering, David Robb appealed to his employees to return to work and promised to meet many of their grievances. Across the street from Robb's, the Amherst Piano Co. tried to entice its employees to return to work with a profit sharing proposal. Manager J.A. McDonald proposed that once the company achieved a seven percent net profit on capitalization all additional profits would be divided among the shareholders and employees. The workers rejected the scheme because, as Frank Burke pointed out, the company had never turned a seven percent profit in its six year history.<sup>67</sup>

The first crack in the solidarity the Amherst labour movement had enjoyed over the previous months occurred when the employees at Robb Engineering returned to work on the second day of the strike. But, despite the company's serious financial situation and David Robb's stature as a community leader, the strike ended only when Robb agreed to negotiate a new wage schedule and a shorter working day. The next week, when these negotiations bogged down, the workers threatened to strike until their demands were met. This announcement jolted David Robb into an agreement with "a committee representing employees", granting higher wages, a nine hour day, and the "Whitley Council principle".<sup>68</sup> In the final analysis, it was Robb Engineering's dire economic straits that kept its employees working throughout most of the general strike. Other factories with a history of relatively harmonious industrial relations and owners with a community stature that equalled that of David Robb could not persuade their employees to abandon the general strike. To attribute the actions of the predominantly skilled work force at Robb's simply to some tradition of craft exclusivism also seems to miss the point. The Amherst Federation of Labor won solid support from the town's other skilled workers and there is no reason to assume that Robb employees were unusually craft conscious. After their return to work the Robb employees did not abandon the Amherst Federation of Labor, as the machinists, moulders, and boilermakers made important contributions to the union's strike fund.<sup>69</sup>

67 *Eastern Federationist*, 31 May, 7 June 1919; *Daily News*, 22, 26, 29 May 1919.

68 "Strikes and Lockouts File", Strike #19 (144), RG 27, vol. 313, PAC; *Eastern Federationist*, 31 May, 14 June 1919.

69 *Eastern Federationist*, 14 June 1919.

Several events cushioned the effect of the Robb employees' return to work on the morale of the Amherst Federation of Labor. Most important was the town council's decision to give "full recognition" to the union and to implement the eight hour day with ten hours pay.<sup>70</sup> The town council's concession to the civic workers was its attempt to find an impasse to the continuing confrontation between the Amherst Federation of Labor and the employers. A majority of the councillors were small businessmen: a contractor, merchant, realtor, farm implement's agent, two lawyers, and a foreman with shares in the Amherst Foundry Co., who were suffering from the decline in business precipitated by the general strike. In fact, the councillors and other small businessmen expressed some cautious support for the strikers, especially those employed by the carworks. Many felt that, as the *Daily News* editorialized, the "unpleasantness in the town was due almost altogether to the uncertainty that has prevailed at the Car Works".<sup>71</sup> Lawyer and former Liberal M.P. Hance Logan chided Canadian Car & Foundry "with its head office and Directorate in Montreal" because it was "naturally more interested" in its central Canadian operations "than [in] our own local industry".<sup>72</sup> Thus, at the end of May when the Amherst Federation of Labor approached the council to arbitrate the strike, the council immediately appointed a committee to try and resolve the dispute.<sup>73</sup> After several days of separate meetings with the union and employers, the committee announced that the employers were prepared to bargain with committees of their employees, including a member of the Amherst Federation of Labor executive. Furthermore, the employers conceded that the employee committees with whom they would meet did not have "the power to accept or refuse any proposition without the sanction" of the Amherst Federation of Labor general executive.<sup>74</sup> This in effect recognized the Amherst Federation of Labor because executive decisions required membership sanction. Elated by the decision, the union committees met with the employers, expecting a quick end to the strike, but the manufacturers retracted their offer without explanation.

The employers probably hoped that the desperate economic circumstances facing many of the strikers would force them to return to work. Apparently the union officials shared a similar concern, for they launched a major fund raising drive. A relief committee solicited funds from the Robb employees and local merchants, and sent delegations to labour meetings in Moncton, Joggins, and Springhill. The best response came from the Springhill miners who collected \$537 in a house to house canvass.<sup>75</sup> The Amherst Federation of Labor also

70 *Ibid.*, 31 May 1919.

71 *Ibid.*, 20 June 1919.

72 *Ibid.*, 21 May 1919.

73 Amherst Town Council *Minutes*, 26 May 1919, p. 5, Amherst Town Hall.

74 *Daily News*, 26, 27, 3 May 1919.

75 United Mine Workers of America, Local 4514, Springhill, Nova Scotia, *Minute Book*, 31 May, 5 July 1919, Springhill Miners' Museum.

organized a "patronize those who patronize us" campaign and advertised that "electrical workers" and "employees of different industries" affected by the strike would accept odd jobs around Amherst.<sup>76</sup> Moral support came in the form of a continuous flow of labour leaders into the town. C.C. Dane and C.M. Arsenault of Pictou County; Silby Barrett of Cape Breton; W.N. Goodwin of Truro, formerly of the Winnipeg T.L.C.; and a number of Cumberland County United Mine Workers' of America officials addressed the various union evening meetings.<sup>77</sup> As the general strike continued through the first week of June, support for the Amherst Federation of Labor remained strong. By this point in the dispute, picketing was unnecessary. Early in the strike Victor Woodworking had attempted to re-open with non-union staff, but the Amherst Federation of Labor members had marched to the plant and frightened away the employees. After the initial excitement of the first few days of the strike, the daily routine of many working class families centered around putting in their gardens, perhaps spending the afternoon at the labour hall, and attending the evening union meeting.<sup>78</sup>

On 9 June the federal government's Royal Commission on Industrial Relations opened hearings in Amherst, bringing together representatives from both sides in the general strike. Several hundred Amherst Federation of Labor members greeted "with hearty" laughter D.W. Robb's report to the commission, especially his assertion that rents in Amherst were low. On the other hand, the workers "warmly applauded any statement that appeared to favour them", until Justice Mather, the chairman, "threatened to adjourn the meeting if quiet was not maintained". Over the afternoon, Mather and his fellow commissioners heard Amherst's most prominent businessmen condemn the Amherst Federation of Labor for leading a strike "similar to that in Winnipeg". They also endorsed international unions in preference to "local organizations" and committed themselves to the eight hour day, if it was adopted universally across Canada. Labour spokesmen used the commission's hearings as another opportunity to catalogue their list of grievances against local employers. Although the session did not settle the strike, the opportunity to vent its frustrations with conditions in Amherst to an apparently neutral body boosted the union's morale.<sup>79</sup>

Throughout the strike, attacks were made on the integrity of the union's leadership. Frank Burke felt the brunt of most of these individual attacks, although G.M. Arsenault, as an outside "labour agitator", faced considerable criticism. When the Amherst Federation of Labor's leadership was accused of

76 *Eastern Federationist*, 7 June 1919.

77 *Daily News*, 7 June 1919.

78 Interview of Thaddie Gould by the author, Amherst, 1977.

79 *Daily News*, 10 June 1919; *Eastern Federationist*, 14 June 1919.

transferring union funds to the local Catholic Church, Burke replied that these "rumours" were attempts "to split the organization through the creation of religious strife". When some employers pronounced that international unions were preferable to "local organizations", many workers saw this as yet another ploy to weaken the Amherst Federation of Labor. In one particularly bitter report *Daily News* editor, A.D. Ross, one of the strongest exponents of craft unionism, criticized the Amherst Federation of Labor for disregarding "regular trade union principles" and for adopting "the Western One Big Union program". Concerned by the effectiveness of the general strike, Ross worried that "force" would be the "only medium to be applied in the settlement of future industrial disputes in the community".<sup>80</sup>

The most serious attack on the union's credibility came when the *Daily News* reported on 6 June that at the previous evening's meeting, employees from Victor Woodworking had tried to raise the question of a return to work, but "failed to get a complete hearing". After witnessing these events, disgusted employees of another woodworking company also interested in ending the strike decided to "retire from the hall". Frank Burke quickly challenged the story's accuracy, insisting that the appeal presented by six employees of the Victor Woodworking Co. had been aired fully at the meeting. When their position was put to a general membership vote, he pointed out that almost 1,400 strikers voted "in favour of leaving the matter in the hands of the general executive".<sup>81</sup> The principle of maintaining the general strike until all workers had acceptable agreements with their employers had been confirmed earlier in the week, when the Amherst Boot & Shoe Co. had offered its employees a settlement weighted heavily in favour of its skilled workers. When several of these skilled workers had brought the offer to an Amherst Federation of Labor meeting, the shoeworks' largely unskilled women workers, with the support of the majority of the company's skilled employees, had strenuously opposed it. Not surprisingly, the proposed settlement had been defeated soundly and the strike at the shoeworks continued.<sup>82</sup>

At the end of the strike's third week, the town council's strike committee managed to bring the two sides together. With the union's strike fund depleted it was only the strikers' determination to wring concessions from the manufacturers that kept them away from work. On the other hand, the employers recognized that their factories would not re-open until a number of union demands were met. Who was to make what compromises remained the crucial question. At the Amherst Federation of Labor's meeting on 12 June, Frank Burke announced that the labour situation had "changed materially" over the

80 *Daily News*, 9 June, 21 May, 6 June 1919.

81 *Ibid.*, 6, 7 June 1919.

82 *Eastern Federationist*, 7 June 1919.

past few days. The Amherst Boot & Shoe, Amherst Foundry, Christie Bros., and the Victor Woodworking Co. had offered to meet with Amherst Federation of Labor committees from their factories and had conceded the nine hour day with wage increases that ensured that the workers' weekly pay remained at pre-strike levels. Similar agreements with the Canadian Car & Foundry and Rhodes-Curry Woodworking also appeared likely. Burke informed his audience that "after long deliberation" the Amherst Federation of Labor executive had decided to recommend that the union accept these offers; the alternative was to "continue a deadlock to the bitter end", which, given the financial circumstances of many members, seemed pointless. Union members, wearied by the long strike, agreed and "adopted unanimously" the executive's position.<sup>83</sup> Workers in the four factories with new wage scales scheduled an immediate return to work and the others planned to follow suit as soon as agreements could be finalized with their employers. In the case of Canadian Car & Foundry and Rhodes-Curry, wage schedules similar to those of the other four factories were agreed to the following day.<sup>84</sup> The woollen mill and a local garage remained on strike for several days longer until the garage mechanics called off their strike. The dispute at the woollen mill proved more complex, as Stanfield continued to ignore the strike, but the factory gradually re-opened.

How did Amherst workers assess the results of their three week general strike? Some workers, like textile worker Albert St. Peter, were embittered and accused Burke of the misuse of union funds.<sup>85</sup> But this was not the opinion of the majority of Amherst Federation of Labor members, who in July re-elected the union's executive for another year. They must have agreed with the *Eastern Federationist's* assessment of the May events: "We heartily congratulate the Amherst union workers on their victory for no matter what may be said to the contrary it was a victory for their recognition and [sic] raise in pay. Not bad for beginners".<sup>86</sup> But while the majority of workers did win a shorter working day and higher wages, the victory was not all they had hoped for. Through their resistance to the union, the employers managed to stop the Amherst Federation of Labor short of the eight hour day and at the woollen mill they defeated the union on all counts. Coupled with the events at Robb Engineering, these employer initiatives weakened the union and it never recovered the momentum it had enjoyed in the months prior to the strike.

The energy of the Amherst labour movement did not suddenly dissipate after the general strike. In the months ahead, the Amherst Federation of Labor continued to represent local workers and remained especially strong in the carworks. Although its leadership changed little over the next several years it

83 *Daily News*, 13 June 1919.

84 *Ibid.*, 16 June 1919; *Eastern Federationist*, 21 June 1919.

85 Interview of Albert St. Peter by the author, Amherst, 1977.

86 *Eastern Federationist*, 5 July, 23 August 1919.

seems unlikely that they maintained any formal contact with the O.B.U. beyond 1919. In 1920 local events continued to consume the union's attention as the women employees at Stanfield's led their third strike in as many years; the principle issue once again was working conditions.<sup>87</sup> At the Canadian Car & Foundry and at Robb Engineering, metal workers struck over demands for wage parity with central Canadian workers and for better working conditions.<sup>88</sup> The 1920 provincial election also attracted the attention of the Amherst labour movement as they helped elect Springhill miner Archie Terris, Cumberland County's Independent Labor Party candidate. Yet, despite all this activity, by the middle of the 1920s the formal presence of a trade union movement in Amherst had all but disappeared. In 1923, the Amherst Federation of Labor dissolved and the locals of international unions among machinists, moulders, and boilermakers struggled to survive in a time of declining memberships. Although in the 1920s trade union activity declined nationally for a variety of political and economic reasons, it was above all the depressed state of Amherst's economy which explains the downturn in the fortunes of the local labour movement.<sup>89</sup> The worst fears voiced for Amherst's future in 1919 had become a reality as the carworks, woollen mill, shoe factory and several smaller companies closed permanently, and Robb Engineering, now a division of Dominion Bridge Co., employed fewer than 100 workers. The collapse of the town's industries left almost 3,000 residents unemployed and many of them began the trek "down the road" to Canada's other regions and the New England states. Between 1921 and 1931, Amherst's population declined from 10,000 to 7,500.<sup>90</sup>

The Amherst general strike was the response of the local working-class to the post World War One crisis of industrial capitalism at home and abroad. In Amherst, as elsewhere in the Maritimes, intensifying regional disparities gave the situation a special urgency. In shaping their reaction to this crisis, local labour leaders drew on their pre-war trade union and political experiences, which when combined with the ideas of industrial unionism and socialism, were institutionalized in the Amherst Federation of Labor. Seeking protection in the workplace and wage parity with other Canadians, Amherst's skilled and non-skilled workers alike created the town's largest, most militant and, at least temporarily, most successful labour organization. On the other hand, it was these same regional economic and social forces that eventually destroyed the Amherst Federation of Labor and that have severely weakened the local labour movement through to this day.

87 "Strikes and Lockouts File", Strike #20 (103), RG 27, vol. 320, PAC.

88 *Ibid.*, vol. 321, Strike #20 (200); vol. 322, Strike #20 (245).

89 A discussion of the problems facing the Canadian labour movement in the 1920s can be found in Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble. Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66* (Ottawa, 1968), pp. 192-213.

90 Town of Amherst, *Urban Renewal Study*, pp. 12-3.