

# "All Solid Along The Line": The Reid Newfoundland Strike of 1918

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Article abstract

As the Canadian and international record will testify, the years between 1917-1920 were critically important to workers' aspirations for industrial unionism. An account of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association (NTWA) has largely been passed over in the writing of the Island's labour history. Yet this organization figures prominently in the events which helped to shape the labour-capital relationship during the wartime period. In the Newfoundland context, the effective use of the strike weapon during this period is a telling indicator of the heightened sense of militancy resulting from the temporary convergence of labour organizations around issues relating to the war. Centred in St John's, but exerting an Island-wide presence, the NTWA arose out of a pressing need for Newfoundlanders to address the economic and political exigencies of World War I. This article examines the NTWA in terms of its structure, membership, and mandate for change with specific reference to the major confrontation waged between the NTWA and their principal opponent, the Reid Newfoundland Company in the spring of 1918.

# All Solid Along The Line:

## The Reid Newfoundland Strike of 1918

Peter McInnis

THE 1918 REID NEWFOUNDLAND STRIKE commenced exactly as planned at 11:00 a.m. *sharp*. Workers, anxious to demonstrate a unified front, followed their schedules to the letter. One newspaper account described some of the proceedings in detail:

Lined up in front of the express [company] were the express drivers and truckmen, and as the signal was given, drove down Water Street to the stable at the rear of the electric light department on Horwood's wharf, where they stabled their horses. At the same time six street cars lined up on Water Street at the foot of Adelaide Street, and proceeding west, the motormen backed their cars into the yard. Everything was done in a quiet and orderly manner.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, at the railway shops, electricians, engineers, machinists, boiler-makers, blacksmiths, and general labourers downed their tools and left the company premises. The workmen were also joined by clerical staff in the plant's offices.<sup>2</sup> The union executive informed the newspapers that the next day's express train to Port-aux-Basques (the Dominion's eastern railhead and major connection to North America) would be allowed to leave the city, while the fate of other trains would be suspended pending further developments. The strikers noted this decision would also apply to the Reid Newfoundland Company's entire steamship operations. If implemented, these measures would effectively isolate the capital city from all outside contact. Further, Reid employees at the Petty Harbour hydroelectric generating plant, the key source of the city's electric power, notified local newspapers that they were prepared to cease operations "in the event of the necessity of bringing still more pressure to bear upon the Company."<sup>3</sup> Quickly moving to capture the support of St. John's workers, a series of city-wide meetings were convened. At every union gathering, scores of new members stepped forward to join the move-

<sup>1</sup>*Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 27 March 1918.

<sup>2</sup>*Daily Star* (St. John's), 27 March 1918.

<sup>3</sup>*Evening Herald* (St. John's), 27 March 1918.

ment. Working people realized that the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association (NIWA) was seeking to do what no earlier group had done: to force the company to respect the rights of organized labour.

Recent scholarship has begun to uncover a more accurate history of the Island's working-class. But as yet, "we know little of the lives and achievements of labouring Newfoundlanders."<sup>4</sup> With the exception of the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU), which has received considerable analysis as a third-party political entity, only a handful of labour studies exist.<sup>5</sup> The story of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association largely has been overlooked in this work. The NIWA figured prominently in the events which helped shape the labour-capital relationship during, and immediately following, the World War I years.<sup>6</sup> Centred in St. John's, but exerting an Island-wide influence, the NIWA arose from working people's pressing need to confront the economic and political realities of their class so as to redress their subservient and exploited situation. Originally known as the Newfoundland Iron Workers' Association, the NIWA was formed in April 1917 by a group of metal workers employed in the Reid Newfoundland Company railway shops. When membership swelled beyond the ranks of Reid employees, the name was changed in order to reflect this new constituency.<sup>7</sup>

The years 1917-20 saw a working-class upheaval of unquestionably international scope. Frequently, the events surrounding World War I have been described as a watershed between 19th- and 20th-century struggles. For working people, the war was an opportunity to develop new forms of collective action on a scale beyond what was often possible in times of peace. Much of this labour activism coalesced around the energized potential for industrial unionism. Newfoundlanders were not immune to this international current. Investigation of the Dominion's labour history, however, reveals both parallels and curious anomalies when compared with North American experience. This study attempts to reconstruct this St. John's-based union movement, and addresses questions about the goals and limitations which constrain spontaneous labour movements, and how Newfoundland's peculiar nature affected the NIWA's history.

By spring 1918, wartime inflation, spurred by rampant profiteering, developed into a hostile atmosphere of confrontation. From this resulted the major dispute

<sup>4</sup>Bill Gillespie, "A History of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour, 1936-1963," MA thesis, Memorial University, 1980.

<sup>5</sup>On the F.P.U., see Ian D.H. McDonald, *To Each His Own': William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-1925*, J.K. Hiller, ed. (St. John's 1987); Robert J. Brym and Barbara Neis, "Regional Factors in the Formation of the Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland," in Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto 1979), 203-18.

<sup>6</sup>The NIWA is the partial focus of one study: Robert Cuff, "The Quill and the Hammer: Labour Activism in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, 1917-1925," BA (Hon) dissertation, Memorial University, 1980; while standard accounts of this period provide only minimal details, see S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto 1971). This organization is briefly mentioned in Canada, Department of Labour, *Tenth Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada* (Ottawa 1921), 61-2.

<sup>7</sup>*Daily Star*, 2 April 1918.

between the NIWA and the Reid Newfoundland Company. This strike was one of a series of job actions by Reid employees — for provoking labour unrest long had been a prominent feature of Company practices. A brief background of the Reid family and the empire they founded provides necessary context for this strike.

Newfoundland entered the railway-construction era later than mainland North America due to its relative isolation, and its historical oceanic orientation towards the British Empire and the Western European economy.<sup>8</sup> “When the colony did begin railroad building, it was not primarily in response to continental pressures, but because the traditional, fish-based economy was not sufficiently productive to give most Newfoundlanders an adequate level of employment and income.”<sup>9</sup> The Dominion was under intense financial and political pressure to diversify its economy and make use of the Island’s mineral and timber resources.<sup>10</sup> The decision to develop the transportation infrastructure as an incentive for further projects, buttressed with additional tariff barriers, has been described as Newfoundland’s “national policy.”

After several abortive schemes and delays, the decision was finally made to award a railway contract. In June 1890, Robert G. Reid crossed the Cabot Strait to Newfoundland.<sup>11</sup> This marked the beginning of a lengthy and troubled relationship. Reid eventually completed the line to the railway’s new western terminus at Port-aux-Basques by 1897. The following year, the Newfoundland government faced national calamity. St. John’s had been rebuilding both its physical and financial structures as a result of a disastrous fire (1892), followed by a bank crash (1894). The collapse of fish prices added to a mounting public debt, and the government was faced with the onerous prospect of operating a railway which many felt certain to lose money. Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, summed up the British reaction: “The future of the Colony will be placed entirely in the hands of the contractor in this railway contract, [a situation] which appears highly improvident.”<sup>12</sup> Taking advantage of the Dominion’s weak fi-

<sup>8</sup>David G. Alexander, “Newfoundland’s Traditional Economy and Development to 1934,” *Acadiensis*, 5 (1976), 56-78.

<sup>9</sup>J.K. Hiller, “The Railway and Local Politics in Newfoundland, 1870-1901,” in J.K. Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto 1980), 123; J.K. Hiller, “The Newfoundland Railway, 1881-1949,” *Newfoundland Historical Society*, pamphlet number 6 (St. John’s 1981); David G. Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: An Economic History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John’s 1977), 1.

<sup>10</sup>David G. Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, comp. E.W. Sager, L.R. Fisher, and S.O. Pierson (Toronto 1983), 9-10.

<sup>11</sup>Alexander, *Essays*, 136; Robert Gillespie Reid, born in Scotland, 1842; first trained as a stonemason and later worked in Australian gold ventures. Reid became involved in railway contracting and built a number of important railway bridges (including that over the Lachine River at Montreal) in the United States and Canada. He had amassed a considerable personal fortune working on CPR projects by the time he travelled to Newfoundland. Reid died in Montreal in 1908, passing his corporate holdings on to his three sons. “The Great Sir Robert Reid-The Man Who Built The Railway,” in J.R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland*, vol. 3, (St. John’s 1937), 568-73.

<sup>12</sup>A.B. Morine, *The Railway Contract, 1898 and Afterwards* (St. John’s [1933]), 9; Newfoundland. *The Royal Commission, 1933, “Amulree Report”* (London 1934), 33-4.

nances, Reid offered to negotiate a new extended contract for the railway. The result was the infamous 1898 agreement known as the "Reid Deal."<sup>13</sup>

In return for a cash payment of \$1 million, Reid secured astounding concessions: a 50-year contract to operate the national railway; land grants totalling over five million acres (including mineral and water rights); a 30-year franchise to operate the Dominion's coastal steamship service, and the vital Cabot Strait ferry linking the railhead at Port-aux-Basques to Nova Scotia; the publicly-owned St. John's dry dock; and the Dominion telegraph system.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Reid was to establish the St. John's Street Railway Company, which would build and run a streetcar system powered by a Company-owned hydroelectric plant to be situated outside the city.<sup>15</sup> "In short, the colony's entire communications system was to be handed over to a private individual."<sup>16</sup> Reviewing this period, J.K. Hiller notes that contemporary journalists "spoke of Reid as another Cecil Rhodes; a more analogous figure might be K.C. Irving."<sup>17</sup>

The 1898 pact firmly established the Reids as major players in Newfoundland society, for here was an "empire which began to rival the government as a source of patronage."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the source of this influence lay in industrial development schemes and not with the traditional power base of the fish merchants. "Ultimately, the question of Reid's place in the economy and politics of the Island split the traditional governing elite into pro-Reid and anti-Reid factions."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Reid Deal caused a political furor which led to the defeat of the government, and a new administration with the express mandate to stop "czar Reid" and his family from further dominating Newfoundland's economy.<sup>20</sup> In 1901, the original contract was modified, and the Reids relinquished their reversionary interests in the railway and telegraph system, and formally created the Reid Newfoundland Company.<sup>21</sup> "In all, it cost the colony some \$2.5 million to repurchase assets which, in the opinion of the vast majority of its citizens, should never have been surrendered in the first place."<sup>22</sup> These events ensured that the Reid name long would be synonymous with exploitation.

The advent of the Reid Newfoundland Company, with its monopoly on Dominion transportation and extensive resource-development interests, introduced a new reality for organized labour. Instead of dealing with modestly-capitalized,

<sup>13</sup>Noel, *Politics*, 27-9.

<sup>14</sup>For a further explanation, see: J.W. McGrath, "The 1898 Contract," *Newfoundland Historical Society*, St. John's, 1973; Alfred R. Penney, "The Newfoundland Railway: Newfoundland Epic," in *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 3, 473-502.

<sup>15</sup>For details, see Brian Wadden, "The St. John's Street Railway Company," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 64 (1965), 3-5, 27-30.

<sup>16</sup>Noel, *Politics*, 27.

<sup>17</sup>Hiller, "Railway and Local Politics," 139.

<sup>18</sup>Noel, *Politics*, 26.

<sup>19</sup>Noel, *Politics*, 26.

<sup>20</sup>Hiller, "Railway and Local Politics," 140.

<sup>21</sup>For an explanation, see Morine, *Contract*, Amulree Report, 35-7.

<sup>22</sup>Noel, *Politics*, 34.

relatively small-scale business firms, workers now confronted the "Reid octopus" — a corporation which integrated both vertically and horizontally into a broad spectrum of ventures.<sup>23</sup> Combined with the transportation industries, Reid's resource-extraction and secondary manufacturing ventures made the firm a powerful and broadly-based corporation, armed with considerable economic and political clout. As the Newfoundland Royal Commission (1933) headed by Lord Amulree would note, "the Reid Newfoundland Company remained for some years the biggest paymaster in the Island, bigger even than the government itself."<sup>24</sup> Although Reid influence permeated the Island, its corporate presence was most keenly felt in the capital city itself.

The city's demographic picture changed rapidly during 1900-10, when St. John's consolidated its dominance of Dominion industry and commerce. St. John's urban population increased by 15.2 per cent, from 29,504 in 1901 to 34,111 in 1911.<sup>25</sup> This expansion caused a 72.1 per-cent increase in the city's labour force during the same period (from 7,505 to 12,923). The workers in question were absorbed by a developing secondary-manufacturing sector, including some heavy industry. In the ten years between census tallies, those employed in secondary manufacturing rose from 18 to 26 per cent of the local labour force. Expansion of the heavy-industry and service sectors was partially due to Reid's location in the capital city.

Reid Newfoundland dominated transport and heavy industry in the St. John's economy. The city was the eastern railhead and deep-water terminus of the Newfoundland Railway and the Reid steamship fleet. As contemplated in the 1898 and 1901 contracts, Reid concentrated operations in the city's west end, where a new railway depot was built on the site of the municipal basin. An extensive range of supply, service, and repair facilities were developed there.<sup>26</sup> Here, too, were the Company's machine, locomotive, car, and dock shops where Reid deployed a diverse labour force of skilled craftworkers and helpers to build and maintain its marine and railway stock.<sup>27</sup> "The combined dry dock and machine shop was far and away the largest heavy metal operation in the city by 1913, employing over 130 tradesmen, labourers, and management personnel."<sup>28</sup> This sum increased

<sup>23</sup>Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), P7/B/19. Reid Newfoundland Company Papers (RNCP). Some of the Reid corporate ventures included: Newfoundland Timber Estates (logging/sawmills); Newfoundland Products Corp. (pulp and paper, chemical manufacturing); Newfoundland-Atlantic Fisheries Ltd. (processing and export of frozen fish to England).

<sup>24</sup>McGrath, *Newfoundland in 1911* (London 1912), 24, as quoted in Lord Amulree's Report.

<sup>25</sup>Newfoundland, *Census of Newfoundland and Labrador*. 1901, 1911.

<sup>26</sup>Penney, "Newfoundland Railway," 487.

<sup>27</sup>McGrath, *Newfoundland*, 69. McGrath claimed that in the Reid machine shops: "boilers are built, marine and locomotive engines constructed, and all parts and fittings for steamers and railway cars are made and repaired.... This, as might be imagined, calls for the employment of an army of skilled mechanics and other operatives." McGrath often engaged in Newfoundland boosterism, but if his description is accurate, it describes an important railroad operation in St. John's.

<sup>28</sup>John Joy, "The Growth and Development of Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's, 1870-1914," MA thesis, Memorial University, 1977, 149.

dramatically during wartime economic growth. A more-detailed breakdown of Reid's St. John's-based labour force is obtained from company records: a conservative estimate is that of between 1,000 and 1,200 in May 1918.<sup>29</sup> This excludes several Company ventures in the city, such as a large cold-storage plant for processing fresh fish, which would push the Reid-employed work force even higher. Given these numbers, Reid Newfoundland clearly was the city's major industrial employer. Census data do not specify job classifications or gender divisions, but estimation from this source suggests that the Company employed nearly 25 per cent of the St. John's male labour force during this period.<sup>30</sup>

Reid operations brought together a wide array of skilled workers, ranging from boilermakers and moulders to electricians and shipwrights. In this concentrated environment, workers could interact and discuss issues of mutual concern. The most-outspoken skilled workers were those in the metal trades. The names of those identified as the NIWA nucleus confirms the dominance of moulders, boilermakers, and machinists. It is hardly surprising to find machinists in the forefront of such an organization. With their well-earned reputation for union activism and aggressive defense of their control of the shop floor, machinists were among the most militant of the industrial crafts.<sup>31</sup>

Newfoundland machinists had organized as "Terra Nova" Lodge 87 of the International Association of Machinists in August 1904.<sup>32</sup> During this affiliation of less than two years, machinists waged one of Newfoundland's longest and most bitter pre-war strikes.<sup>33</sup> Labour leaders reasoned the backlash from city industrialists was due partly to the IAM attempt to organize a city labour council. These events only further polarized labour and capital; this division soon grew more significant when a new group of workers sought the changes for which their predecessors fought. The Newfoundland Railway seems to have had less recourse than did its Canadian counterparts to tactics used to fragment shopcraft-workers at large plants. Spared such obstacles as extensive company rules and regulations, job incentives, and artificial hierarchies, Newfoundland railway workers encountered fewer barriers to the formation of an industrial union. Labour's response was to face this new challenge with a new form of union. They chose an industrial union which would unite the diverse skills of city workers under one umbrella organiza-

<sup>29</sup>PANL, P7/B/19, files 365-410 RNCP. Reid employed 2,847 workers in all of its total operations as of May 1918.

<sup>30</sup>Census, 1911, 1921. No figures are available for 1918, but census data from 1911 and 1921 indicate the significance of the St. John's labour force. City population is given as 31,257 (1911) and 37,823 (1921), with a total labour force of 12,923 and 13,213 respectively.

<sup>31</sup>The literature on militant machinists is extensive. For example, see David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge 1987), 171-213; Cecilia F. Bucki, "Dilution and Craft Tradition," *Social Science History*, 4 (1980), 105-24; James E. Cronin, "Labor Insurgency and Class Formation," *Social Science History*, 4 (1980), 135-7.

<sup>32</sup>*Machinist's Monthly Journal*, (August 1904), 75; for further details of St. John's metal industries, see A.B. Perlin, *The Story of Newfoundland* (St. John's 1958), 204-5.

<sup>33</sup>Jessie Chisholm, "'Hang Her Down': Strikes in St. John's, 1890-1914," Research paper, Memorial University, 1987, 31.

tion. The vehicle for this change would be the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association.

For leadership and ideological direction, the NIWA had the services of an unusual and eclectic group of talented individuals. The men and women who provided the union with its impetus and guidance shared among themselves a considerable background in labour unionism and local and national politics. In addition, many were familiar with socialist literature. One such leader was George F. Grimes. Grimes, an avowed socialist, traced the origins of his political stance to his involvement in the Newfoundland Socialist Party, a movement formed in 1906 whose "leading spirit," Robert E. Scott, was a member of the mainland Socialist Party of Canada (SPC).<sup>34</sup> Grimes, as the Unionist MHA for Port de Grave from 1913 to 1919 (and later the member respectively for Fogo, Twillingate, and Lewisporte), continued to proclaim his links to socialist thought.<sup>35</sup> Often described as the "most intellectual of the thirteen Fishermen's Protective Union MHAs," Grimes established a strong reputation as an activist for social change. He thus had experience which proved invaluable in shaping NIWA ideology.

Central to NIWA leadership was Warwick Smith. An articulate, passionate writer, Smith's persuasive articles frequently appeared in the St. John's newspapers. It was in this capacity as a writer and advocate for the working class that he excelled. During the war, Smith's work helped sway public opinion on many issues vital to the growth of the fledgling Association. When the NIWA launched its own, bimonthly newspaper, *The Industrial Worker*, in May 1918, Smith served on its board of directors and as its main editorial writer.<sup>36</sup> His writings evince a strong interest in labourism; he contended that the NIWA should politically act through an independent party founded "to conserve the interests of labour alone."<sup>37</sup> The NIWA also drew active participants from many St. John's unions. Prominent from this quarter were officials of local labour groups, many of whom had shared union experiences while working on the mainland. One such individual was Nova Scotia-born machinist, Philip Bennett, who became the NIWA's articulate and dynamic president during its turbulent first year.

The Association enjoyed abundant organizational expertise from the start. Indicative of this was the way membership applications were handled. Taking full

<sup>34</sup>David Frank and Nolan Reilly, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916," in Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman, *Underdevelopment*, 102.

<sup>35</sup>George H. Tucker, "The Old NIWA," 279-81; *Who's Who In and From Newfoundland* (St. John's 1927), 199; *The Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* vol. 2 (St. John's 1984), 749. The Union Party was the political wing of the Fishermen's Protective Union, led by W.F. Coaker. In 1913, its first elected members sat in the House of Assembly.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*: "Smith was the most intelligent of the labour agitators, he was an agitator at the time, no question about it, but he was an intelligent fellow and wrote well." Interview with Dr. Raymond Gushue by R. Hattenhauer, Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), tape C-7222. Dr. Gushue served as President of Memorial University, 1952-66.

<sup>37</sup>*Daily Star*, 5 January 1918. *Constitution and Bylaws of the NIWA*, Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University; Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 45-76.



advantage of the initial excitement their union generated, the NIWA parlayed this interest into concrete membership gains. The extent of outside curiosity can be judged by the range of requests for organizational literature. Inquiries were sent in from communities throughout the Dominion: from Grand Falls to Port-aux-Basques, and from Corner Brook to Harbour Grace.<sup>38</sup> Bell Island workers also asked for details on the NIWA as the word spread about the new organization. Such letters and telegrams ensured that the Association's principles would gain an audience outside St. John's.

The NIWA's rapid expansion indeed supports the contention that this movement caught the imagination of Newfoundland's workers. Starting with 35 members in April 1917, the Association claimed more than 3,500 members the following April, of whom 2,800 resided in St. John's.<sup>39</sup> What began as a small association of Reid Newfoundland Company metal workers rapidly became a thriving, broadly-based industrial union. The numbers gain greater significance when placed in the context of census statistics. Despite incomplete data on St. John's workers, NIWA membership represents over 20 per cent of the total labour force, and this percentage does not distinguish industrial workers from such amorphous groups as domestic labourers.<sup>40</sup>

Through the end of 1917 and into 1918, the NIWA concept proved exceptionally attractive to a broad spectrum of working people. The Association processed membership requests whose number quickly surpassed even the most optimistic initial hopes. The NIWA had struck a responsive chord, the vibrations of which spanned the Island. Observers said the Association "set a record for this country as regards to its rapid growth."<sup>41</sup> These developments caused consternation among St. John's businessmen; the frequency of their letters to the press attest to alarm. Newfoundlanders were warned that the Association's "advanced ideas" might prove a "menace to ... existing institutions" and "established customs."<sup>42</sup> The tone of these comments also reflect the wave of labour unrest which then swept the city.

A series of strikes continued into the fall and winter months; two major disputes figured prominently on the pages of St. John's newspapers. In December, the final strike in a year of unrest pitted the Newfoundland Express Company (a Reid subsidiary) against teamsters. The issue was wages and working conditions. The result was an impressive victory for the union: a dismissed worker was reinstated and a wage increase granted, while several job-security concessions were promised. Even half of the lost wages were to be refunded.<sup>43</sup> This strike marked the second direct confrontation between the NIWA and the Reid Newfoundland Company and its resolution could only instill confidence in the union's capabilities.

<sup>38</sup>*Daily Star*, 26 January 1918.

<sup>39</sup>*Daily Star*, 2 April 1918.

<sup>40</sup>*Census of Newfoundland and Labrador*, 1911, 1921; see also David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy," 50-73.

<sup>41</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 21 July 1917.

<sup>42</sup>*Daily Star*, 19 January 1918.

<sup>43</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 14 December 1917.

Such confrontations typified organizations adhering to the tenets of labourism. As historian Craig Heron points out, during World War I the large industrial monopolies often were portrayed as economic "parasites" feeding off the vitality of the "producing classes." Public utility monopolies attracted some of the most withering criticism in this regard. Social unrest translated into calls for taxation of war profits and of personal incomes which exceeded a set limit. Yet labourites' "limited critique" was not meant to assail entrepreneurial industrialists or modest businessmen who were viewed as kindred "co-producers" in the economic system.<sup>44</sup> To allay the fears of such fellow co-producers, the NIWA (for its part) claimed that because "the Association stands for fair play, honest businessmen will be safeguarded by them."<sup>45</sup> Rather than advocate revolutionary changes, the NIWA accepted a hierarchical society as long as it was based upon egalitarian principles.

In the first year the NIWA laid the basis for its growing network of reform measures. These plans incorporated a broad slate of social measures concerning many fundamental aspects of working-class life. The slate proposed legislation on child labour, workers' compensation, factory regulation, establishment of a labour department, improved housing for workers, the public ownership of utilities, and the eight-hour day.<sup>46</sup> To promote these reforms, the Association passed a resolution supporting the establishment of an independent labour party to contest the general election.<sup>47</sup> Three candidates each for the ridings of St. John's East and West were to be sponsored by the Association. Early in 1918, the first three NIWA branches were established in Port-aux-Basques, Whitbourne, and Grand Falls. The latter branch claimed 50 members by mid-January.<sup>48</sup> Plans for a co-operative store in St. John's were well under way by this time. The Association had sold its entire issue of shares in the business, and a system of paper scrip was being distributed to the membership.<sup>49</sup> By early March, the reform petition had 2,000 signatures, and more were expected. An NIWA "Ladies' Branch" was to be established immediately.<sup>50</sup> But progress toward these ends was interrupted in late March, when the Association prepared for what proved to be an epic confrontation between city trade unionists and the Reid Newfoundland Company.

Probably no issue accentuated the disparity between Water Street capitalists and the Island's working class more than did the issue of wartime trade. The

<sup>44</sup>Craig Heron, "Labourism," 59; James Naylor, "Toronto 1919," *Historical Papers*, 1986, 33-55.

<sup>45</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 28 July 1917.

<sup>46</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 29 September 1917, 30 September 1917.

<sup>47</sup>The next general election was to have been held in 1918, but parliament was prorogued and the matter was not settled until November 1919, when the NIWA-inspired "Workingmen's Party" ran three candidates in St. John's West.

<sup>48</sup>*Daily Star*, 26 January 1918.

<sup>49</sup>The co-operative store opened for business 12 October 1918. Despite its considerable initial success, it collapsed during the postwar depression in Newfoundland.

<sup>50</sup>This group, officially formed August 1918, was not intended as an auxiliary to the men's union. For further analysis of the role of women in the NIWA, see Nancy Forestell, "Women's Paid Labour in St. John's Between the Two World Wars," MA thesis, Memorial University, 1987.

Newfoundland economy could not function smoothly without adequate provision of food and supplies, nor remain solvent without steady revenues from staple exports. The failure of Water Street commerce to cope with the exigencies of wartime transportation resulted in an upheaval of the shipping system that deprived the Dominion of its most critical requirements. This situation also threatened to undermine local growth in secondary manufacturing, for such industry depended on imported raw materials and machinery.<sup>51</sup>

The immediate result was spiralling costs of basic commodities, which caused working-class living standards to plummet. Widespread animosity was directed at Water Street merchants by workers who could not absorb cost increases. The primary reason for such problems was the decision of St. John's businessmen to dispose of their steamship fleets early in the war. Gambling on a short-term conflict, merchants liquidated almost their entire fleet of modern steel-hulled steamships. The outcome of these transactions was a windfall profit for Water Street interests, and a serious threat to the Newfoundland economy.

The first to capitalize on the international demand for steamships was the Reid Newfoundland Company, which sold the *Lintrose* and *Bruce*. These recently-commissioned ships formed the backbone of Reid's route running between Port-au-Basques and North Sydney; their loss caused chronic freight-congestion at both terminals for the duration of the war.<sup>52</sup> This hampered the attempts of the Island's overburdened railway system to cope with wartime freight-volumes. "It was estimated that only one-third of the total food requirements could be brought in by rail," and anything which hampered this marginal supply had serious ramifications throughout the Dominion.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, a consortium of Water Street interests known as the Venture Steamship Company, whose shareholders included influential politicians and businessmen, moved quickly to dispose of additional vessels. In its annual review for the year 1915, the *Evening Telegram* sardonically noted, "the year that is now passing has witnessed the departure of our steel fleet."<sup>54</sup> This also forced the removal of steamers from Dominion coastal service, and reversion to antiquated, wooden-hulled ships as a stopgap measure.

One of the most telling examples of further profiteering was the disruption and price-fixing in connection with the St. John's coal supply. "The coal issue proved beyond question that major Water Street merchants were using their control over importing, wholesale and retail trades to exact the highest possible margin of profit."<sup>55</sup> That the merchants involved enjoyed the complicity of the Edward P. Morris government was undeniable, given the incestuous nature of Newfoundland's commercial and political world. Many beneficiaries of inflated coal-

<sup>51</sup>Joy, "Trades and Manufacturing," 54, and *passim*.

<sup>52</sup>PANL, RNCP, Correspondence, Box 8 (1917-1918).

<sup>53</sup>Patricia O'Brien, "The Newfoundland Patriotic Association, 1914-1918," MA thesis, Memorial University, 1983, 235.

<sup>54</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 31 December 1915.

<sup>55</sup>O'Brien, "Patriotic," 240.

prices were the same men who had brought on the shortages by selling off steamships. Before the matter was resolved, angry citizens had demanded that the government seize coal stocks and end city businessmen's price-gouging practices.

Like coal, salt was another basic commodity of critical importance to the national economy; it was in short supply by 1915. Without salt, the cod fishery was threatened with disaster. Increased wartime opportunities presented to Newfoundland producers would go for naught without adequate salt-imports to cure their catch. Once again, the business-government axis was apparent. Strong evidence suggested that salt prices were artificially inflated, and for most citizens, it was "impossible to avoid the conclusion that the government was working hand-in-hand with the commercial establishment."<sup>56</sup>

Wage and price data for the World War I period are incomplete, but clearly delineate unstable contemporary conditions. Department of Justice evidence provides a detailed breakdown of retail prices, 1914-19. On average, retail food prices doubled or trebled during this period, and contributed to the climbing rate of inflation.<sup>57</sup> Organized labour's barrage of correspondence directed at the government and the Newfoundland Board of Trade demanded an inquiry into profiteering, and the formation of a board of food control based on Canadian and British models. Eventually, the Morris government was forced to bow to public pressure, and set up a commission to investigate prices.<sup>58</sup>

This "High Cost of Living Committee" issued six interim reports between 2 May and 21 August 1917. If Water Street hoped to avoid recrimination, these reports removed any chance for anonymity. One, released in June 1917, dealt with the "question of flour." Finally, here was an official statement confirming what had been obvious so long — for some people, the war was highly profitable. Dealers were accused of hoarding flour supplies and charging the highest possible prices, even for older stock obtained at much lower cost. Acting in collusion, city flour-importers schemed to drive prices steadily upward for this most-ubiquitous of Newfoundland staples.<sup>59</sup> Certainly, the St. John's working class did not require a commission of business worthies to inform them of the existence of war profiteering, yet these reports demonstrated just how widespread was this practice. As the commissioners themselves drily noted, "under conditions such as have applied here since the war began, and especially during the past year, the opportunities for making large profits have been utilized very fully and the public has had to pay considerably more."<sup>60</sup> The NIWA termed it "legalized robbery," and called for decisive government action to remedy the situation.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>56</sup>O'Brien, "Patriotic," 275.

<sup>57</sup>PANL, GN 13/1, Box 155, Department of Justice. Newfoundland Constabulary, Inspector General's Office.

<sup>58</sup>PANL, GN 9/1, *Proceedings of the Executive Council*, 23 April 1917.

<sup>59</sup>Note 58.

<sup>60</sup>High Cost of Living Commission, Fourth Interim Report, 12 July 1917.

<sup>61</sup>PANL, GN 8/3, Lloyd papers, letter from M.H. Hitchen to E.P. Morris, 22 June 1917.

The city's labour protest also raised housing issues as another example of the class divisions between rich and poor. The war served to exacerbate an already-serious housing crisis in St. John's.<sup>62</sup> Many families were forced into the streets as city landlords sought to take advantage of a strong economy and raise rental rates. In 1918, estimates placed the number of St. John's residents living in houses without running water or sanitary facilities at more than 20,000.<sup>63</sup> It was claimed, too, that "over 2,000 are domiciled in hovels utterly unfit for human habitation." Housing conditions in St. John's had been a perennial concern since the 19th century, when the city's dilapidated slums had attracted the attention of many.<sup>64</sup>

In St. John's, the war drastically influenced conditions in several industrial sectors. By February 1916, the capital city had contributed more than 1,300 men to the military.<sup>65</sup> (This climbed to 2,600 by the Armistice.) Recruits represented nearly 30 per cent of the St. John's male population aged 17 years and older. The city remained a focus of patriotic fervour throughout the war; its enlistment rate was the Dominion's highest. The war was a profoundly nationalistic experience for most Newfoundlanders, and their memories of the people killed in terrible battles, such as Beaumont Hamel, remained indelible. Even so, as the war proceeded, the rate of enlistment failed to resupply the Royal Newfoundland Regiment overseas. The onset of conscription further reduced the male workforce in the city. This situation placed the skilled and unskilled workers on the home front in an advantageous position to press demands for change. The point was not lost on the city labour movement, and unionized workers became increasingly restless in the face of blatant war profiteering and soaring subsistence costs.

The powerful force of wartime rhetoric had been successfully redirected to pressure businessmen to accept some responsibility for the war, instead of simply committing others for overseas service. An NIWA resolution in support of income taxes affirmed this view, "So that flesh and blood shall not bear the burden of the war alone, but that wealth be compelled to bear its full share."<sup>66</sup> Arguments were embellished by making use of the patriotic imagery so familiar to wartime readers. For the NIWA, here was a fight for the right in the best traditions of their British ancestors.<sup>67</sup> The Association's move to drape itself in the Union Jack left Reid officials without a rejoinder sufficient to sway public opinion; rebuttal, in effect

<sup>62</sup>*Proceedings of the House of Assembly, 1918, 212.*

<sup>63</sup>*Daily News*, 8 July 1918.

<sup>64</sup>Melvin Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1880-1921," PhD thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1980; Baker, "Municipal Politics and Public Housing in St. John's, 1911-1921," in *Workingmen's St. John's* (St. John's 1982), 29-43.

<sup>65</sup>C.A. Sharpe, "The 'Race of Honour': An Analysis of Enlistments and Casualties in the Armed Forces of Newfoundland, 1914-1919," *Newfoundland Studies*, 4 (1988), 27-56.

<sup>66</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 7 July 1917.

<sup>67</sup>In "The Case of the Expressmen," *Evening Telegram*, 17 December 1917, Warwick Smith presented his argument in typical fashion: "Over the principle of Free Speech, many a blood stained battlefield has paid the price of that freedom.... Our fathers laid down their lives to maintain this liberty. Shall we make their sacrifice a vain one and bind upon our children the shackles of slavery?"

would criticise all that apparently was sacred to a society supported by the principles of "meritocracy and patriotism." In his regular despatch to the Colonial Office, Governor Walter E. Davidson noted that there was a strong sense of resentment against Water Street interests. Davidson's successor, Alexander Harris, also reported to England that the burdens of war were not being borne on an equal basis. All of the commissions and reports presented one salient fact, "that many who administered the war effort on one hand were reaping unconscionable war profits on the other."<sup>68</sup> It was this system of "cronyism" that the working people of St. John's sought to escape. As one union member succinctly put it, "the slavery of greed" burdened the worker.<sup>69</sup>

These complaints were similar to those voiced in Canadian urban centres, as demonstrated in testimony to the 1919 Royal Commission on Industrial Relations in Canada (the Mathers Commission).<sup>70</sup> World War I was a moment of working-class unrest throughout the Western world as labourers everywhere sensed that conditions favoured their fight for a more-equitable share of wealth. Material privation played a major role in precipitating protest. Larry Peterson notes that "workers developed their consciousness ... primarily by means of economic action and organization rather than formal ideology."<sup>71</sup> James Cronin supports this interpretation, and writes that the effect of economic upheaval upon the lives of working people resulted in profound dissension which was "more important than simple war-weariness and the growth of an anti-war sentiment."<sup>72</sup> Michael Piva's study of real wages in Toronto, 1900-21, demonstrates just how harsh conditions became for the working poor.<sup>73</sup> Housing conditions, high subsistence costs, declining real wages, war profiteering, and wartime conscription all served temporarily to unite Newfoundland's working class behind the labour movement's articulate outrage that manpower, and not wealth, was conscripted for war.

In a letter to Reid Company General Superintendent J.P. Powell, NIWA secretary W.J. Nauffts complained, "your Company has increased rates since August 1914, in some cases over 500 per cent ... yet some employees have received increases as low as 6 per cent, and some have received absolutely nothing."<sup>74</sup> Although wages were the immediate issue in the Reid strike, to restrict study to

<sup>68</sup>O'Brien, "Patriotic," 278.

<sup>69</sup>*Daily Star*, 2 April 1918.

<sup>70</sup>Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 41-2.

<sup>71</sup>Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925," in James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni, eds., *Work, Community, and Power* (Philadelphia 1983), 50-1.

<sup>72</sup>James E. Cronin, "Labour Insurgency and Class Formation," 126.

<sup>73</sup>Michael J. Piva. *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921* (Ottawa 1979), 58; See also, Gordon Bertram and Michael Percy, "Real Wage Trends in Canada 1900-26," *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 12 (1979), 299-312. See also, Edward J. Chambers, "New Evidence on the Living Standards of Toronto Blue Collar Workers in the Pre-1914 Era," *Histoire sociale-Social History*, 18 (1985), 285-314.

<sup>74</sup>Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador (PANL), GN2/5/344. Colonial Secretary (Special Subject Files), 13 March 1918.

this would overlook a further range of issues, the origins of which may be traced back through years of frustration prior to the dispute. Beyond the issue of wages lay a number of more-complicated problems. Primarily, the critical matter of job classifications demanded a solution. The NIWA sought to establish a clear set of standards for wage levels based on skills and experience in a range of craft distinctions. Other matters included overtime regulations, grievance and dismissal procedures, and special privileges for employees.<sup>75</sup> Many of these concerns had simmered for years, waiting for a strong collective voice to present them effectively to Reid officials.

The wage issue itself reached a critical point in early 1918, when NIWA shop-committee meetings outlined specific demands. These committees were formed within the departmental divisions of Reid Company operations, and they drew together workers with similar craft backgrounds.<sup>76</sup> The NIWA executive then submitted wage proposals based on revised job classifications to Reid General Superintendent J.P. Powell. The first of these submissions broached wage increases of 20-35 per cent, with the larger portions going to employees at the lower end of the wage scale.<sup>77</sup> This initial approach was followed by several further notes detailing wage hikes, job classifications, and overtime rates covering workers in a range of skilled and unskilled categories, from marine engineers to general labourers and railway cleaning-staff. Correspondence between the union and Reid management failed to establish a time frame for definite negotiations.

Although these letters were marked by an air of restraint, both groups privately were busy making contingency plans in the event of a walkout. Responding for the Company was H.D. Reid, who had succeeded his father as president. At the time, Reid also was in touch with Dominion government officials, from whom he was seeking a substantial increase in government subsidies to the coastal steamer service, and in Newfoundland Railway fares and rates.<sup>78</sup> In one letter to the prime minister, Reid denounced NIWA wage demands as "excessive and impossible." As pressure was being applied on the government, Reid officials attempted to undermine the Association's preparations by sending Company agents out along the railway line to intimidate union members.<sup>79</sup> Relations between Reid Newfoundland and the NIWA were seriously inflamed by the Company's summary dismissal of several "mechanics and labourers" who had considerable job seniority in the boiler, marine and carpentry shops. The men claimed they were given no explanation for their dismissal, which defied a December 1917 agreement that such

<sup>75</sup> A full report of the NIWA Reid settlement was reprinted in the *Evening Advocate*, 15 June 1918. Only a single copy of the union's newspaper *The Industrial Worker* is known to have survived.

<sup>76</sup> Each craft was represented by a separate committee along the lines of a shop stewards' committee. See interview with Thomas C. Noel by Rolf Hattenhauer, (MUNFLA, tape C-7232).

<sup>77</sup> PANL, GN2/5/344. W.J. Nauffts to J.P. Powell, 5 February 1918.

<sup>78</sup> PANL, GN 8/3. Prime Minister's Office. W.F. Lloyd Papers. Letter from H.D. Reid to W.F. Lloyd, 6 March 1918.

<sup>79</sup> PANL, GN 2/5/344. W.J. Nauffts to J.P. Powell, 13 March 1918.

dismissals would only occur with due notice, and for specific infractions of railway rules.<sup>80</sup>

Affecting an ostensibly-neutral posture, the government officially declined to assist union members with negotiations. The NIWA stated that the issues at stake were not limited to this dispute, for its membership encompassed many people in addition to Reid employees: "the interests of the people of this dominion concern us quite as much as they do any class in the community."<sup>81</sup> At an impasse, the NIWA voted by secret ballot to strike.<sup>82</sup> This decision passed by an "overwhelming majority" eager to act.

It is estimated that more than 500 Reid employees joined the strike on its first day.<sup>83</sup> By one count, this represented more than 90 per cent of the Association members employed by Reid operations in St. John's.<sup>84</sup> This estimate was later confirmed by the union's executive in its post-strike report of the final settlement. The NIWA claimed that "fully 97 per cent of all members employed on the Company's premises in town came out, accompanied by others who were not members of the Association."<sup>85</sup> As the NIWA placed their total membership at the time of the strike at 3,500 (2,800 of these resident in St. John's), the Association's threats to apply further, systematic pressure to all Reid operations could not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. Nor could Reid Newfoundland turn to other city labour groups to help them through this dispute. Both the city Truckmen's Protective Union (TPU) and the powerful Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU) had declared their intention to side with the NIWA strikers. This support effectively closed Reid docks to all shipping activity. After the dispute, Governor Alexander Harris reported that the strike had "absolutely held up any repairs to ships in the dry dock."<sup>86</sup>

Coming as it did in wartime, the strike received immediate government attention. The Island's vital transportation links depended on the continued operation of the Reid network. Prime Minister William Lloyd thus quickly moved to promote talks between the two sides. His actions were prompted by Governor Harris, who also wanted the strike settled quickly. Talks broke off suddenly when the NIWA learned that Reid was "demanding the railroad employees ... sign a statement guaranteeing to stand by the Company against the Association ... those who refused to sign were threatened with the consequences."<sup>87</sup> Current employees were promised "incentives" if they would remain at work. A circular distributed

<sup>80</sup>PANL, GN 2/5/344. W.J. Nauffts to J.P. Powell 14 March 1918. This agreement was reached during the NIWA strike against the Newfoundland Express Company (a Reid subsidiary).

<sup>81</sup>PANL, GN 8/3. W.J. Nauffts to W.F. Lloyd, 28 March 1918.

<sup>82</sup>*Evening Advocate*, 15 June 1918.

<sup>83</sup>*Evening Advocate*, 27 March 1918.

<sup>84</sup>*Evening Telegram*, 27 March 1918.

<sup>85</sup>*Evening Advocate*, 15 June 1918.

<sup>86</sup>CO 194/295. Colonial Office. Governor Alexander Harris' summary of the strike, included in an interim report to the British Colonial Office, June 1918.

<sup>87</sup>PANL, GN 2/5/344.



all along the railway line stated that "any men who stand by the Company at this juncture will be guaranteed their work and otherwise looked after in the future."<sup>88</sup> The fact that Reid officials issued such an offer to employees outside St. John's attests to fears the strike would spread to all sections of the railway.

For those workers who chose to stand against the Company, Reid Newfoundland was prepared to continue adding names to its infamous blacklist.<sup>89</sup> Writing to a railway section foreman, J.P. Powell stated that, "We have no doubt in here as to how this fight is going to end. Any of our men who are fools enough to go out with this crowd may find some difficulty in getting back in their own positions as heretofore." Reid management did not interpret the strike simply as an *ad hoc* reaction to wartime inflation. "The fight with the NIWA is about one particular thing — as to whether they are going to run the Company, or whether the Company is going to do business itself."<sup>90</sup> Despite their public and private comments, Reid Newfoundland's tactics only served to drive more of its employees into the NIWA camp; many undecided workers realized that their best hopes lay with the Association. From the first day of the strike, Reid Newfoundland's dockside operations were at a complete standstill — a rare event in such a maritime community. The Company faced the worrisome prospect of lost revenue and contract defaults, for the dispute effectively closed the dry dock and shipping piers to all traffic. Reid officials underestimated the NIWA's resolve to stop all dockside labour. As a result, they were caught with "so many steamers 'in slings'" that many predicted "the Company could not but accede to the demands of the strikers within the next few weeks."<sup>91</sup>

Reid management also experienced great difficulty finding replacements for striking workers. For the Company, the work stoppage occurred at a critical time, when vessels waiting to be serviced crowded St. John's harbour. Many of the steamers involved in the annual spring seal-hunt would have been serviced there prior to their departure, which traditionally occurred on 13 March. No ships were allowed out before 10 March, and sealers were expected to return no later than 30 April. Following this chronology, the ships would have been returning to St. John's during the strike period (27 March-15 April). Any disruption in the seal hunt meant a tremendous loss in revenue for the merchant firms which owned the steamers, and these circumstances pressured Reid Newfoundland officials to settle. This suggests that the NIWA had planned the strike at a strategic moment during the shipping season.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> PANL, P7/B/19, RNCP, 27 March 1918.

<sup>89</sup> Reid Newfoundland made extensive use of such blacklists to bar troublesome workers from ever again attaining employment with the Company, or with any of Reid's close business associates. See PANL, RNCP, Correspondence, Box 8 (1917-1918).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*; Earlier, in a letter to the prime minister, H.D. Reid states that, "no threats of any nature have been made against, or inducements of any kind held out to any person by this Company." PANL, GN 8/3, H.D. Reid to W.F. Lloyd, 4 April 1918.

<sup>91</sup> *Evening Herald*, 9 April 1918.

<sup>92</sup> On the seal hunt see, P.T. McGrath, *Newfoundland in 1911* (London 1911), 139-40; Levi G. Chafe,

Reid Newfoundland had invested heavily in these facilities, only to watch them sit idle during this period of potential record activity. Earlier, in October 1917, former Governor Walter Davidson observed, "the dry dock, which is of large size and commodious, has been constantly occupied during the war time by disabled steamers and must have shown very large profits."<sup>93</sup> The curtailment of Reid operations signalled a victory, not only for the Association, but for the St. John's labourers in general, for it was at these facilities where numerous early disputes had been fought — and often lost.

City longshoremen, like other dockside labourers, frequently had battled Water Street merchants for union recognition, retention of traditional working practices, and wage schedules. In the prewar period, Reid Newfoundland became infamous for its aggressive antiunionism. Indeed, Reid Newfoundland had come to symbolize the arch-villain against which all organized labour rallied. The numerous examples include the company's disputes with longshoremen, firemen, and other wharf labourers. Often, Reid paid its workers considerably below the union scale or traditional rate. During one notable dispute in September 1912, an LSPU member complained that his union lacked the strength to force Reid into line with other firms. "Where is the power of the Union if it can't secure from Reid what every other employer is paying."<sup>94</sup> As the largest and most-vocal city union, the LSPU had been in the vanguard of the struggle to control the St. John's waterfront.

The symbolic and practical victory to be gained from the successful assertion of a working-class agenda was not lost on the combined union membership. In this regard, the strike served the important function of uniting city unionists who earlier had exhibited some degree of conservative exclusiveness based on craft distinctions. Instead of acting individually, St. John's labour now sensed the value of cooperative action. Yet this cooperation was both transient and volatile by nature, and as such, efforts to prolong labour's united front were problematical at best. The visible support issued to NIWA strikers by key unions, such as the Teamsters and Longshoremen, enabled the Association to negotiate with Reid from a position unlike that of previous unions, for now they bargained with the strength of new unity.

This spirit of cooperation raises several critical questions about the nature of this heightened trade-union consciousness. The coexistence of transitional forms

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*Chafe's Sealing Book* (St. John's 1923); D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland* (London 1895), 450-1. St. John's longshoreman Les Taylor confirmed that March was one of the most active periods on the dock yards as preparations were made for the seal hunt. See interview with Les Taylor by R. Hattenhauer (MUNFLA, tape C-7246).

<sup>93</sup> Before leaving his post as Governor of Newfoundland, in December 1917, Walter Davidson commented on the operations of the Reid Newfoundland Company to the British Colonial Office. The report was titled "The House of Reid." See CO 194/293, October 1917.

<sup>94</sup> For a more detailed examination of this period, see Jessie Chisholm, "Strikes in Newfoundland, 1890-1914: Preliminary Statistics," Research paper, Memorial University, 1986; see also, "Labour Organization in Newfoundland," *The Christmas Echo* vol. 2 (St. John's 1917), 16-7.

of capitalist development makes it difficult to analyze such issues as skill dilution and labour intensification. St. John's shared similarities with other port cities, in that it saw a gradual shift from traditional waterfront crafts and the development of a large surplus-labour pool of "unskilled" and "semi-skilled" dock workers in an industry increasingly dominated by modern steel-hulled steamships.<sup>95</sup> In this environment, conservative-minded craft divisions were eventually supplanted by less structurally-distinct groupings.

The size and scope of Reid operations necessitated a broader form of union organization, one which would cut across the boundaries of craft and levels of skill. The Reid Newfoundland strike witnessed the active cooperation not only between skilled and unskilled waterfront labour, but between these dockside workers and a whole range of city workers. Here is evidence of a developing, consensual support for a new strategy to counteract the integrated corporate empire of the "Reid octopus". Even waterfront unions with reputations for independence and insular behaviour recognized the importance of this nascent move towards industrial unionism. A year prior to the Reid strike, the LSPU had registered its members' desire for solidarity, adopting a resolution to refrain from "any work which shall have the effect of hindering or interfering with the effort of the members of any union on strike."<sup>96</sup> This declaration applied formally only to LSPU members. But it also would have influenced casual waterfront labour, because the longshoremen were highly influential in the setting of *de facto* working standards.<sup>97</sup>

Such support suggests that a new, cohesive sense of labour co-operation developed in St. John's during the war years. This solidarity was critically important in the NIWA strike against Reid, for the Company now found it could no longer rely on strikebreakers to divide and conquer workers. These developments, and others relating to the dispute, were carefully attended by city labour groups, for the outcome promised to set a precedent for other confrontations pending between labour and capital in Newfoundland. Examples of militant protests were not confined to the St. John's waterfront, as other city workers joined forces to intensify the NIWA's strike action. A case in point is the city's street railway operations, owned and operated by Reid Newfoundland Company.

North American street-railway operations witnessed a myriad of violent labour disputes during the 19th and early-20th centuries.<sup>98</sup> When disputes arose between

<sup>95</sup>Ian McKay, "Class struggle and Merchant Capital," in Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle* (Toronto 1986), 17-36.

<sup>96</sup>LSPU, *Minutes*, 3 April 1917; Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University.

<sup>97</sup>Thomas K. Liddell, *Industrial Survey of Newfoundland* (St. John's 1940), 36-7.

<sup>98</sup>For accounts of several Canadian examples, see Robert H. Babcock, "The Saint John Street Railwaymen's Strike and Riot, 1914," *Acadiensis*, 11 (1982), 3-27; Bryan D. Palmer, "'Give us the road and we will run it': The social and cultural matrix of an emerging labour movement," in G.S. Kealey and P. Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working Class History* (Toronto 1976), 106-24; Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict* (Montreal 1979), 209-16; Peter D. Lambly, "Working Conditions and Industrial Relations on Canada's Street Railways, 1900-1920," MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1983, 104-51; Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond To Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980), 199-204.

management and their employees, public sentiment often sided with the workers. Time and again, street railways served to focus intense confrontations between labour and capital. During the Reid protest, this characteristic pattern of public support for striking workers combined with determination to avoid the violence which often had accompanied disputes in Canada, and so gave authorities an excuse to intervene.<sup>99</sup> Despite the Company's provocative strikebreaking tactics, the picketers remained cohesive. The strict self-discipline with which NIWA members conducted themselves won the praise of many, and attests to the peculiar milieu of wartime St. John's — a combination of patriotism, social conscience, and perhaps, traditional inhibitions.

The suspended streetcar-service was a highly visible indicator that organized labour sternly had challenged Reid Newfoundland. To counter this perception, the Company concertedly tried to place some of its trolleys on the line. Yet the support for the strikers remained firm. The *Daily News* reported that "the NIWA claim that so strongly is sympathy with them that the Company will not succeed in giving any kind of service."<sup>100</sup> This was borne out by the small number of men initially willing to cross picket lines and operate the street cars — all of whom soon reconsidered their actions and left work.<sup>101</sup>

Reid Newfoundland also attempted to recruit strikebreakers from outlying areas of the city. Three such individuals from "the Goulds" (just south of St. John's), when appraised of the situation, refused to continue work for the Company, and returned their car to the railway barns. Later that evening, they presented themselves to an NIWA meeting as prospective membership candidates. This was not an isolated incident. Reid management often sought to undercut potential working-class solidarity by using rural labourers to replace protesting urban workers. Early in the strike, President H.D. Reid had considered bringing in outport men from the districts of Bay de Verde and Trinity Bay. Such tactics had long been favoured by St. John's businessmen, when faced with conflict, as a method of arousing long-standing animosities between 'baymen' and city residents.<sup>102</sup>

The question of sectarian rivalry also was in the air, as the Goulds region was predominantly Catholic in religion, while many NIWA members adhered to the Protestant faith.<sup>103</sup> Reports circulated that Reid Newfoundland would be given "military protection" if they could secure enough men to operate the street railway.<sup>104</sup> Throughout this tense period, the strikers remained calm and avoided

<sup>99</sup>For example see, Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: Century of Labour in B.C.* (Vancouver 1967), 73-4; Elaine Bernard *The Long Distance Feeling: A History of the Telecommunications Workers' Union* (Vancouver 1982), 54-5.

<sup>100</sup>*Daily News*, 11 April 1918.

<sup>101</sup>*Evening Herald*, 11 April 1918.

<sup>102</sup>Briton Cooper Busch, "The Newfoundland Sealers' Strike of 1902," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (1984), 75; Bill Gillespie, *A Class Act: An Illustrated History of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's 1986), 21.

<sup>103</sup>*Census of Newfoundland and Labrador 1911*, vol. 1, xv, xvii-xix; Busch, "Sealers' Strike," 79-80.

<sup>104</sup>*Daily News*, 17 April 1918.

offering any excuse for official intervention. The NIWA's ability to contain its membership and prevent violence starkly contrasts with later St. John's protests.<sup>105</sup> In the aftermath of the strike, a prominent city clergyman declared that "but for the NIWA there would have been serious rioting last winter."<sup>106</sup>

The NIWA had good reason for cautious optimism about their chances against Reid Newfoundland Company. A groundswell of support reinforced the strikers' mood of solidarity as groups and individuals came forward to help. Strike funds were supplemented by money forwarded to the St. John's union executive by the NIWA's major branches in Grand Falls, Whitbourne, and Port-aux-Basques. Strike support was not limited to contributions, as workers jeopardized their jobs in spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity. Even offers of doubled or tripled wages failed to entice workers to cross picket lines. In a region of severe economic privation this response was impressive.

The *Daily Star* noted that this type of broadly-based support signalled "a new era opening for labour here for the day was near when no Newfoundlander need leave the country to secure lucrative employment."<sup>107</sup> Rather than flee the Dominion in search of a living wage, workers could now stay and fight for their share of the national wealth. Newfoundlanders had long been forced to travel to the Maritimes or the "Boston States" of New England in search of temporary employment. Such "sojourning" still rankled nationalist sentiments of Newfoundlanders.<sup>108</sup> But any sense of impending victory in the Reid Strike nevertheless was tempered by the knowledge that Company influence permeated every aspect of the Dominion's political economy. The strike was far from decided, but unionists now spoke with increasing confidence. The bonds which were forged by this event had established what many earlier protests had failed to accomplish — a base for future cooperation among Newfoundland labour groups throughout the Island.

The stalled mediation efforts caused considerable distress both to Prime Minister Lloyd and Governor Harris. Lloyd wrote H.D. Reid several times to express his fears of an impending, Island-wide walkout. "From information received, I fear that it may well spread to the railways and perhaps the steamers ... this would be a serious blow to Newfoundland, which is daily in difficulties with regard to arranging for tonnage for our requirements."<sup>109</sup> The threat of a total shutdown of the Company's transportation system now appeared to be a reality. But President Reid even so sought to limit further government intervention that might force his hand in negotiations. Meanwhile, the Association's support among

<sup>105</sup>For comparison, see, E.R. Forbes, "Newfoundland Politics in 1921: A Canadian View," *Acadiensis*, 9 (1979), 95-103; James Overton, "Public Relief and Social Unrest in Newfoundland in the 1930's," in Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St. John's 1988).

<sup>106</sup>*Daily Star*, 2 September 1918.

<sup>107</sup>*Daily Star*, 6 April 1918.

<sup>108</sup>Peter Neary, "Canadian Immigration Policy and the Newfoundlanders, 1912-1939," *Acadiensis* 11 (1982), 69-83.

<sup>109</sup>PANL, GN 8/3. W.F. Lloyd to H.D. Reid, 3 April 1918.

railway and steamship employees proved well-organized and solid, for the NIWA had carefully assayed its strength both before and during the dispute.

Reid Newfoundland found itself vulnerable to pressures from every quarter. Privately, Lloyd and Harris strenuously pushed for resumed negotiations, while public opinion turned increasingly hostile. Fearing that the Island might otherwise be isolated from regular commerce, impatient calls were issued for a hasty settlement.<sup>110</sup> The Company must have been dismayed by the weak support offered to them by their Water Street business colleagues "as evidenced by their silence."<sup>111</sup> Many interpreted the lack of any public statement by the Board of Trade as a tacit denunciation of the Company's actions. Without question, in the course of establishing their empire, the Reids had alienated many more-traditional Island power brokers.

Reid officials also might have feared losing revenues needed to realize plans to expand and diversify corporate holdings.<sup>112</sup> Dramatic increase in the wartime passenger and freightload was a bonanza for the Company which it could ill afford to forfeit because of a protracted strike. The reality of the situation was obvious: Reid Newfoundland stood to lose far more from the strike than from a prompt settlement of the wage demands. Spurred by the NIWA, labour's united front stunned the Company. The issue was all but decided. After several days of bargaining, in which the parties met several times daily, a formula to settle the dispute was agreed upon and formally adopted on Friday, 12 April 1918.

This tentative outcome became public knowledge next day.<sup>113</sup> The NIWA and Reid Newfoundland had decided to keep the terms of agreement "secret" and details of the matter did not fully emerge until early June. Daily press commentary on the settlement was curiously muted; only bland support was offered for the provisional settlement. This is attributable partly to the strict press censorship invoked under the War Measures Act.<sup>114</sup> (Such powers earlier had been exercised to suspend three "anti-government" newspapers, the *Daily Star*, *Daily News*, and the weekly *Plaindealer*.<sup>115</sup>) It later was revealed that a clause in the agreement

<sup>110</sup>*Daily News*, 11 April 1918. Calls were made to invoke the "War Measures Act" for the "good of the public interest." The "Emergency War Measures Act" was passed in 1914.

<sup>111</sup>*Evening Advocate*, 6 April 1918.

<sup>112</sup>Reid Newfoundland Company was exploring the feasibility of a number of business ventures, including a hydroelectric/paper mill development on the Humber River. J.K. Hiller, "Newsprint Politics: The Newfoundland Pulp and Paper Industry, 1915-1939," Research paper, Memorial University, 1986.

<sup>113</sup>*Daily Star*, 13 April 1918; *Evening Advocate*, 15 June 1918.

<sup>114</sup>For examples of censorship in Canada, see, Russell Hann, "Introduction," in Daphne Read, ed., *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History* (Toronto 1978), 9-38; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (Toronto 1983), 171.

<sup>115</sup>See, PANL, GN 1/3/A, Governor's Correspondence, Files 473, 648; CO 194/295, Governor Harris to W.H. Long, 27 April 1918. Evidence suggesting that Reid Newfoundland had in fact restricted newspaper reports dealing with the strike was provided in correspondence between H.D. Reid and solicitor H.J. Elliott. Reid requested that a St. John's-based correspondent for the *Montreal Star* who submitted matter "not suitable to the best interest of this Company" be removed. See PANL P7/B/19, RNCP, Correspondence, Box 7 (1915-1918).

stipulated that all issues in dispute were to be adjusted by 15 May, and that all wage settlements were retroactive to 15 April (the day the strikers returned to work).<sup>116</sup>

Central to the pact was the Reid Company's recognition of the NIWA as the formal representative of the workers, and the acknowledgement of the "great principle that the employees are entitled to be heard in all matters connected with their welfare." This was to take the practical form of a standing committee to mediate between labour and management. The committee was to consist of workers "from every department of the Company represented by those who were on strike."<sup>117</sup> NIWA President Philip Bennett was to chair the workers' committee, which would meet with H.D. Reid and his managers about all issues concerning the two groups. Whether this standing committee was of practical value to the workers is unclear. But this spirit of mutual cooperation clearly was in keeping with the NIWA's labourist ideology. Such a measure was innovative in a society where, in the absence of any government ministry with a specific mandate for labour relations, most workers were left with no recourse for the settling of disputes through an apparatus of formal negotiation.<sup>118</sup> The contract provided for greater workplace security; it did not bind the Reid employees to long-term conditions, as it was subject to annual renewal.

Following the settlement, H.D. Reid wrote his Montreal solicitor, Henry J. Elliott, for advice about arrangements to be made between Reid Newfoundland and the NIWA.<sup>119</sup> As outright hostility had proved ineffective against the NIWA, the Company favoured a different tack. Urging the cultivation of a paternalist image, Elliott prescribed a form of joint management-union committee similar to one used by the Standard Oil Company.<sup>120</sup> This would entail seating elected employee-representatives with company officials on a round-table committee to "advise" on workplace conditions. The report also favoured expenditures "for the laying out of [company] tenements and improvements in the living conditions of the men." Despite Elliott's recommendation for an industrial agreement premised upon an American model, the Reid Newfoundland-NIWA settlement appears to have had more in common with Whitley Councils in Britain. Apparently this kind of joint participation was entirely acceptable to NIWA members, because the Association earlier had declared its faith in the concept of mutual co-operation between labour and capital in a series of optimistic articles in *The Industrial Worker*. Whether such an agreement ever was enacted remains unclear, for Whitley Councils were not formally instituted after World War I. (Thomas Liddell again recommended such

<sup>116</sup>*Evening Advocate*, 15 June 1918, col.3, clause 1e.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, col.3.

<sup>118</sup>Newfoundland did not formerly establish a labour department until the Canadian Labour Relations Act was adopted in 1950.

<sup>119</sup>PANL, P7/B/19, RNCP, Correspondence Box 7 (1915-1918). Correspondence between H.D. Reid and H.J. Elliott, 16 April 1918, 25 April 1918.

<sup>120</sup>Clearly, Elliott had in mind an industrial council modeled after the American type of Rockefeller-King arrangement. Bruce Scott, "A Place in the Sun: The Industrial Council at Massey-Harris, 1919-1929," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976), 158-62.

an expedient in assessing Newfoundland labour in the late 1930s.)<sup>121</sup>

The NIWA also secured a partial list of concessions from Reid Newfoundland management. Key issues which centred on overtime hours and job classification were addressed in a five-level system based on skill qualifications and job seniority. Equitable procedures for grievances and dismissals were implemented. Also included in the settlement was a clarification of minor employee-privileges. On the matter of wages, the Association reported that "with very few exceptions substantial increases were given."<sup>122</sup> Finally, Reid Newfoundland promised not to retaliate against any strikers, and further acquiesced in NIWA demands to exclude from wage-settlement benefits those employees who had scabbed.

For the moment, the workers had won. Association members had sustained their strike for three weeks, and won some major concessions from a corporation notorious for its animosity toward organized labour. In taking on the Dominion's largest single employer, the NIWA indeed had accomplished something of note. Important precedents were established for future disputes that the Association quickly moved to implement. As one union activist later recalled, "The railway was always accepted as a yardstick in money and rates at that time and everybody said, we'll just follow the railway."<sup>123</sup>

Wartime privation had served to heighten disparities between the lives of workers and those of the Water Street business-interests. The disastrous impact of excessive living costs, coupled with a longstanding animosity towards the Reid Newfoundland Company, had coalesced around this strike action. Considered in the context of the time, the Reid strike had brought together organized and unorganized labour alike in a way which few earlier had done. Workers presented strong evidence of solidarity among industrial producers, not only in St. John's, but throughout the Island. NIWA branches situated on the Newfoundland Railway rallied to the slogan "all solid along the line." This solidarity was heartening for many, even those not directly involved in the dispute.<sup>124</sup>

Following the resolution of the St. John's strike, the NIWA once again tangled with Reid Newfoundland. Between August and September 1918, Association members at the Company's Port-aux-Basques rail-ferry terminal successfully fought a protracted strike for wages and working conditions.<sup>125</sup> And in the capital city, the NIWA Ladies' Branch led their members into a series of tumultuous strike actions against local manufacturing concerns during 1918-1919.<sup>126</sup> The NIWA continued to pursue its reformist mandate with efforts to organize an independent labour party for the 1919 national elections. To this end, the Association fielded

<sup>121</sup>Thomas K. Liddell, *Industrial Survey*, 127.

<sup>122</sup>*Evening Advocate*, 15 June 1918.

<sup>123</sup>Interview with Walter Sparks by R. Hattenhauer (MUNFLA, tape C-7228).

<sup>124</sup>*Daily Star*, 11 April 1918; Many St. John's workers emphasized the "great exuberance and tremendous enthusiasm" the NIWA engendered. See interview with Frank and Irving Fogwill, by R. Hattenhauer (MUNFLA, tape C-7229).

<sup>125</sup>Newfoundland Board of Trade, *Annual Report, 1918*, 21-2; *Evening Telegram*, 2 September 1918.

<sup>126</sup>Forestell, "Working Women," 73-118.



three candidates for the "Workingmen's Party" in St. John's West.<sup>127</sup> Yet all these efforts were undermined by the severity of the postwar depression in Newfoundland. As one English observer noted, "In few countries has the change from prosperity to adversity following the aftermath of the war been so marked as in Newfoundland."<sup>128</sup> Under the pressures of a collapsing economy, the NIWA drew back to its original roots in the Reid Newfoundland railway shops, while launching several attempts to revive an Island-wide federation of labour.<sup>129</sup> Eventually, the Association that had symbolized the highest hopes of Newfoundland labour throughout 1917-20 faded from view, officially filing for dissolution in 1943.

The advent of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association was one major step among many to be made in the struggle to win a fair share of the benefits otherwise reaped by capitalist enterprise in wartime Newfoundland. To introduce change, these working people came together to form a movement which, in displaying the commonality of working-class experience, articulated a social vision which called for a more-equitable distribution of the Island's wealth. The eventual demise of the postwar labour activism tends to eclipse the potential for something quite novel in Newfoundland. While the possibilities for an OBU/TWW movement remained slight throughout this era, the NIWA was an expression of "otherness" and one which had again shown Newfoundlanders the power to be exercised through collective action.

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<sup>127</sup>Noel, *Politics*, 143; McDonald, *To Each His Own*, 73-85. Although all three labour candidates were unsuccessful in gaining a seat in the House of Assembly, the Workingmen's Party garnered 21 per cent of the popular vote.

<sup>128</sup>*The Times* (London), 18 July 1921; also see, Amulree Report, 106.

<sup>129</sup>In 1921, NIWA leaders helped form the Unemployed Workers' Committee in an attempt to lobby the government for relief measures. Later the rump of the NIWA membership formed the Railway Employees' Welfare Association in 1927. During World War II these members formed the nucleus of a St. John's-based IAM lodge.