

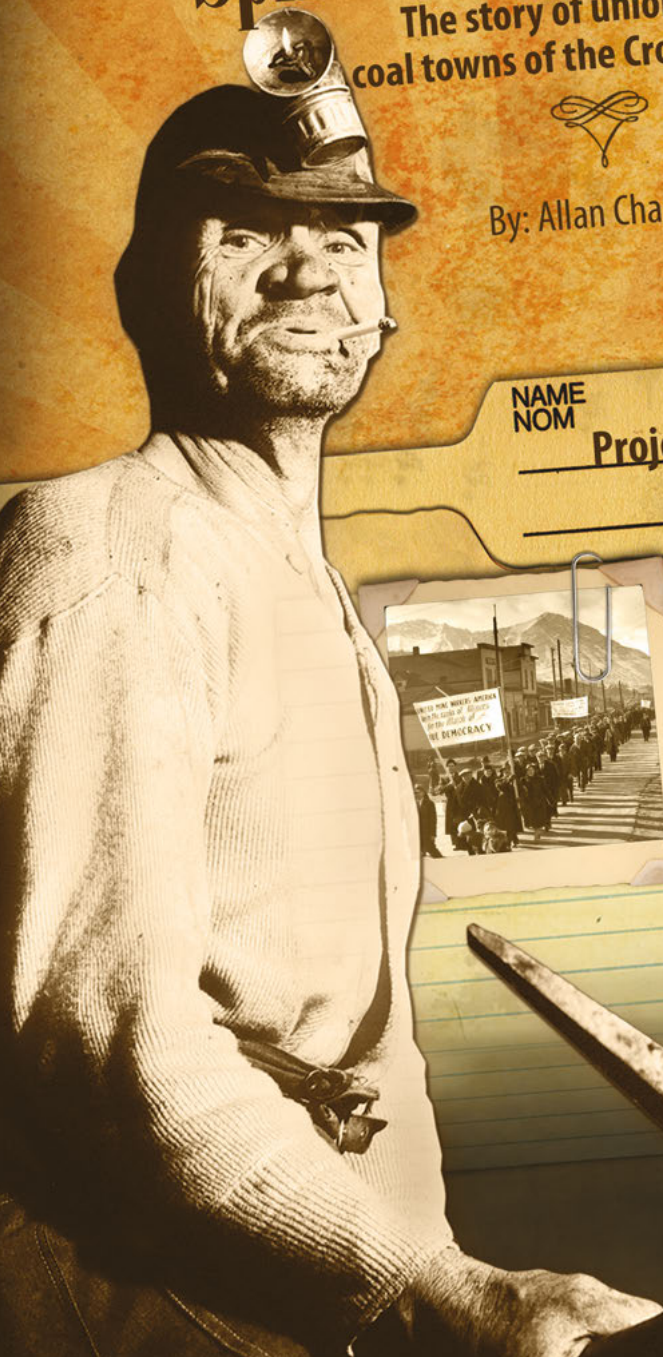


Spirit of the Crowsnest

The story of unions in the
coal towns of the Crowsnest Pass



By: Allan Chambers



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NOM

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The Alberta Federation
of Labour, 1912 - 2012:
A Century of Struggle
and Solidarity



Coke Ovens at Night,
Coleman, Alta.

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coal towns of the Crowsnest Pass**

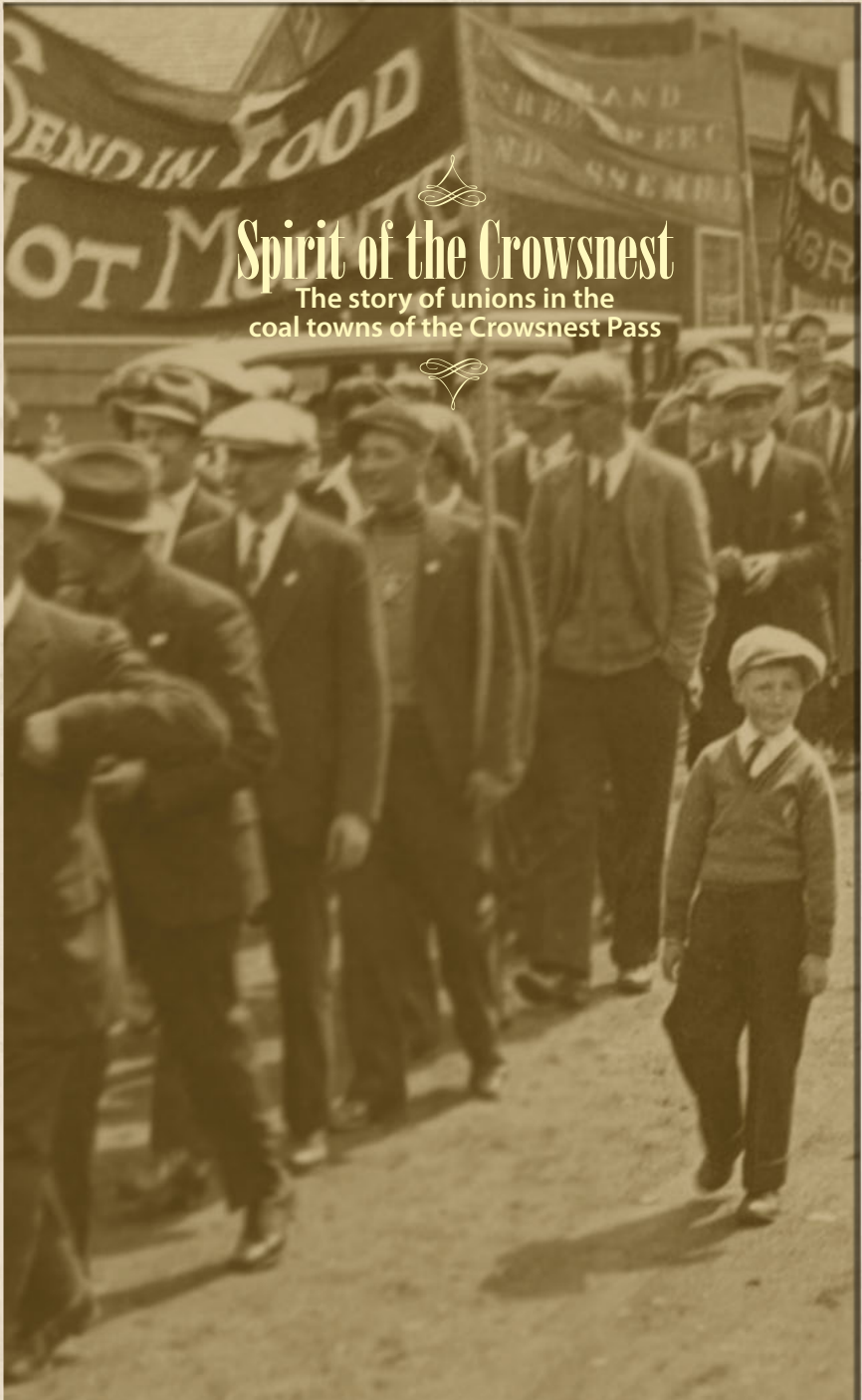
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Spirit of the Crowsnest



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END IN FOOD
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Spirit of the Crowsnest

The story of unions in the
coal towns of the Crowsnest Pass



For fifty years, mine whistles ruled the wind-blown coal towns of the Crowsnest Pass. They announced shift changes. They declared with a single sharp blast at nightfall that workers were needed the next day at Coleman or Blairmore or Bellevue. Two or three blasts meant there would be no work. In bitter winter and hot summer, miners and their families stepped outside at night to listen for what the next day held, to plan their lives by the whistle.

The coal-mining families also feared the whistle. If it sounded unexpectedly, it meant disaster. "If you heard the whistle blow at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, you knew somebody got killed," Liz Liska, wife of retired Coleman miner Steve Liska, said in an interview in 2005. When it blew during one of the many strikes in the Crowsnest, the miners and their families knew it was calling anyone willing to cross a picket line, and their resolve stiffened.

The Crowsnest Pass, a deep valley linking Alberta and British Columbia in the southern Rocky Mountains, is famous for its beauty and its disasters, its coal and the strong people who mined it. After the arrival of the CPR in 1885, the Crowsnest became the biggest coal centre in Alberta, out-producing other mining regions in the province such as Drumheller and the Coal Branch. Ten coal towns sprang up on the Alberta side of the Pass. Five remain: Blairmore, Frank, Bellevue, Coleman and Hillcrest. The mines closed one by one after the Second World War, but the mine whistles still linger in the memories of the coal-mining families who gave the Pass its dramatic history.

One June morning in 1914, three ominous blasts from the Hillcrest mine summoned rescuers from throughout the valley. The piercing blasts also drew stricken families, including children released from school, to gather numbly on the hillside by the pit's opening to watch Canada's worst mining disaster

unfold. The death count was 189, half of the men in the mine. The explosion killed the fathers of 400 children, and left 130 widows. The nation was stunned. The brave people of Hillcrest buried their dead and resolutely built their lives again.

Disasters shape communities. They are like wars or economic depression – which the Crowsnest Pass mining families also confronted in their decades of struggle. Not all communities respond to hardship in the same way. Some sink into despair, and some surrender to their cruel fates.

Coal towns in the Crowsnest Pass were different. Something of the hardness of the surrounding rock entered the souls of the communities, and shaped their spirits. Families responded to tragedy by rebuilding shattered lives and helping one another to endure the worst times. In the early years, the miners faced remorseless owners and police truncheons on the picket line and didn't back down. Coal workers fought bitter strikes for a living wage and basic job security, and often were defeated, but didn't surrender.

The discovery of oil in Alberta eventually silenced the mine whistles in the Crowsnest Pass. Trains could run more efficiently on diesel than on

steam. Homes were better heated with natural gas than with coal. The storied towns of the Crowsnest Pass entered a brief decline. Lately, they have begun a new chapter as tourist destinations and as sought-after escapes from urban life in Calgary. One historian of the Pass noted recently that modest homes at the former site of the Blairmore mine tipple now sell for upwards of \$650,000. Miners who spent their lives swallowing coal dust would have choked on that one.

Yet the history of the Crowsnest Pass coal mines and their workers refuses to fade. Historians and students of social movements continue to make their way to the old coal towns and through the wealth of documents buried in archives and collections across the country.

Here is the reason. In fifty years of struggle, the mainly immigrant population that mined for coal in the Crowsnest fought battles that are at the heart of modern Canadian society. Their struggles helped to produce some of the most fundamental gains for labour, including workers' compensation and a basic union right to be recognized in the workplace.

Coal towns became a social and political laboratory in the first few decades of

Crowsnest Labour History Timeline



1872 – *Unions become legal in Canada under the Trades Union Act.*

the twentieth century. Revolutionary theories shaking Europe and America after the First World War blew with the fury of mountain winds through the Crowsnest Pass. Radical conditions of hardship and economic insecurity produced radical solutions, culminating in the Depression era strike of 1932, described by some as one of the purest examples of class struggle in Canada. Those same conditions led to the election in 1933 of a “Red” government in Blairmore, unique in all of Canada.

Behind those radical struggles was a simple truth. Crowsnest Pass workers insisted on the basic dignity of their work and the human strength at the heart of their communities. It is what the historians rediscover every time they venture into the Pass. It is the legacy of the Crowsnest, handed on to us.

A dangerous job

Working conditions in the Crowsnest mines in the early 1900s were as dangerous as in mines anywhere in the world. Death and injury were commonplace, as was the threat of catastrophic explosions. Ever-present methane gas, which mine fire bosses attempted to measure with inadequate equipment, became explosive when combined with air. A single spark, perhaps from a pickaxe

When the mine floor bumped

Steve Liska worked underground in the Crowsnest for 30 years and then above ground as a weighman before he retired in Coleman. In an interview with the Alberta Labour History Institute, he recalled one of the most dangerous conditions in the mine – a “bump” or shifting and rumbling of rock below the mine floor:

“Two guys got killed with a bump. When it bumped the floor up, they got killed. One got killed right away, the other one died in the hospital. Another one, Danny McLellan, he was putting in chute again. The bottom bumped, sheet arch cut him here in the groin. That’s the way it was. And that’s the way that Sekora across the street got killed. The coal bumped and covered his partner up. He tried to get him out. He couldn’t, so he ran across to the neighbours. He went back first. By the time the other guys came, another bump had covered him up. Young man. Lost his life.”



3



1885 – *Canadian Pacific Railway is completed.*



- Mine rescue team takes a break , Hillcrest, 1914

Mine whistle in the afternoon

"When Ulmer blew up, we lived in Bellevue. They still had the old Bellevue mine whistle, it was still active. I remember sitting in a friend's house, and this whistle blew. I thought, what the deuce is that? I'd never heard it in my life. I still get goose bumps to this day. I phoned a friend, Mrs. Lazarato, her husband has always worked in the mine, Roy. I phoned her and she said, 'There's been a mine disaster at Ulmer North.' So we all just sat around. All us wives got together and sat around and waited and listened and talked back and forth on the phone. It was horrendous. I can still hear that whistle to this day, and I hope I never have to hear it again."

—Beryl Orr, wife of a miner at Bellevue, Interview with the Alberta Labour History Institute, 2005



1898 – Rail line from Lethbridge to the Crowsnest Pass opens. First coal mine opens in the Alberta Crowsnest in Blairmore, quickly followed by mines in Passburg, Bellevue, Hillcrest, Frank, Lille and Coleman.

striking rock or from the flame in a miner's lamp, could touch off a lethal blast. The presence of coal dust in the air could magnify the explosion.

The miners created a whole language for the daily hazards they faced. Fire-damp referred to a lethal methane-air mixture. Afterdamp meant the presence of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide after an explosion. Lacking air, miners who survived a blast often died from asphyxiation. The best hope of escape? The lucky ones would race toward fresh air with seconds to spare.

Sparks from falling rocks, igniting coal dust in the air, likely caused the explosion at Hillcrest, widely regarded as a well-run mine. Similar conditions probably caused two explosions at Bellevue in 1910, including one that killed 30 miners, and another explosion at Hillcrest in 1926.

Explosions were not the only hazard. At Crowsnest mines, miners had to dig sharply angled coal seams into the side of mountains, creating difficult conditions for moving the coal out. Many miners died or were injured while hauling coal, or while attempting to free coal that had been blocked in chutes constructed to allow it to flow out — a task known as “bucking

coal.” Mine cave-ins were also a constant danger, made worse by the soft nature of much of the bituminous coal in the Crowsnest. Random “bumps” often signaled an imminent wall collapse or rockslide. For days before the terrible Frank slide of 1903, which buried much of the coal town, miners heard “bumps” and rumbling in the Frank mine.

Darker shadows lurked over the list of daily dangers in the mine. The deadliest was a health condition known as black lung. Far too many Crowsnest miners faced a slow and agonizing death from lung damage after a life of breathing coal dust.

More than 1,000 miners on the Alberta side of the Crowsnest Pass died in mining accidents and explosions between 1906 and 1945. An unknown number of Albertans died from black lung, a condition that was not acknowledged as related to coal mining for much of the time the Crowsnest mines operated. Thousands of coal miners suffered severe injuries while at work. It is hard to imagine an industry with a more staggering rate of death and injury.

Safety regulations were sparse and poorly enforced in the early years, and usually surfaced only in response to deadly accidents and union pressure.



1903 – A rock slide in Frank buries much of the small mining town, and kills 81 people. Coal miners in western Canada organize as District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America.

Companies bent on profits for their shareholders in Europe, the United States and Eastern Canada often ignored their own regulations. Government inspection barely existed. Injured miners had no compensation. Widows and their children had no benefits when a miner was killed. An injured miner or black-lung victim could hope at best for a transfer to lighter work at the mine – but that happened only when the mine operator felt a pang of sympathy.

Workers took up collections as individuals, and later together through their unions, to pay for funerals or to help with living expenses for the recently widowed. Often the family members of a dead miner simply dis-

appeared because they had no reason to stay in the community – even their home was owned by the mining company, which wasn't in the business of offering charity.

Coal miners needed one another

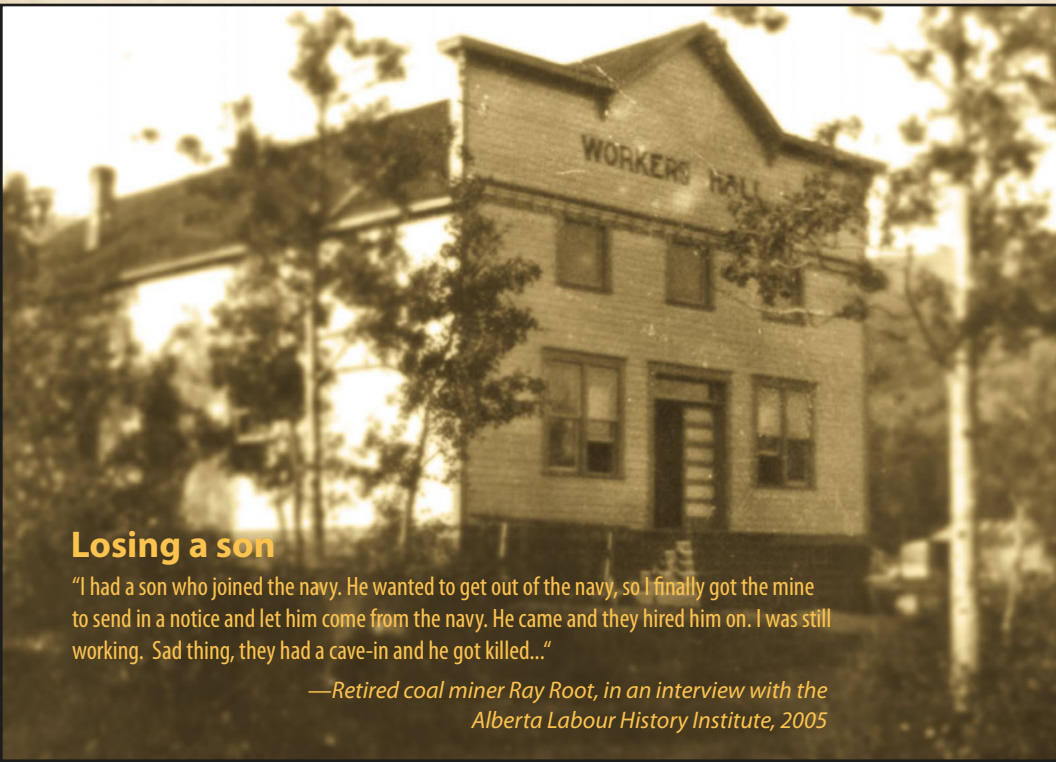
In rugged circumstances, Crowsnest miners banded together. Sometimes they relied on new friends who shared the same ethnic background. From the beginning, the Crowsnest mines and towns drew a mingled flow of immigrants in search of opportunities in the Canadian West. English and Welsh miners, along with workers from Eastern Canada and the United States, arrived first. They were quickly joined by Poles, Italians, Finns, Ukrainians,



- Ukrainian cultural group holds "working families picnic", Blairmore, 1932.

1907 – *The right to strike is severally limited after Mackenzie King's report on the miners' strike in Lethbridge. In response to the law, the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, the Alberta UMWA launch first strike and win wage increases and job security.*





Losing a son

"I had a son who joined the navy. He wanted to get out of the navy, so I finally got the mine to send in a notice and let him come from the navy. He came and they hired him on. I was still working. Sad thing, they had a cave-in and he got killed..."

—Retired coal miner Ray Root, in an interview with the Alberta Labour History Institute, 2005

Russians and many others, forming a sort of coal miners' United Nations. Ninety per cent of Alberta's coal miners before the First World War were recent immigrants, according to most estimates. A large percentage spoke no English.

Miners turned to their own communities for help. Organizations such as the Ukrainian labour temples and Italian social clubs helped newcomers adjust to life in the rapidly growing West, and

lobbied for basic institutions such as schools and hospitals. These clubs offered firm support to immigrants, and fun, too. Many a Finnish miner, chiseling coal in the darkness underground, looked forward to the dances in the Finnish socialist halls, highly popular entertainment in the Pass in the years before the First World War.

Ethnic-based organizations offered something else. A Polish or Italian miner in Blairmore or Coleman might

1912 – *The Alberta Federation of Labour is formed. Coal miners form the largest single union group within the new organization.*

FARMER AND LABOR
RALLY
PUBLIC MEETING
At 8:00 O'clock P.M.
EVERYBODY WELCOME

have a cousin or hometown friends with the same problems in the coal mines of Pennsylvania, or elsewhere. Through these personal connections, ethnic organizations became a direct link to the radical ideas and social theories rising up in Europe and the United States in response to the brutal exploitation of workers by industrial capitalism in the early 1900s. When union organizers came to the Crowsnest Pass they found workers who were often already convinced of the need to organize.

In the early years, the militant Western Federation of Miners organized workers on both sides of the Crowsnest Pass in Alberta and British Columbia. Miners working in dangerous jobs, and living in squalid conditions, quickly signed up with the hope of a better life.

Most mining companies responded by hiring security guards and appealing for government help. Alberta's mine employers adopted scare tactics, taking advantage of the union's reputation for militancy. From the start, a pattern emerged. Worker attempts to organize and bargain as a group invariably led to owner cries of radicalism, socialism and, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, the convenient and soon well-used label of "Bolshevism."

Which union should represent us?



The Western Federation of Miners eventually decided its main work was in American mines. When the more moderate but powerful United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) came to the Crowsnest in search of members, the Western Federation decided to step aside.

The coal miners of western Canada formed District 18 of the UMWA in 1903. This was the beginning of a long and stormy relationship. Through the next four decades, the UMWA would lead major strikes, winning some and losing some. It would wage battles for contracts and for political change. It would lose the respect and support of miners caught up in labour radicalism after the First World War. It would regain that support in the darkest days

1914 – An explosion at Hillcrest mine on June 19 kills 189 Albertans in Canada's largest mining disaster. In August, the First World War begins.





Mary North, The Red Finn

"The meeting opened with the singing of The Internationale. I had never heard it before and it was very moving. In the future, whenever I heard it sung, I remembered that moment and wondered about the effect it had on the many others who had come, like me, to the 'Golden West'."

- Mary North, a Finnish-Canadian socialist and feminist known as the Red Finn, describing the opening of the Finn Hall at Coleman in 1910

"We are only actors in a larger drama."

- Mary North during a strike in the Crowsnest Pass

-Speaker addresses crowd during rally, Blairmore, 1932

-Crowd gathers at "Karl Marx Park", Nordegg, 1936.

1919 – Labour revolt breaks out in western Canada. Crowsnest union members support Winnipeg General Strike, which is brutally put down by police. Coal miners in the Crowsnest join the One Big Union movement.



Coleman Miners' Unit, One Big Union

(Coal Mining Section)

District No. 1, Mining Department

Office of Secretary Treasurer

COLEMAN, Alberta, Dec. 20th 1919
Canada

Dear Sir,

The following resolution from Fernie Miners Unit Dist (1) Mining DEpartment of the One Big Union, was unanimously endorsed by the Coleman Miners Unit Dist (1) Mining Dept O.B.U.

RESOLUTION

Believing it is ~~not~~ essential there should be no stoppage in the coal Industry in this District, This Mass Meeting of miners are prepared to accept the 14% offered by the Coal Operators and agree to keep any agreement made by the men and Operators, but will fight to a finish any attempt to force us to join the United Mine Workers of America, Signed on behalf of the above Unit, *Ans Beattie* SECRETARY

- Letter from Coleman district union to the coal operators showing unanimous support for O.B.U., 1919.

of the Great Depression, after radical solutions and open class strife had brought workers to what seemed like a dead end.

The United Mine Workers in the Crowsnest Pass started off with a victory in 1907. Thanks in part to a heavier demand for coal in the decade before the First World War, UMWA District 18 negotiated favourable contracts after taking 3,000 members out on strike. Besides winning higher wages, the miners handed a stinging defeat to the newly formed Western Coal Operators Association, which had been

set up to overwhelm the unions.

The UMWA also led Alberta's emerging labour movement in a push for basic workers' compensation for injured employees, which was gradually accepted and slowly expanded in the years 1908 to 1918. The growing union became a crucial player in 1911 and 1912 in the creation of the Alberta Federation of Labour to represent all workers. The miners' union formed the largest contingent within the new AFL.

The United Mine Workers made an-

1925 -- Workers in Crowsnest mines vote to join the more radical Mine Workers Union of Canada after a failed UMWA strike. Their new union has Communist support.



other contribution to Alberta labour that is often overlooked. Its approach to the multicultural nature of the coal communities, though driven by self-interest, was enlightened at a time of blatant racism by a largely Anglo-Saxon population towards East European “foreigners.” Union president John Mitchell declared in an 1899 speech to union members: “The coal you dig isn’t Slavish or Polish or Irish. It’s just coal.” Unfortunately, there was no similar generosity, by unions or employers, toward Asian immigrants who were often banned from frontier workplaces at the union’s insistence. The UMWA officially banned Asian workers from holding union memberships in the first four years after District 18 was formed.

That said, the UMWA newspaper did communicate in several languages with its members. This openness to other cultures inspired considerable loyalty and trust among immigrant miners in the struggles to come. The attitude helped the union to keep its members united in the face of employer attempts during strikes to pit workers of British origin against the “radical foreigners” who allegedly wanted both a strike and a revolution.

The 1907 strike and contract turned out to be high points for the Crowsnest

workers. In subsequent years, any gains won on the picket line were often rolled back in the next strike. Picket lines and bitter feelings became commonplace.

Frustrated coal miners in the Pass were often willing to vote for more radical political parties. In 1909, Crowsnest voters elected union organizer Charles O’Brien, the first Socialist Party candidate to sit in the Alberta legislature. Over the years, the Crowsnest voters elected other socialist MLAs to represent organized labour and its concerns, including one of the six Labour Party MLAs elected in 1926.

In 1911, mine operators hired strikebreakers for the first time in the Crowsnest after District 18 of the UMWA, now 7,000 members strong, went on strike for higher pay. One of the largest strikes in Canada before the First World War, this strike cemented the reputation of the Alberta mine workers as leaders in the working class struggle for a better life. The final settlement, however, reflected the beginnings of a recession and signaled tougher times to come.

The First World War was a catastrophe for a new generation. After four bitter years of war, Canadian workers began a militant fight for pay and work

1929 – *The North American stock market collapses, the coal market plunges, and the Great Depression begins.*



- Mine Workers Union of Canada marches in support of mine nationalization, Crowsnest, 1934.



1930 – Alberta miners respond angrily when the RCMP shoot and kill three coal miners during a strike at Estevan, Saskatchewan.



improvements in 1919. They knew that wartime inflation had slashed their actual pay, and they expected that their wartime wage cuts would be addressed. Returning war veterans wanted fair work and some recognition of their sacrifices on distant battlefields. Many miners reacted angrily when they heard about the wartime profiteering of corporate leaders – the same men who had demanded that they accept pay cuts to help the war effort.

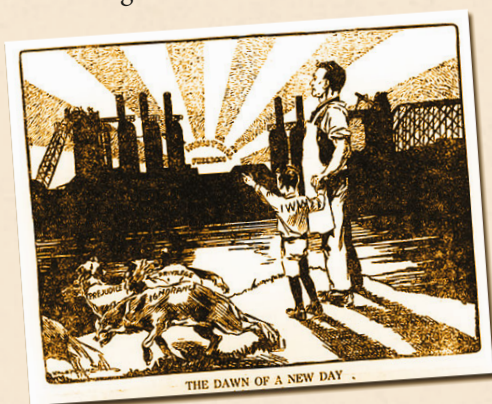
Many coal miners in the Pass were thrilled and radicalized by the 1917 Russian Revolution and by the post-war labour revolt in Europe, marked by strikes and talk of a proletarian revolution. In 1919, Winnipeg workers staged a general strike, which was quickly and brutally put down by government authorities. Alberta's coal miners were among the strongest supporters of the Winnipeg workers.

One Big Union

Alberta miners began to turn away from the UMWA, which they perceived as complacent and too moderate for the radical sentiments gripping many western Canadian workers. Some leaders of the District 18 Mine Workers actively supported the One Big Union, or OBU, a radical movement that promised to unite all work-

ers in a class struggle with the owners of industry, and the governments and police forces that bolstered the system. Nearly 5,500 members of District 18 decided to join the OBU, and only 256 opposed the idea, when the decision came to a vote.

The One Big Union advocated a general strike as the main tactic for improving the condition of workers. This dramatic tactic caught the imagination of social theorists, but Canadian workers soon recognized it was



- I.W.W cartoon, 1919

unrealistic. When employers simply refused to recognize the OBU as a bargaining unit, and attacked it instead as a revolutionary front, its shortcomings became apparent. In the Crowsnest, a somewhat unholy alliance between the coal operators and the United Mine Workers hastened the defeat of the OBU. The alliance was abetted by the federal government which, fearing

1932 – Coal miners in the Crowsnest go out on strike. The bitter dispute will last seven months, and turn into a bitter struggle for union survival. Mine operators rely on blacklists, strikebreakers, and armed police to keep the mines going.

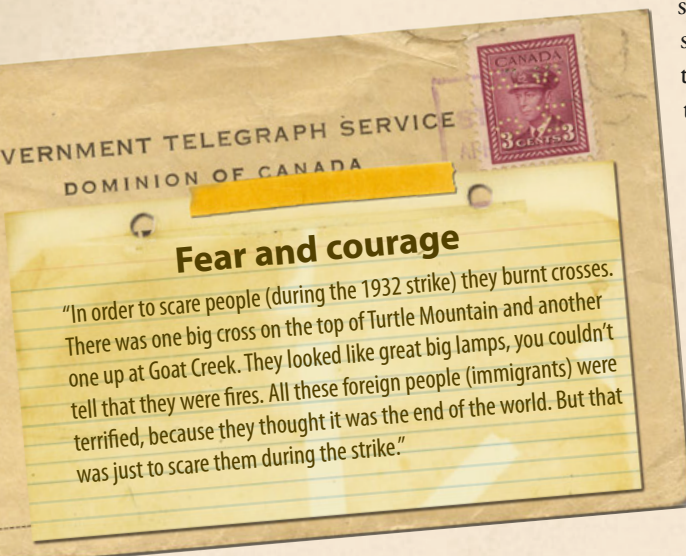


the radicalism of the OBU, approved a cabinet order requiring miners to belong to one union – the UMWA. In a semi-official history years later, UMWA District 18 acknowledged the arrangement to be “one of the few instances in history providing such solid evidence of employer-union collaboration.”

Miners in the Pass faced tougher challenges in the 1920s. Coal operators demanded concessions in contract talks. They also conspired to set up “home” unions in response to strike threats, and to bargain with these in-house creations. Angry and thwarted,

Crowsnest miners again began to desert the UMWA, this time for a new union called the Mine Workers Union of Canada, which began with active support from the Communist Party and its Canadian leader, Tim Buck. Within a year, the new MWUC signed up 4,000 members in the Alberta Crowsnest and began to prepare for renewed battle with the coal owners.

Coal supplied the fuel for the North American industrial machine, but that machine collapsed with the devastating stock market crash of 1929. The coal market plunged in the early spasms of the Great Depression. In a matter of months, the newly-organized Alberta coal miners, more radical than ever, were virtually destitute.



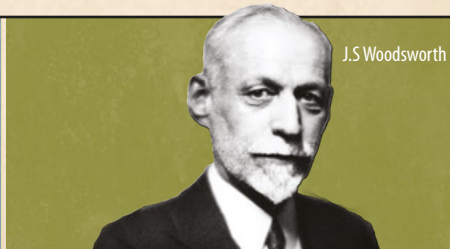
Fear and courage
“In order to scare people (during the 1932 strike) they burnt crosses. There was one big cross on the top of Turtle Mountain and another one up at Goat Creek. They looked like great big lamps, you couldn’t tell that they were fires. All these foreign people (immigrants) were terrified, because they thought it was the end of the world. But that was just to scare them during the strike.”

- Veronica Fontana, who was a child in Blairmore in 1932, in an interview with the Alberta Labour History Institute, 2005

The troubles of 1932

The 1932 coal strike in the Crowsnest Pass towns of Blairmore and Bellevue is an unforgettable story in Canadian labour history. In the memorable words of historian Allen Seager, author of *A Proletariat in Wild Rose Country*, the strike became “the rawest class struggle which the Pass had ever witnessed.”

1932 - In Calgary, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation [CCF] is organized as the new national political party of social democrats. It will become the predecessor of the NDP.



J.S. Woodsworth

WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE



- Newly elected "red" town council sweeps slate, Blairmore, 1933.

Coal operators hired strikebreakers to dig the coal, and security guards with guns to intimidate the strikers. They used blacklists to threaten union miners that they might never work again unless they co-operated. They also tried to divide the coal miners along ethnic lines, inciting desperate men to resent one another in desperate times. Mass unemployment and pittance

wages hardened attitudes, and forced miners to make tough choices. Frantic for a fair wage, union miners and strikebreakers became enemies for a time in divided communities.

The radical MWUC, spurred on by the Communist-backed Workers Unity League, responded to the coal operators with threats and violence of its

1933 – Voters in Blairmore elect a 'Red' town council. Leftist councillors change the name of the main street to Tim Buck Boulevard to honour the jailed leader of the Communist Party of Canada.



Tim Buck

Battling the strikebreakers, 1932

"I remember a lady from the dairy, Mrs. Rushko. Did you know, they brought (strikebreakers) in on the trucks. That's how they brought scab workers in, the police you know. And she chased that truck, and she grabbed the back. And I can still see her, and she had the slats, you know, she grabbed the slats of the rack. And she's hanging onto that and the police were hitting her hands with a club. I can see that as plain as if it happened right now. I bet he broke every one of her fingers. And he's lucky he went home alive . . . we got mad. That was a terrible thing to do and we went after him (the policeman) and he took off."

—Bertha Yagos of Blairmore in an interview with the Crowsnest Pass Historical Association.



own. The situation began to look like a return to the fierce confrontations of the distant past.

All sides in the 1932 Crowsnest strike recognized the fundamental class struggle at its heart. Patrick Lenihan, a Communist organizer in the Pass

who later became a city councillor in Calgary, described it as "the greatest strike in the history of Alberta." He continued: "It became a vicious battle. It lasted seven months. There were hundreds of RCMP in there. And, of course, the company and the right-wing elements in the camps were

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1935 – *The Social Credit movement sweeps to power in Alberta, ushering in a new era of conservative politics and hostility to unions.*





- Crowsnest miners march, Coleman, 1934.

extremely vicious and active in trying to terrorize people. And many were arrested. One woman, Mary Peters, got twelve months [in jail]. She grabbed a Mountie by the belt and pulled him right off a horse.”

The employers’ hardball tactics worked

to some extent. As the strike wore on, half of the Crowsnest workers returned to the mines, breaking through picket lines, and walking past the children and wives of striking miners. At Blairmore, the strike radicalized not only the strikers, but their families and supporters.

The Crowsnest soon gained a national reputation as one of the strongest regional bases of the Communist Party during the Depression. Communist organizers impressed the miners with their commitment to the working class and their distrust of the owners. Many miners considered the Alberta leaders of the new Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) to be more concerned with social theories than work contracts. In retrospect, many in the labour movement would argue that the split between militant Communists and the reformist CCF was disastrous to the left in Alberta. Neither faction was prepared to make common cause, and thus neither had much success later. Boxed in by militant Communists, the reformist CCF had little room to develop in Alberta as a voice of moderate reform on the left.

The bitter strike of 1932 ended only

1939 – *The Second World War begins. Canada’s heavy demand for coal in wartime keeps the mines in the Crowsnest Pass at full operation for the next five years.*





Mrs. Rossi's lump of coal

The spirited Mrs. Rossi made up her mind before the "Red" election in Blairmore in 1933. An 80-year-old Italian immigrant who spoke no English, she brought a lump of coal to the voting station to show how she intended to vote.

The incident drew national attention because Blairmore voters elected a slate of left-leaning candidates at a time when the Canadian government and industry were caught up in an anti-Communist scare.

Newspapers and opponents of the new council seized on the figure of Mrs. Rossi, portraying her as typical of the non-English "foreigners" in Canada who supported Communism. To local miners, Mrs. Rossi became a symbol of a working-class community unified by the strike battles of 1932.

The "Reds" on this Blairmore council were all left-leaning, and some were Communists. Voters turned to them because they promised to tackle the hardships of the Depression in a practical way. Voters had also opposed the business slate of candidates because local businesses had abandoned their traditional neutrality in the strike of 1932 and openly attacked the miners.

- Italian woman, name unknown, Blairmore, 1935.

when the families of strikers in Blairmore gathered their children and brought them to Edmonton. They appealed for help to Premier John Brownlee and the somewhat embarrassed United Farmers of Alberta government. The premier agreed to mediate the strike. The result was a standoff. The strikers did not win – although they did withstand an onslaught meant to destroy them. Their union failed in its attempt to gain recognition as the workers' bargaining representative with employers.

The citizens of Blairmore sent a shocking message to the world by electing Canada's first "Red" town council in 1933. The vote reflected the town's disenchantment over the strike result, and the miners' unhappiness with the business community, which had violated long-standing tradition by taking sides against the strikers. The community had also become more certain of its working-class identity. On election day, more than 90 percent of Blairmore's voters turned out to narrowly elect a slate of

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1947 – *Oil is discovered at Leduc, Alberta. As the oil boom surges, Alberta's coal industry goes into decline.*



candidates with openly Communist or leftist loyalties and a practical program for dealing with the hardships of the Depression.

To this day the council's more flamboyant actions can still capture the imagination. Councillors renamed Victoria Avenue as Tim Buck Boulevard in honour of the jailed national Communist leader. They declared a civic holiday on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution. They drafted a telegram of sympathy to Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie after Italy under Fascist leader Benito Mussolini invaded the African country. The telegram was not sent, however, because of the expense.

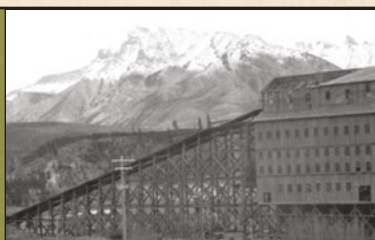
The Blairmore council had practical goals beyond radical pronouncements. To tackle local poverty, it deducted from the pay of wage earners to provide some relief pay to the jobless, and shifted more of the tax burden to business owners. It set aside unused public land for gardens for the unemployed and waged a fierce war with the province for higher relief payments and an end to degrading conditions in work camps. Blairmore citizens who appeared before the council with individual hardship stories got a sympathetic ear and, in many cases, direct

help. New ethnic organizations such as the Blairmore Slovak Benefit Society sprang up to help struggling community members, and the council supported these efforts.

By 1936 the political radicalism in the Crowsnest was in retreat. That year, leftists lost their seats on the Blairmore council because of corruption scandals and public impatience with their militant posturing. The Mine Workers Union of Canada, wounded in the 1932 strike, fell victim to ideological struggles. At the urging of its Communist leaders, the union was folded and workers were advised to return to the rival United Mine Workers of America. The about-face reflected international efforts by Communists to build a popular front on the left against growing fascism. Once again the Crowsnest miners, many of them radicalized by the struggles of the Depression years, drifted back to the moderate UMWA.

A new kind of radicalism swept to power across Alberta in response to the Depression. The Social Credit party under its leader, William Aberhart, would soon reveal itself to be radically conservative, not leftist, and no friend of organized labour.

1957 – *West Canadian Collieries closes its mines at Bellevue and Greenhill, leaving its operation at Coleman as the only working coal mine on the Alberta side of the Pass.*





Legacy of the Crowsnest

The coal miners' shared sense of purpose and social justice did not die in the Social Credit era. As the coal market soared during the Second World War, miners used their temporary prosperity to negotiate pioneering benefits that set a new standard for Albertans and Canadians.

The union deducted a portion of the miners' wages to pay for doctors' services long before public medicare arrived in Canada. The Alberta locals led the campaign to open a hospital between Blairmore and Coleman in 1949. District 18 locals in 1946 used their own pay deductions to build a welfare fund to help disabled miners, and, in 1950, a retirement fund. These measures foreshadowed similar federal and provincial programs that developed across Canada decades later. They also demonstrated the continuing progressive approach of the Crowsnest communities, even as Alberta sank further into the grip of Social Credit and its rigid brand of conservatism.

The discovery of oil at Leduc in 1947 was the closing whistle for the

Crowsnest mines. Five of the ten communities that were alive and hopeful in the Alberta Crowsnest in 1910 had collapsed when their mines folded: Lille, Burmis, Passburg, Lundbreck and Beaver Mines. By the early 1950s only two major mining operations remained. In 1957 one of them failed. In 1983, Coleman Collieries shut down and coal mining in the Alberta Crowsnest came to an end.

We can hear a faint echo of the old mine whistle if we use our imaginations. The Crowsnest has begun to attract tourists and new residents fascinated by coal mining history and by the beauty of the mountain pass and its little communities. The five towns on the Alberta side, amalgamated now into a single municipality, honour their past with museums, landmarks, interpretive centres and historic tours.

The people of the Crowsnest Pass are shaping their communities for a new century, but their past enriches them. They will remember the vivid stories of hard-working grandparents, of dangers and disasters, of defeats and triumphs in a long struggle for a better life. This is their inheritance — and our own.

1983 – *The Coleman mine closes, marking the end of the coal mining era in the Crowsnest Pass in Alberta.*



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* Celebrating Our Past & Building Our Movement *

PROJECT 2012

100 YEARS OF ALBERTA LABOUR

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<div style="float: left; width: 30%; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">  </div> <div style="float: right; width: 65%; padding-left: 10px;"> <p>Project 2012 is a joint project of the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Alberta Labour History Institute. The project will produce materials which celebrate the AFL's 100th anniversary in 2012, and will record the history of working Albertans.</p> </div>	
	