

Labour and Politics : Nova Scotia at Confederation

by K. G. PYKE *

During the 1850's, Nova Scotia was a place of prosperity and of economic growth. Shipbuilding, as well as shipping and exports, particularly of coal, had all grown, and they continued to develop in the 1860's under the stimulus of the American Civil War. The provincial economy, already dependent on exports and on commerce, became more urban-oriented as industries developed. This orientation in turn fostered the growth of an urban working class, which was concentrated mainly in the two principal coal-mining areas of the province, and in the city of Halifax. In the main areas of urban concentration workers engaged in an active, although limited, labour movement which developed in spite of the political climate, which was hostile to unions. Many employers, politicians and Halifax newspapers seemed to embrace a doctrine of progress which left very little room for a working man's movement. Just why labour activity did develop in this environment reveals a significant essential of the nature of that movement, as well as the basis of contemporary social and political ideas.

Any labour movement had to contend with a strong belief in social order, which required that workers accept the leadership of the more respectable elements of society. This autocratic attitude was summed up by Attorney General Martin I. Wilkins, in 1871, when he stated that "the servant was always under the authority of the master. The man who paid another wages had a right to control his actions as a general rule..."¹ In 1874, a civil engineer wrote in his diary on his return from an election tour: "I do not condescend to talk to the people about any question of morality or politics."² What was considered true for the people with respect to politics was also considered true for the worker with respect to economic affairs. There was nothing that the worker could do to alter

* Associate Professor of History, University of Windsor.

¹ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1871, *Debates*, 25 March 1871 (Halifax, 1871), pp. 272-273.

² VERNON SMITH, *Diary*, 5 February 1874, Manuscript, Public Archives of Nova Scotia, hereafter cited as P.A.N.S.

his position without causing economic chaos and political anarchy. Some conservatives might adopt a paternalistic attitude towards their servants; some liberals might argue that the worker was responsible for his own welfare. Yet many people in authority would declare that any organized activity by the worker on his own behalf must not infringe upon the authority of his employer, nor broach political issues which were the concern of the proper leaders of society.

The traditional view of the worker made no allowance for differences in skills. Some type of organization had probably existed amongst the crafts for some time. And by the 1860's journeymen were becoming especially interested in separating themselves from other less skilled workers. The journeymen were better able to make demands for recognition because of their skills and relative economic security. The journeymen had good reason to fear the introduction of machinery, which reduced the need for their skills and changed their method of work. This machinery also provided new opportunities for workers with less skill. Thus, the journeymen had to protect their interests against the threats posed by technology and by the desire of less skilled workers to improve their own economic interests.

The new mood of the workers erupted onto the political scene in 1864 when the coal miners at Sydney Mines, which was operated by the General Mining Association, a British company, went on strike. The miners had apparently at first requested an advance on their wages. When their request was denied, they then demanded an increase in wages. In the spring of 1864, with the shipping season about to open, the company manager decided to break the strike. He telegraphed the government in Halifax for aid in clearing the strikers from the company houses. But although J. W. Johnston, who was premier and attorney general, was willing to help, he was handicapped by the lack of provincial legislation. However, the day before the legislature was to close, Johnston brought in a bill, based on a British statute of 1825. It was considered of such urgency that it passed all three readings before lunch. Its main provision was to make illegal any use of coercion or force by an employee against any other employee or against his employer. Anyone violating the statute was subject to a mandatory twelve months' jail sentence.³ When asked

³ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1864, *Debates*, 9 May 1864 (Halifax, 1864), pp. 202-203.

in the assembly whether British troops would be available to break the Cape Breton strike, Johnston indicated that they would be available if they were required. He neglected to mention that one hundred troops were ready to sail before the anti-strike bill was passed. No ships were available to transport them, however, and it was not until 13 May 1864 that the troops actually left Halifax.⁴ The strikers were quickly dispersed, and other mining companies on the island sent miners to replace those workers who had left voluntarily and those who had been blacklisted.⁵ Despite this aid, the company was unable to regain its usual production in 1864.⁶ Neither was the government's intervention particularly satisfactory from its own point of view, since it had not expected to have to pay for the use of the troops. Whether the government would willingly assume such costs again was doubtful. The question of future government action was even more in doubt with the coming of confederation in 1867, which gave the control of all troops to the federal government. As a result the only official police force in the province consisted of the occasional constable or county sheriff. Thus, in the period immediately following union, any police action against strikes had to be carried out by a posse led by a constable.

When Johnston brought in his bill to make unions illegal he told the assembly that strong government action was needed in order to break organized labour agitation that threatened to paralyze mining in the province. There was no public evidence to support such a claim, nor for the claims made by several other members of the assembly concerning the destructive, lawless behaviour of the strikers.⁷ These claims were somewhat paradoxical considering the fact that the members of the assembly had recently granted an act of incorporation to a miners' union in Pictou county.⁸ There was, thus, evidence to indicate that the assembly was not acting against all unions but only against certain union activities, or alleged activities, which were regarded as a conspiracy against an important provincial asset.

⁴ Bruce FERGUSON, *The Labour Movement in Nova Scotia Before Confederation* (Halifax, 1964), pp. 25-28.

⁵ *Mornig Chronicle* (Halifax), 2 June 1864.

⁶ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1864, *Journals*, "Report of the Inspector of Mines" (Halifax, 1864).

⁷ *Sun and Advertiser* (Halifax), 18 May 1864.

⁸ NOVA SCOTIA, *Statutes*, 1864, chapter 28.

This distinction was to prove significant as craft unionism developed in Halifax. There were already several self-help, mutual benefit or fraternal societies in Halifax, which included working men as members. The carpenters were particularly notable in this regard, as they had a benefit society which dated from 1798.⁹ Another benefit society, the British American Friendly Society of Canada, had an agent in Halifax by 1856. Such activities often received public encouragement and support because they allowed for a self-gratifying display of paternalism on the part of respectable elements in return for a show of self-help by the recipients. In 1864, for example, the mayor of Halifax, P. C. Hill, helped organize a benefit society for the constables and night watchmen.¹⁰

The same mayor had been involved, in 1862, in a move to establish a half-holiday on Saturday. He chaired a public meeting at which such prominent men as Edward Kenny, a leading banker, S. L. Shannon, a lawyer, and Dr. Charles Tupper explained that a half-holiday would lead to the moral improvement of the workers. At the meeting, which was also attended by several militia officers, it was particularly stressed that the move would enable more men to turn out for the militia.¹¹ There was apparently little difficulty encountered in extending the half-holiday to banks, government offices, or to wholesale firms. The proposal did meet with opposition from retail merchants, who feared a loss of income. The merchants countered the view that the workers would benefit by stating that hard working men would lose half a day's salary and that "others" would have more time for dissolute habits.¹² The opposition to the movement showed a lack of sympathy for labour, but the reaction of the merchants seemed based primarily on a desire to preserve their own situation. Had they been able to close without loss to themselves, they might have been as willing as the bankers were to do so.

The movement for a half-holiday at first did not seem to have a connection with a particular workmen's movement. There was some support from various clerks in retail stores, particularly as the promoters began to press for an earlier closing hour, rather than a half-holiday.¹³

⁹ FERCUSSON, *Labour Movement in Nova Scotia*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 5 April 1864.

¹¹ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 20 June 1862.

¹² Neil J. MACKINNON, "Nova Scotia From Reciprocity to Confederation: A Social Study of the Period," unpublished M.A. Thesis (Dalhousie University, 1963), p. 251.

¹³ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 21 August 1865; 24 February 1868.

A society was established, with the burdensome label of the "Halifax Young Men's Early Closing Association," which had some sixty members by 1866. Meetings were held at which the clerks had the opportunity to listen to P. C. Hill read excerpts from Charles Dickens' works.¹⁴ This group also made an attempt to establish a gymnasium and a reading room.¹⁵ In spirit this type of organization seemed to have little connection with trade unions. It was related rather more to the "Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society," organized by the Poplar Grove Presbyterian Church, which promoted night school for adults.¹⁶ Even though such activities were not directly related to craft unions, they did form one response to the problems of an urban, working force. They also might have helped create a certain reservoir of sympathy for more overt trade union activity.

The first actual trade union in Halifax was the Housejoiners Union Society, which requested, and received an act of incorporation from the assembly in 1864. Before they organized into a group, the journeymen received the support of several master carpenters. Once they had received their act of incorporation, they set out a demand for a raise in salary from the prevailing five or six shillings per day to eight shillings per day. A more important demand, however, was that there be a uniform wage scale for two categories of journeymen. The master journeymen had probably acquiesced in the formation of the union to build up good will, but when 150 men went out on strike, some quickly became more reluctant.¹⁷ One newspaper began to threaten that "If the mechanics begin to show an unfair spirit the employers will naturally resort to means by which fresh sources of supply may be opened up."¹⁸ It did not prove necessary to bring in carpenters from outside of the city, nor to use semi-skilled workers. The master craftsmen at first met the demands of the strikers. But they quickly reversed their position. They revoked part of the raise and would only agree to establish a uniform scale of wages for first-class journeymen.¹⁹ The housejoiners, who had obviously tried to move too quickly, accepted their defeat. Despite this setback, various

¹⁴ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 26 March 1868.

¹⁵ *Halifax Citizen*, 12 September 1868.

¹⁶ *Halifax Citizen*, 5 December 1865.

¹⁷ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 26 May 1864; 4 June 1864.

¹⁸ *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 4 June 1864.

¹⁹ *Sun and Advertiser* (Halifax), 17 June 1864.

members of the union continued to take an active role in union affairs in the city, and the society continued to exist for some time.

A more subtle policy was followed by the shipwrights and caulkers' union, which was also incorporated in 1864. This society met its first major obstacle when the storekeeper at H. M. Dockyard refused to hire any member of the association.²⁰ After winning this battle, the society tried to stop the hiring of out-of-town journeymen and objected to working with non-society shipwrights. These demands were contrary to the statute of 1864 and, in 1866, the Chamber of Commerce, formed in 1864, sent a protest to the legislature. Rather than intervene in the dispute, the Conservative government sent the protest to the committee on trade and commerce.²¹ The committee dismissed the petition, and William Annand, a member of the committee and a prominent Liberal, congratulated the society on its defence against the charges.

It was rather strange that the politicians and the merchants seemed willing to countenance actions that they had been in such haste to declare illegal in 1864. No use was made of the anti-strike legislation in Halifax until the painters and glaziers' strike of 1869. Some painters had walked out, and one striker assaulted a former colleague who had continued to work at the old rate. The striker was brought up before the stipendiary magistrate, Henry Pryor, a former mayor of the city, who had served as a Conservative member in the assembly from 1859 to 1867. Pryor, after some hesitation, imposed a fine of twenty dollars, although the statute of 1864 stipulated a mandatory one-year jail sentence.²² He showed a similar leniency in two other cases that appeared before him in 1873 in connection with a three months long sailors' strike.²³ Pryor was not willing to tolerate individual cases of violence, but he regarded the legislation of 1864 as intended for major labour disturbances.

There was no apparent protest against Pryor's decisions and no employer in Halifax tried to use the statute of 1864 to break a strike.

²⁰ SHIPWRIGHTS AND CAULKERS ASSOCIATION OF HALIFAX AND DARTMOUTH, *Trades and Congress Souvenir*, 1908.

²¹ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1866, *Debates*, 27 March 1866, in *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 3 April 1866.

²² *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 9 April 1869. The painters wanted their wages raised from one dollar and fifty cents per day to two dollars per day.

²³ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 19 January 1873; *Evening Express* (Halifax), 20 March 1873.

Perhaps one reason for not resorting to the courts was that the employer already had the option of recruiting out-of-town workers or of using semi-skilled workers. If such devices failed, then a resort to the courts was only likely to create a mood of confrontation that might provoke a more virulent labour movement. On the whole, labour activity seemed to be regarded at that time as being basically within the old forms of fraternal, self-help societies. During this period the newspapers tended to ignore the local labour scene or to devote only a few lines to some anticipated strike. There were some editorials denouncing strikes in England or Germany,²⁴ but they did not apply their strictures to the local scene. If the editors did comment on a local strike they tended to adopt a paternalistic tone, warning the strikers that they might provoke a reaction from their employers if they were not more reasonable.²⁵ The political reaction in 1864 to the strikes in the Cape Breton coal fields was evidence that the warning had some point. It was noticeable, however, that the coal miners were obstructing a major company, whereas most of the strikes in Halifax involved less than one hundred workers in isolated fields. The prolonged reaction to a union in Halifax concerned the shipwrights who were directly involved with an industry considered vital to the economy. Another feature of the miners' strike was that few people knew anything about the conditions in the coal fields. Whereas there was likely to be sympathy for some of the grievances of the local workers,²⁶ even if there were none for the methods used by the strikers. There remained the possibility that the increased number of unions, or some specific incident would make some people in Halifax decide that the city was in the grip of a major labour disturbance which required immediate suppression.

During the 1860's several attempts were made to form unions, but local circumstances seemed to determine their degree of success. In 1864 the truckmen forced the city to increase their rates.²⁷ The truckmen were more or less forced to act together because a city bye law of 1851 had set their rate structure. Two years later a group of labourers went on strike

²⁴ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 15 October 1867; 30 September 1868; 30 November 1868.

²⁵ *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 4 June 1864; *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 24 April 1869.

²⁶ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 2 April 1868.

²⁷ *Halifax Citizen*, 13 December 1864.

for an increase in pay from one dollar to one dollar and fifty cents per day.²⁸ They were followed a month later by the dock workers, who wanted the same pay "owing to the high cost of everything."²⁹ Neither group succeeded in forming a union at this time, although in 1874 a "Benefit Order of Labourers" was established. The society probably remained a self-help society because the executive included a lawyer and a pawnbroker.³⁰ Without the strength of the crafts and apparently lacking any particular doctrine the labourers had to be content with a benefit society.

Many of the difficulties facing the tradesmen in forming a union were caused by the employers, but there was occasionally trouble from within the various societies. The stone cutters and masons' union was incorporated in 1866, but in 1868 a group of masons formed their own society. They immediately called a strike to enforce their demand that all masons in Halifax belong to the new union.³¹ This intra-union bickering indicated that the emphasis on creating societies around a particular craft could be divisive. A somewhat more typical situation occurred in 1868 when the bakers organized the "Society of Journeymen Bakers" and went on strike to enforce their demand for a raise in salary to eight dollars a week. They also insisted upon a reduction in their sixteen-hour day to a twelve-hour day.³² The chief opponent of the union was the Moir and Company Steam Bakery, which hired adults from the Deaf and Dumb Institute, as well as women and boys.³³ The strikers, aided by other craft unions, immediately established a producer's co-operative.³⁴ The strike ended after three weeks with most of the journeymen being rehired at the salary demanded and with a shorter working day.³⁵

By the end of 1873 a dozen craft unions were operating in Halifax, principally in trades connected with shipping and construction. They were essentially small bodies interested in local issues. In 1867 the plasterers did form a local connected to a British union, but this probably remained a benefit society.³⁶ It soon disappeared and was replaced in 1873 by a

²⁸ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 30 May 1866.

²⁹ *Sun and Advertiser* (Halifax), 30 May 1866.

³⁰ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 20 June 1873.

³¹ *Halifax Citizen*, 2 June 1868.

³² *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 17 March 1868.

³³ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 9 April 1868.

³⁴ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 13 April 1868.

³⁵ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 23 April 1868.

³⁶ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 29 May 1867.

Halifax-based society.³⁷ An attempt to include the Halifax societies into a North American labour movement began in 1868 when the Knights of St. Crispin began to organize the shoemakers in the maritime provinces.³⁸ There were few firms making shoes in Halifax at this time,³⁹ but the shoemakers probably shared the general concern of all shoemakers about the recent increased use of machines.⁴⁰ This latter development could not only throw the Halifax craftsmen out of work, but could also completely destroy the industry in Halifax. The immediate impact of the appearance of an American union in Halifax was to strengthen the emphasis on preserving the crafts and to increase the opposition to technological change. At this time a Montreal union official helped introduce the typographical society of Halifax into the International Typographical Union.⁴¹ This latter union had long been concerned with protecting the position of its members as tradesmen. The introduction of this union into Halifax, along with the shoemakers' union, provided a tangible bond between the city craftsmen and craftsmen in other areas, who had similar problems. These international unions, by concentrating on the problems of the crafts, emphasized and deepened tendencies already present in Halifax.

Although much of the journeymen's attention seemed to be devoted to the internal problems of the various trades, especially in the 1860's, they did make some effort to improve their general economic security. In 1866 the president of the housejoiners' society became president of a consumers' co-operative, which operated for about two years.⁴² A number of people in Halifax, who were not connected with unions, promoted co-operatives because they encouraged thrift and embodied a desire for self-help.⁴³ These people may well have encouraged the fishermen in the Halifax area to form the Fishermen's Union and Co-operative Society in

³⁷ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 27 February 1873.

³⁸ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 10 September 1868; *Halifax Citizen*, 13 November 1869.

³⁹ In 1876 there were three firms with an estimated worth of less than \$2,000.00 and one firm of not more than \$50,000.00. See BRADSTREET'S *Report of the Dominion of Canada*, 1 February 1876 (New York, 1876), pp. 838-846.

⁴⁰ Aranka KOVACS, "The Knights of St. Crispin in Canada," *Canadian Labour* (April, 1966), pp. 35-36.

⁴¹ George TRACEY, *History of the Typographical Union* (Indianapolis, 1914), pp. 271-272. A much earlier contact with an American society occurred in 1837 when a Nova Scotian was seated as a fraternal delegate at the second convention of the National Typographical Society in New York (TRACEY, *Typographical Union*, p. 88).

⁴² *Evening Express* (Halifax), 18 April 1873.

⁴³ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 24 June 1865; 13 December 1865.

1868.⁴⁴ A few years later a number of craftsmen decided to help working men own their own homes. Helped by master builders and other non-union people, they set up a mechanics building society, which was modelled after a Montreal society.⁴⁵ This project, even more than the co-operatives, indicated that some journeymen were increasing their scale of expectations. These journeymen implicitly rejected the view that a man could acquire a house as he moved up in the social scale. Instead they wanted home-owning brought within reach of the journeymen, if not of the ordinary worker.

The labour activity in Halifax was fully matched by that in the coal mining areas, particularly after 1872. Following the collapse of the strike in 1864 there was no further major disturbance until January 1868 at Little Glace Bay. This strike lasted for three months and unrest continued until July.⁴⁶ Then the mining areas were quiet until July 1872 when a series of disturbances broke out. These lasted until the end of 1874. The unrest was concentrated in the mines being developed in Pictou county. In 1873 coal sales increased twelve per cent and coal prices went up almost fifty per cent. Rather than engage in a lengthy contest with the miners, the companies preferred to compromise.⁴⁷ Wages, which in 1872 had already risen by twenty-five per cent,⁴⁸ continued to rise throughout 1873. The miners followed an aggressive policy of confrontation, striking over a change in their hours of work,⁴⁹ or when they did not receive their salary on the designated pay day.⁵⁰ Neither the miners nor the company attempted to set up any procedure for negotiation, and both resorted to ultimatums and to force. The workers were led by the experienced, underground miners.⁵¹ These men had long enjoyed the rights of master craftsmen to hire their own assistants, and they had long taken a very independent position towards the General Mining Association.⁵² However,

⁴⁴ *Halifax Citizen*, 4 April 1868; *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 18 April 1868; 21 April 1868; 5 May 1868. A Fishermen's Union and Benevolent Society was incorporated in 1872.

⁴⁵ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 16 April 1873.

⁴⁶ *Halifax Citizen*, 23 June 1868.

⁴⁷ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1873, *Journals*, "Report of the Department of Mines" (Halifax, 1873).

⁴⁸ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1873, *Journals*, "Report of the Department of Mines" (Halifax, 1873).

⁴⁹ *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 12 December 1872.

⁵⁰ *Halifax Citizen*, 21 October 1873.

⁵¹ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 13 November 1874.

⁵² FERGUSSON, *The Labour Movement in Nova Scotia*, p. 17.

the disturbances in the 1870's occurred primarily with new companies, which had brought in new managers, several of whom were Americans, who may not have followed the practices developed in Nova Scotia. The basic problem was probably that the new companies attempted to treat the miners as ordinary salaried employees, while the miners attempted to keep their position as tradesmen.

In September 1872 Henry S. Poole, manager of the Caledonia Coal and Railway Company, an American company, proposed to the government that it should look abroad for skilled miners to relieve the labour shortage in the mines. Although he himself was English, Poole did not want English miners, rather he preferred that the government look to Scandinavia, which was "a country that sends to the western states men who are peaceable and industrious."⁵³ But instead of encouraging Scandinavian immigrants, the governor made arrangements in France to bring in 300 miners from the section of Alsace-Lorraine taken over by Germany. They began to land in 1873 and continued to arrive throughout 1874, when there was no longer any need for them. Moreover, many of the immigrants were not miners, and they had no mining experience. They had been assured of jobs, however, and when they were not forthcoming they complained to the French consular agent. The provincial government was soon embarrassed by inquiries about these immigrants from the federal government.⁵⁴ As in 1864, the government's intervention into the labour problems of the mining companies was ill-considered and followed by unexpected results.

The introduction of the French miners into Pictou county complicated the labour situation for the companies. In 1874 a number of French miners at Vale Colliery marched into New Glasgow to confront the company's agent with their grievances.⁵⁵ Rumours circulated that they were armed with rifles and revolvers and that they had threatened the underground foremen.⁵⁶ The constable of New Glasgow, aided by volunteers, went out to the mines, arrested the ring leader and broke the strike.⁵⁷ This incident

⁵³ Henry S. Poole to W. B. Vail, 17 September 1872, Provincial Secretary's Papers, No. 1775, P.A.N.S.

⁵⁴ H. Crosskill to J. C. Taché, Deputy Minister of Agriculture, 10 December 1874, Provincial Secretary's Papers, Letter Book, P.A.N.S.

⁵⁵ *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 21 May 1874. Sir Hugh Allan of Montreal was president of the company which operated the Vale Colliery.

⁵⁶ *Halifax Citizen*, 26 May 1874.

⁵⁷ *Colonial Standard* (Pictou), 26 May 1874.

was only one of several involving the French miners.⁵⁸ These incidents provoked a brief outburst of nationalism from some Halifax newspapers. "The surplus manhood of Europe," declared one paper, "requires good strong law to keep it in order."⁵⁹ Identification of labour unrest with immigrants, whether from Europe or from Great Britain, provided an explanation for strikes and another means of expressing hostility for labour activity in general.

The situation in the mines was not a satisfactory one, particularly with respect to working conditions. The expansion of coal mining had taken place with little, if any government supervision and some of the practices were very hazardous. In 1873, the inspector of mines pointed out that, on a per capita basis, one miner out of every 219 was killed in a mine accident in Nova Scotia as compared to one miner out of 345 in Great Britain.⁶⁰ In 1872 the government began preparing a bill for regulation of the mines, and it sought the advice of several company managers. It was not surprising that the government did not consult the miners. The latter, moreover, did not seem interested in mine safety or in government regulations. The lack of interest in government supervision was in keeping with their general lack of political participation. In the town of Albion Mines only one out of seventeen people were registered to vote as compared to one out of six in the neighbouring town of New Glasgow, which had approximately the same population. Not only did the miners not have much political weight, but there was evidence that the companies exerted their influence over their employees at election time.⁶¹ The lack of any real participation in the political process probably helped account for the failure of the miners to see the importance, or at least the utility of political action.

In 1873, the government introduced a comprehensive bill to regulate mining. Several members of the assembly accepted the necessity for some regulation. They were concerned, however, that regulations would reflect on the commercial reputation of the province in the world money markets. This could have been the basis for a tough, anti-union bill, but the

⁵⁸ *British Colonist* (Halifax), 12 March 1874; *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 11 June 1874.

⁵⁹ *British Colonist* (Halifax), 30 May 1874.

⁶⁰ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1873, *Journals*, "Report of the Department of Mines" (Halifax, 1873).

⁶¹ *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 22 August 1872.

members were content to ensure that the workers had no voice in the operation of the mines. The authority of the company managers was to be preserved intact from any intervention by the miners. This would not only protect the rights of property but would aid the proper working of the mines and thereby result in fuller employment. The protection of property rights was thus regarded as a forward, progressive approach, which would protect the true interests of the workers.

The Nova Scotian bill was based on a British statute of 1872. It was noticeable that all the clauses in the British statute protecting the salary rights of miners were deleted. The Nova Scotian miner, argued the commissioner of mines, unlike his British counterpart, was not under the control of a master and therefore needed no protection in law. Another provision which affected the position of the miner related to the investigation of accidents. The commissioner pointed out that in future these would be conducted by the coroner, instead of by grand juries, because the latter had often been packed by miners. Thus, unless miners were called as witnesses, they had no official method of protesting against their working conditions.⁶² However, the bill did contain a prohibition against the employment of boys under ten years of age in the mines and a restriction of sixty hours of work per week for those under twelve years of age. This contrasted with the British limitation of thirty-six hours per week. The leader of the opposition in the assembly, Hiram Blanchard, wanted no restrictions at all placed on the right to work. One humanitarian, Mather DesBrisay, pointed out, however, that more than sixty hours of work would interfere with the right of every Nova Scotian child to have an education.⁶³

At the close of the legislative session, the chief government newspaper offered its opinion that the mining act was timely, even if not absolutely necessary.⁶⁴ Just how necessary it was was shown two weeks later when the Drummond Colliery exploded, killing sixty men and boys. The explosion followed a strike, which had probably been provoked in part by unsanitary conditions in the company tenements where there had been thirty cases

⁶² NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1873, *Debates*, 23 April 1873 (Halifax, 1873), pp. 258-259.

⁶³ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1873, *Debates*, 24 April 1873 (Halifax, 1873), p. 269.

⁶⁴ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 1 May 1873.

of typhoid with several deaths as a result.⁶⁵ After being out on strike for a week, the men returned to work. At noon a fire was reported to be burning in the workings. The managers led a small rescue party into a shaft, but before it had proceeded very far an explosion took place, killing all those in the mine.

The reaction of some Halifax newspapers to this tragedy was straightforward and clear. One stated that "... the fires are raging and burning up the bodies of the unfortunate men whose wrong-headed conduct has brought this disaster upon the heads of their wives and children."⁶⁶ Another stated that:

The miners, eager for too much, have lost all. It is hard to speak with any degree of patience or courtesy of the unjust and tyrannical policy of strikers in their blind efforts to improve their own wages — not their own condition — at the expense of others. The fate of the Drummond colliery is a fearful warning to employers and employed — a warning that should be utilized to the utmost.⁶⁷

The disaster at the Drummond Colliery made no apparent difference to the miners, who continued their policy of confrontation. Both employment and coal sales in 1874 exceeded the levels attained in 1873, but prices were down and the rise in sales did not match the increase in production. Several of the smaller collieries did not open at all in 1874, and those that did ended the year with large quantities of unsold coal. The change in market conditions was quickly reflected in a change in the attitude of the companies towards wage demands. When the miners went out on strike at the Drummond Colliery, the company had the ring leaders arrested and only dropped the charges when the men returned to work.⁶⁸ In November of 1874, the Pictou companies posted a notice that wages would be reduced by twelve per cent. The miners at five collieries promptly walked out, but within a matter of days they accepted the lower rates.⁶⁹

It was obvious that the companies had no intention of negotiating with the miners, and the latter had not tried during their brief period of strength to make the companies accept some method of negotiation.

⁶⁵ *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 17 April 1873. George Drummond of Montreal was president of the International Coal Company, which operated the Drummond Colliery.

⁶⁶ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 14 May 1873.

⁶⁷ *British Colonist* (Halifax), 15 May 1873.

⁶⁸ *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 20 August 1874.

⁶⁹ *Eastern Chronicle* (New Glasgow), 12 November 1874.

Nor had they tried to increase their strength by organizing some province-wide union. The attempt to do so was not to come until the establishment of the Provincial Workers Association in 1879. Instead, the miners had adopted a militant attitude towards the companies while they looked after their future economic stability by establishing benefit societies, consumer co-operatives and saving banks. The earliest co-operative had been established at Stellarton in Pictou county in 1861.⁷⁰ Another co-operative was also involved with the establishment of a Savings Bank, which was limited to assets of \$20,000.00. This bank opened in 1866, and in 1874 it received a federal charter, with an increase in capitalization to \$50,000.00.⁷¹ In Pictou an equally active group began a savings bank in 1866, as well as a hiring hall and a mechanics reading room. Similar activity began in Cape Breton when the Britannia Co-operative was opened about 1861, but it soon collapsed, perhaps because of the strike of 1864. In 1866 the "Provident" store was begun, but this time with an act of incorporation. The operators of the store fell into the all too common habit of issuing high dividends in order to win supporters, and thereby deprived the store of reserve funds.⁷² This store, like the other projects, was not intended for the ordinary mine labourer, but was intended for the particular benefit of those miners who had the capital necessary to buy shares.⁷³ It may have been this policy which led another group in 1874 to seek to revive the old Britannia Co-operative.⁷⁴ These various projects were linked to the old tradition of self-help. The miners seemed interested primarily in protecting their own status and interests while they prepared as best they could for more depressed times. Rather than work for an accident fund, which would apply to all workers, for example, they established benefit societies with a much more restricted coverage. Their failure to seek any long-term goals in the contests with the mining companies could also have indicated that they felt the futility of attempting to make any change in the policies of their employers.

The gathering depression which helped end the miners strikes also affected the craft unions in Halifax. The situation was also altered by

⁷⁰ R. G. BAIN, "Consumers' Co-operatives in Nova Scotia," unpublished M.A. Thesis (Acadia University, 1940), pp. 1-3.

⁷¹ CANADA, *Statutes*, 1874, chapter 64.

⁷² *Evening Express* (Halifax), 8 June 1874.

⁷³ CANADA, *Royal Commission on the Relations of Capital and Labor in Canada*, 5 vols. (Ottawa, 1889), Nova Scotian Evidence, pp. 405-406.

⁷⁴ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1874, *Debates*, 13 April 1874, p. 135.

political events which coalesced a growing opposition to unions. Overt opposition to the workers became pronounced during the federal election of February 1874. This election was called by the new Liberal prime minister, Alexander Mackenzie, who had taken office following the resignation of Sir John A. Macdonald. The Conservative organization in the city was in disarray, and it could not find candidates for the dual riding. Ten days before the election, a meeting was held to consider whether or not a working man's candidate should be nominated. With the thermometer registering eighteen below outside, fifteen hundred men milled about Temperance Hall, waiting for someone to admit responsibility for calling the meeting. A protest against the proposal of a third-party candidate was read on behalf of five craft unions.⁷⁵ The crowd, however, wanted to hear Donald Robb, a master plasterer, who had campaigned for the Conservatives in previous elections. At the meeting Robb denied any intention of contesting the election,⁷⁶ but the following day he reached an agreement with the Conservatives whereby he would run as a working man's candidate, and the Conservatives would pay him \$3,000 towards his election expenses.⁷⁷ Several Conservatives refused to aid Robb, and some even came out publicly in favour of the Liberal party nominee.⁷⁸

A basic question for the workers was how they would participate in politics. Although some workers had been involved in political activities for some time,⁷⁹ they probably participated less than did other economic groups. One important obstacle was the statute of 1863, which imposed a real and personal property franchise of \$300.00. When this requirement was applied in Halifax one ward had one voter for every seven persons, while another ward with a heavy concentration of working men had only one voter for every twelve persons. Moreover, the wards with the lowest registration rate also tended to have the lowest turnout of registered voters at elections. The working man's interest in politics was likely further dulled by the knowledge that some employers expected all of their employees to vote as they did.

⁷⁵ These unions were: The Typographical, Coopers, Knights of St. Crispin, Sailmakers and the Shipwrights and Caulkers.

⁷⁶ *Halifax Citizen*, 27 January 1873; *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 27 January 1874.

⁷⁷ *Halifax Citizen*, 31 January 1874.

⁷⁸ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 30 January 1874.

⁷⁹ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 19 December 1863.

The labour unrest after 1863 showed a rejection of the domination of workers by their employers and indicated that the workers intended to adopt an independent position in politics. This may have been part of a general development. Some of the conventions of political behaviour, particularly about voting, seemed to be breaking down. An increase in voter mobility may have been behind the politicians' complaints that voter corruption was on the increase. The problem of corruption had been raised in the provincial assembly in 1869. The members had decided then that the increased difficulty in running an election was due to the influx of Canadian money. To curb the costs of election campaigns the legislature had passed, for use in provincial elections, a ballot system which was based on the method used in New Brunswick.⁸⁰ This ballot did not actually protect the voter as it did not provide for privacy while the ballot was being cast. Even if the assembly did not provide the opportunity to cast a free vote, it did acknowledge that a growing number of people were going to vote as they saw fit.

It was logical that the worker, because of his special interests, would be involved in a pragmatic fashion with the increased role of the voter in political questions. The growth of unions provided a forum for debate and a means of participating in the ordinary political questions of the day. The executive of the Shipwrights and Caulkers' society, for example, in 1865 met with some difficulty from their own members over their support of the union of the provinces. Nevertheless, this society, along with other unions,⁸¹ continued to take part in the struggle for confederation.⁸² The political activity of these societies, which took the usual form of organized pressure groups, was usually on the side of the Conservatives. One possible reason for this support was the number of Irishmen on the executive of such societies as the Shipwrights and Caulkers. The Catholics, and especially the Irish, had tended to be Conservatives since the 1850's.

Labour may also have gravitated to the Conservative party because this party, rather than the Liberal party, had shown a willingness to work with the unions. Some Conservatives were scornful of the liberal doctrine of progress and doubted that the mere accumulation of wealth was in

⁸⁰ NOVA SCOTIA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, 1869, *Debates*, 14 April 1869, pp. 274-279.

⁸¹ *British Colonist* (Halifax), 27 June 1867.

⁸² A. G. GILBERT, *From Montreal to the Maritime Provinces*. Intro. D. LOCKHEAD, Bibliographical Society of Canada (Toronto, 1967), pp. 20-21.

itself a sign of superior merit. Believing that wealth was only one of the conditions necessary for leadership and responsibility, they nurtured their paternalistic role in society. Such men as P. C. Hill had helped form benefit and friendly societies in the 1860's, but Hill broke into public denunciation of the working man's movement led by Robb.⁸³ Although some Conservatives were willing to allow for some political participation by workers, they reacted sharply to the contention that working men had special interests of their own and that these special interests required a separate political party. The reaction of Hill and of others also indicated that the reaction to unions was likely to be much less sympathetic in the future than it was in the past. It was no longer possible to consider a union as a friendly society in disguise. There was also less likely to be a distinction drawn in the press between local and European workers, who were apparently inflicted with a pestilential infection.

Many of the merchants in Halifax, particularly after the struggle over confederation, were identified with the Liberal party. These merchants, and the West Indies commission merchants especially, were connected with the old mercantile economy of the province.⁸⁴ Although the craft societies were opposed to the merchants, they were dependent upon the economy supported by them. It was significant that among the unions which opposed the working man's movement were found the sailmakers, the coopers and the shipwrights. These crafts were threatened by the increased use of machinery and by the ambitions of semi-skilled workers. Many Nova Scotians could work a piece of canvass or do a bit of carpentry. Although the craftsmen shared a common interest with the merchants, it was difficult to associate with a party which declared that the merchants were the dynamic force in the march of the nineteenth century towards progress and reform.⁸⁵ The doctrine of progress had little room for the worker because it contended that whoever had achieved material gain and social mobility had proven their fitness to lead society. The possession of property was proof of ability, and it was also a guarantee that a man would have sufficient independence to exercise his judgement. The worker, merely by virtue of being a worker, was incapable of leadership and was

⁸³ P. C. Hill to the editor, *Evening Express* (Halifax), 2 February 1874.

⁸⁴ Of nineteen private firms in Halifax in 1876, with a value estimated at over \$100,000.00, seventeen were owned by merchants. See BRADSTREET's *Report of the Dominion of Canada*, pp. 838-846.

⁸⁵ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 2 September 1872.

also corrupt by nature because he depended upon another man's will for his livelihood. The Liberal argument made it essential that the respectable classes prevent the worker from disputing their leadership in either economic or political areas. Although in practice the application of this doctrine in any given case required an act of judgement which allowed other factors to intrude, in theory it did not allow for any compromise with the aims of the workers to organize strong unions and to participate actively as working men in politics.

The men who turned out to hear Robb speak were thus a challenge to the economy and to a persuasive political doctrine. These workers could perhaps not improve their own standard of living, but they could stand and cheer as Dr. W. J. Almon, a former member of the federal parliament, denounced the Halifax merchants as "cod-fish aristocrats," who had controlled the city for too long.⁸⁶ The *Evening Reporter* used these jibes as the basis for an argument in favour of a high tariff policy designed to develop manufacturing, and thus help the workers. Society, according to this paper, consisted of the farmer, the manufacturer, and the worker. For some time the government had favoured the farmer, continued the *Reporter*, and it should now help urban areas by promoting industry, and thereby create more jobs for the workers.⁸⁷ The Liberals immediately replied that Robb's campaign was designed to set class against class.⁸⁸ Some muttered about communism and anarchy, but the accusations seemed to reflect a fear that the agitation would lead the workers to reject the leadership of the reputable elements of society.⁸⁹ In retaliation for the charges of anarchy, Robb seized on a statement made by Alexander Mackenzie that he would use Chinese coolies to build the railway to the Pacific.⁹⁰ Signs were posted throughout the city warning the working men that the Liberals intended to take bread from the mouths of working men.⁹¹ The communism and yellow peril charges, bizarre as they were, did illustrate that economic prosperity and social order were basic issues in the campaign.

⁸⁶ *British Colonist* (Halifax), 31 January 1874; "West Indies Merchant" to the editor, *Halifax Citizen*, 31 January 1874.

⁸⁷ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 28 January 1874.

⁸⁸ *Halifax Citizen*, 31 January 1874.

⁸⁹ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 2 February 1874; 3 February 1874.

⁹⁰ *Halifax Citizen*, 31 January 1874.

⁹¹ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 4 February 1874.

Robb's campaign received at least some support from working men. It soon became apparent, however, that he lacked the endorsement of many Conservatives. Not only did several Conservatives publicly support the Liberal candidate, but some of Robb's committee members voted against him.⁹² He was also handicapped by the open ballot system, which prevented some working men from voting as they might have wished. The entire campaign was partly the result of the temporary collapse of the Conservative party following the disintegration of the Conservative government in 1873. Robb's own lack of commitment to a third party working man's movement was demonstrated when he returned to Conservative ranks in the fall of 1874.

Although the working men were not to have their own party at that time, the campaign did contain issues which would affect the tone of contemporary politics. The most important of these issues was the attack on the privileges of the respectable classes. Attacks on privilege had a familiar ring. The Liberals had for years condemned the privileges arising from aristocracy and family pride. In place of an aristocracy they had wanted to substitute a system to reward thrift and industry.⁹³ Even before Robb's campaign it was apparent that the working men's movement was being used to attack the elitism inherent in the Liberal policy. During a bye election in Halifax for the provincial assembly in February 1873 the *Evening Reporter* had supported a disbarred lawyer, who had stood as a friend of the working men.⁹⁴ In this contest the privileges of wealth were attacked and proposals were made to increase the control of the people over the political processes.⁹⁵ This same type of argument was present in Robb's campaign and was likely to recur in provincial politics.

The attempt to graft an attack on privilege to support for increased industrialization was in part an attempt to gain influential allies for the working man. Although the ploy had not been particularly successful before, attempts were made during the summer of 1874 to develop this tactic. A society, which bore the title of the Nova Scotian Association for the Encouragement of Industrial Interests, was formed in the spring to

⁹² *Halifax Citizen*, 14 February 1874.

⁹³ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 20 June 1862.

⁹⁴ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 8 February 1873.

⁹⁵ *Halifax Citizen*, 11 February 1873; 20 February 1873.

promote a high tariff policy.⁹⁶ The vice-president of this body was Michael Walsh, who had worked for Robb during his campaign and who, in 1864, had been vice-president of the Housejoiners association. This support of high tariffs by Walsh at first seemed paradoxical in view of the Conservatives' lack of support for the workers during the election and the attacks on privilege by some workers. The arguments used against the old economic order, however, could easily be turned against the new. Any general support for industrialization by the workers was likely to reflect a demand for their economic betterment. Any support for higher tariffs was not only an attack on a type of property but also an attack on the craft unions. Thus rather than being the result of a clear cut policy, the advocacy of higher tariffs was probably a tactical move that could change with altered circumstances.

The differences in interest between the craft unions and the general body of workers was a major handicap to the formation of any general policy by labour. Not only were the workers deprived of the strength of the crafts associations, but the latter were limited in their effectiveness by conflicts with semi-skilled workers. This was particularly evident in 1874 as the growing depression provided the employers with an added reason for opposing the demands of the crafts. The growing opposition to unions was clearly shown when twenty-six sailmakers, who had organized in 1871, went on strike to support a demand for a raise in salary.⁹⁷ Their employers promptly hired semi-skilled workers,⁹⁸ and after a two-month struggle the craftsmen were forced to return to work at the old rate.⁹⁹ The division among the various grades of workmen also hindered the efforts of the shipwrights. In 1872, this association insisted that their wages be raised to two dollars and fifty cents per day.¹⁰⁰ This demand was met so promptly that the bargaining committee asked for, and received, a nine-hour day rather than the prevailing ten-hour work day.¹⁰¹ Success bred self-confidence, and the society soon began to expel those members who did not meet its ever-rising standards. A result

⁹⁶ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 10 April 1874.

⁹⁷ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 31 March 1874; "Journeyman Sailmaker" to the editor, *Evening Express* (Halifax), 15 April 1874.

⁹⁸ In 1876 there were seven firms making sails in Halifax, and none of these firms exceeded \$10,000.00 in value. BRADSTREET'S *Report of the Dominion of Canada*, pp. 838-846.

⁹⁹ *Halifax Evening Reporter*, 21 May 1873.

¹⁰⁰ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 1 May 1872.

¹⁰¹ *Morning Chronicle* (Halifax), 2 May 1872.

of this short-sighted, arrogant policy was shown in 1874 when a shipyard organized the Union Shipwrights and Caulkers Association of Halifax made up of those who were ineligible for membership in the original union.¹⁰²

The conflict in interests between the various levels of skills was thus an important factor in the development of a working man's movement in Halifax. Various groups went on strike and tried to organize between 1864 and 1874, but the ones that had the most apparent success were those connected with various crafts. The crafts' fear of industrialization and their conflict with semi-skilled labourers, who wanted better paying jobs, forced the craft societies into a conservative stance that was essentially defensive in nature. This tendency was reinforced by the tie with American unions, which emphasized the protection of the position of the various skills. The prominence of the craft unions in Halifax gave a conservative tone to the entire labour scene in the city. There did seem to be, however, a potential for more radical measures within the general labour picture in the city.

The conflicts between the workers were less severe than were the tensions between the workers and their employers, the press and the politicians. Unions were at first identified by many as self-help or benefit societies, which enjoyed a measure of public respectability. Public criticism of a working man's movement and of unions became more pronounced as more unions were formed and attacks on the privileges of merchants became more open. There was little room for compromise between some workers and the newspaper which asserted: "There must be always working men, men to work with their hands, to be industrious, to be unfortunate, to suffer; it is the will of God and the destiny of the race."¹⁰³ The pessimistic attitude that little could be done to improve the economic position of the workmen may have been a reason why some of the workers were becoming more and more critical. These workers were also in conflict with the liberal doctrine of progress that saw political and economic leadership as a reward for merit. This liberal doctrine did hold out the promise of economic progress with social mobility, but the rewards could only come when the worker had risen above his class.

¹⁰² "Shipwright" to the editor, *Evening Express* (Halifax), 1 December 1874.

¹⁰³ *Evening Express* (Halifax), 5 February 1874.

The demand by the workers for economic improvements and a political role denied the belief in competition and also denied the right of the most prosperous to leadership. The very existence of the unions thus constituted a challenge to a prevailing doctrine of the period. By their existence the unions were an indication that the supremacy of this doctrine was being undermined. A possible cause for this alteration could be found in the changing nature of the Halifax economy which, in becoming more industrial, was making the old mercantile system seem less important.