

Flin Flon, Manitoba: The Workers Unity League,  
The Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company  
and the Great Depression

Bob G. Hume  
870288

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The strike which occurred at Flin Flon, Manitoba during the turbulent summer of 1934 in many ways typified the nature and sequence of labour disputes throughout the depression-plagued Dominion of Canada. Robert Robson in his excellent chronology of the Flin Flon strike noted that

[It] combined the innovative strike <sup>tactics</sup> ~~touches~~ of the Worker's Unity League with...[the] Anti-Communist style hysteria of "boss" oriented propaganda to provide a major example of 1930's style labour management confrontation.<sup>1</sup>

The demands of embittered workers and the stony edifice presented by the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company Limited (HBM&S) mirrored the clashes erupting across the country as the Communistic agencies of Worker's Unity League (WUL) urged the frustration of employed and jobless alike into a focused assimilation which <sup>might</sup> ~~may~~ have had the potential to readjust the political fabric of the country. Tactics and events witnessed <sup>in</sup> ~~by~~ the tiny settlement from June 9 to July 9, 1934 were intensely emotional at the municipal level and depressingly redundant at a national one. At every turn, Flin Flon exemplified a process at work in Canadian industry from British Columbia to Ontario. ✓

The forces of Canadian labour, goaded by the ineffectiveness of existing means, and seduced by radical Communist organizers, struggled to gain a standing posture before big business and government. Crushed by unfinished resistance, the effort would fail and time and time again, collapse into dissatisfied submission.

The laborer in Flin Flon, trapped on a thin line between

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Robson, "Strike in the Single Enterprise Community, Flin Flon, Manitoba 1934," Labour, vol. 12, Fall, 1983: 63.

unemployment and poverty, was desperate enough to stake everything on the success of an untested alternative labour movement. When the ideological root of that movement was unearthed, it was inevitable that the legitimacy of his demands would be insignificant in the resolution of his turmoil. The HBM&S willingly created an hysteria in the small camp which undermined the unity of the miners and effectively aligned the forces of local public opinion and provincial lawmen with the anti-union viewpoint. As the mood in Flin Flon shifted from acceptance to uncertainty to hostility, the company never varied from their posture and staunchly refused to acknowledge the validity of the union.

In this perspective, one may easily see the almost ~~formative~~ <sup>Formulaic</sup> unfolding of events which so typified labor unrest from 1930 until 1935. Labor, organized with the help of agents of the WUL, formed a cohesive unit. Management, upon notification of demands, refused to recognize the union. A strike ensued which was eventually quelled by elements of the provincial (or national) police and local constables in an often violent and bloody conflict.

## I

The Great Depression was the most all-encompassing aspect of life in 1930's. As for the "unionist in the 1930's and 1940's, his immediate and indeed sole concern was to achieve financial security."<sup>2</sup> For unemployed and employed alike, <sup>?</sup> it haunted their every move and overshadowed all other considerations. The worker had little to say with

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<sup>2</sup>Irving Abella, Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) v.

regard to his rights, and less ability to say it. He could scarcely look to the government for salvation. Irving Abella has noted that

...government - provincial, municipal and federal alike - were so committed to economic expansion and to encouraging business that they steadfastly refused to pass legislation to protect workers, fearing that such acts would merely frighten off industry.<sup>3</sup>

Existing international unions had been proving themselves nearly worthless since the turn of the century.

The craft unionism to which the international unions were wedded belonged to another generation...(and) was clearly more appropriate for...assembly lines. The trades and Labor Congress...by the end of the (1920's)...was impotent, rudderless, in total disarray and its very survival seemed in the balance.<sup>4</sup>

Immigration, which by 1913 had already seen the influx of "well over one million (people)...to do the work of the great Canadian boom"<sup>5</sup> crippled the bargaining power of individual unions because of the willingness of foreign labour to expect and accept post conditions.<sup>6</sup> This weakness was further accentuated by the protectionist tendencies of the National Policy, geared as it was to the propagation of eastern business interests.

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<sup>3</sup>Irving Abella, The Canadian Labour Movement, 1902-1960 (Ottawa: Love Printing Service, 1979), 3.

<sup>4</sup>Abella, Nationalism, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup>Abella, Canadian, 5.

<sup>6</sup>The detrimental effect of foreign labor influx is succinctly captured in Evelyn Dumas' description: "The foreigners,...seemed to believe that they had to endure more...to accept a bigger piece of hell from the bosses to establish themselves here." Evelyn Dumas, The Bitter Thirties in Quebec, trans. Arnold Bennett (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1975), 29.

When World War I came and went with its implied and then rescinded promise of greater equality and prosperity for all, it appeared to workers that something more fundamental than protest would be required.

*backward* Their faith in the existing system of representation sorely tested and their inability to evoke desperately required change within their system, when combined with the frustration experienced at the hands of politicians at all levels, culminated in decisive action. Radical and Communist by nature, outlawed by the government, and scorned by the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC), new movements gained steadily in momentum eventually resulting in the formation of the One Big Union (OBU) in March/April of 1919.

[Its] adoption of radical policies, including secession from the TLC and the creation of a new Marxist Labor Centre clearly reflected the frustrated, militant mood that permeated western labor.<sup>7</sup>

The "frustrated and militant mood" elsewhere, and in fact, independent of the OBU erupted in a full-blown show of solidarity and power when the Winnipeg General Strike effectively shut that city down from May fifteenth to June twenty-sixth, 1919. It would be in the light of that event that future governments would perceive the efforts of labor to organize itself. The success of the authorities in crushing the alliance lay in their willingness to embrace the interests of industry while forsaking the needs of the vast majority of the population. When police clashed with strikers on June twenty-first, bloody rioting began. Two people died, the strike ended unceremoniously

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<sup>7</sup>Abella, Canadian, 11.

in dismal failure,<sup>8</sup> and the pattern by which labor conflict in western Canada would be resolved for the next twenty years had been indelibly established.

Although this did for a time derail the new radical movement, it did nothing to alleviate the basic causes which had fueled the initial uprising. Throughout the twenties, labor seemed to assess the situation in which it found itself. The TLC maintained its arrogant posture, mass production industries grew in size and importance, and the radical organizations slowly and carefully expanded and tested the water.

In the thirties virtually every labor conflict which deteriorated into a strike was debated over the issue of the Communist ideology of its organizers. Indeed this was a pertinent concern. S.M. Jamieson noted in his extensive study on labor that

these were desperation strikes by workers seeking to resist wage cuts...imposed on them by employers...The most important of these were organized and led by new left wing unions that had been formed in opposition to the established labor movement.<sup>9</sup>

In the twenties, the Communist Party of Canada had made a concentrated effort to gain control of the Canadian labor movement.

[Through permeation] of the labor unions and [replacement of] the present reactionary leadership by revolutionary leadership.<sup>10</sup>

By 1930 it had become apparent that this "boring-from-within" tactic was

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<sup>8</sup>Irving Abella, ed. On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada 1919-1945 (Toronto: James Lorimar & Company, 1975), 1-30.

<sup>9</sup>S.M. Jamieson. Task Force on Labour Relations Study #22: Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Conflict, 1900-1966 (Ottawa: Oct. 1968), 214-15.

<sup>10</sup>Abella, Canadian, 16.

not to be fruitful and the Worker's Unity League (WUL) was formed "on orders from the Communist International."<sup>11</sup> The new WUL seemed at once to embody the mood of the laborers it sought to represent and to cast off any of the placating tactics of appeasement which had crippled the effectiveness of the TLC. In May 1931, the Mine Worker's Union of Canada, a division of the WUL declared the following program:

To unite the members of all camps into the Mine Worker's Union of Canada on the basis of the struggle against the operators, to smash the United Mine Worker's (a subsidiary of the TLC) and to smash the leadership of the MWUC, to transform the MWUC into a militant fighting union...for the miners.<sup>12</sup>

By that time, the Depression had ravaged the economy to a point at which unemployment was rampant and uncontrollable, relief costs were astronomical, wage cuts among the employed were common and general working conditions were wretched. The WUL easily gained in strength, size and significance. The Bolshevik apparatus attempted to do for workers and unemployed what they could not do for themselves, and what existing unions could not or would not attempt. Regardless of any hidden agenda for the subjugation of capitalism, and despite the militaristic jargon used in their rhetoric, the Communists provided a central rallying point and a glimmer of hope that salvation may lay in unity.

It was against this backdrop that events in Flin Flon would unfold, and in the context of these circumstances that hysteria would take hold of the small community. The scenario was by 1934 depressingly familiar

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<sup>11</sup>Abella, Canadian, 16.

<sup>12</sup>Jamieson, 219-20.

to observers of labor. Indeed a three act play of organization, appeal and defeat had been played out in industrial theatres across most of the country. By 1934, the failure of the grandiose aspirations of the WUL and the MWUC was as sure as the sunrise.

## II

Flin Flon's history began "when Tom Creighton was exploring the country in a northerly fashion from his campsite at Phantom Lake...in the fall of 1914."<sup>13</sup> Some twenty years later, at the time of the labor dispute, the community was, at best fledgling. Though "new families had been arriving regularly at the <sup>settlement</sup> by...winter of 1928-29"<sup>14</sup> and three hundred and nine lots had been (sold) by February of 1932,"<sup>15</sup> the pioneers of Flin Flon seemed adept at "enduring what they could not change at the time."<sup>16</sup>

Long before organizers from Winnipeg arrived to coordinate the working men to express dissatisfaction, a number of factors had created tension between the company and the community itself.

Doubtless~~ly~~ this was due to the position of the HBM&S as paramount in every aspect of life in Flin Flon and, in fact, as the sole and

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<sup>13</sup>Valerie Hedman, Loretta Yauck, Joyce Henderson, Flin Flon (Altona: Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1974), 10.

<sup>14</sup>Hedman et al., 63.

<sup>15</sup>Hedman et al., 82.

<sup>16</sup>Hedman et al., 58.

<sup>u</sup> unequivocal reason for the very existence of the settlement.<sup>17</sup> One cannot stress enough the tenuous connection Flin Flon had to survival. "Flin Flon was a viable community only because it provided the (essential) labor force."<sup>18</sup> This relationship made the company at once paternalistic and dictatorial, for as long as the good citizens remained subservient and obedient, the HBM&S would have no need to flex their might. In a situation such as this, it is not unreasonable to suppose that questions of civic identity occurred to the people of the townsite.

When the men who worked the machinations<sup>es</sup> of the plant voiced dissatisfaction, they gambled not only their income and jobs, but in a very real way, forced the entire town to consider its ultimate mortality. The strike was "a frightening experience from the community perspective."<sup>19</sup> This more than any other factor led to the success of the company in undermining local support for the strike.<sup>20</sup>

Looking back to the creation of a living space for the thousand-odd men employed in preliminary excavation and construction, one may see the roots of the company/community conflict. Initially little interest was

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<sup>17</sup>Though Flin Flon is for the most part typical of the 1930-35 labour dispute/resolution pattern prevalent in Canadian history, the single industry nature of the town provides a unique element. In the interest of accuracy, this element is discussed here.

<sup>18</sup>Robert Robson, "Flin Flon: A Study of Company/Community Relations in a Single Enterprise Community" Urban History Review Vol. xii, No. 3, Feb. 1984:29.

<sup>19</sup>Robson, "Company/Community", 31.

<sup>20</sup>By way of illustration, a dispute in 1932 between the Ratepayer's Association and the C.D.C. over the issue of municipal incorporation sparked the following comment from Jack Freedman, a highly visible and very prominent local businessman: "There should be no desertion with the HBM&S as the people were dependent on them for a living." Hedman et al., 85.

paid to the planning of a townsite; indeed there was no less than three areas of original settlement. In the early days, life was harsh, hours long, and sources of relief from the drudgery were few and very far between.

Men...came to the northland prepared to work diligently in most cases and to carve out a new home in the Manitoba-Saskatchewan wilderness...(There were) long work days, seven days a week (and) the destitution of the unemployed.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the conditions in which these men lived and worked, it should, in fairness, be noted that there was not general dissatisfaction. In the spirit of pioneers, many were simply "grateful to be at work (and) loyalty to the company was one of the trademarks of early employees of...the HBM&S."<sup>22</sup>

On May 9, 1928, the Manitoba Department of Mines and Natural Resources proposed that the C.N.R. should be responsible for the development of the community site "Some three miles distant from the mine and metallurgical works."<sup>23</sup> This plan was abandoned and "without plan or direction, the residents and business establishments located very close to the plant."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Hedman et al., 54.

<sup>22</sup>Hedman et al., 61.

<sup>23</sup>Hedman et al., 77.

<sup>24</sup>Hedman et al., 77. Proximity to the Metallurgical plant was not an issue to be taken lightly. During the refining process, noxious fumes, poisonous gasses and choking smoke are expelled in large amounts into the open air. A.J. Dalrymple, whose article in the July 9, 1934 issue of the Free Press was the subject of much controversy, wrote that gasses from the Smelter "burned the eyes and the tender tissues of the mouth and nostrils." He quoted Dr. E. Stephanson, Flin Flon's health officer: "Every time you get a scratch infection sets in...I have been infected oftener here than any other place." The implication being that

The HBM&S exerted undisputed domination of the town. Hiring policy created the makeup of the population. In a limited sense (which would be accentuated when production and community affairs stabilized) job class determined social class. Dissatisfaction or even disagreement with a superior could result in "giving a man a Green Slip (dismissal) at a moment's notice if the boss didn't like him."<sup>25</sup> Flin Flon was "(essentially) a closed town...They (the company) made certain the applicants...invited to establish in the...town were of an abiding nature."<sup>26</sup>

Little changed when

Premier John Bracken proposed the implementation of the Flin Flon Town Planning Scheme (which) set aside...a three mile square townsite that was to be administered by the Community Development Company.<sup>27</sup>

The CDC,

(was) intended to act as a holding company until...the incorporation of the municipality,...in reality, with its directorship composed of roughly two-thirds HBM&S employees, [it] functioned as an arm of the (company).<sup>28</sup>

When that organization seceded to the newly incorporated Municipal

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the presence of the mine was detrimental to overall health.

<sup>25</sup>My Recollections of the Strike of 1934 at the HBM&S Operations in Flin Flon, Manitoba unpublished article in possession of the author.

<sup>26</sup>Hedman et al., 77-8.

<sup>27</sup>Robson, "Company/Community", 30.

<sup>28</sup>Robson, "Strike", 64. The CDC in functioning as an "arm of the company" often incurred the dissatisfaction of the citizens of Flin Flon. Hedman et al. note that "letters to the editor (on the subject) were verbose, sometimes whimsical, and often bitingly contemptuous of the C.D.C....and petitions...were frequently circulated by the inhabitants", 81.

District of Flin Flon, a modicum of independence was established. However "it still generally deferred to HBM&S (and) essentially, the company ran the town."<sup>29</sup> This trend in the pre-conflict days of Flin Flon should be kept in mind when the actions of the Municipal Council are later observed.<sup>30</sup>

Any holistic examination of the strike must consider the ramifications of Flin Flon's precarious position and acknowledge the linkages between company management and community administration. In challenging the benevolence of the company, the MWUC forced a deeper examination on the part of Flin Flon's citizenry. In many ways, the strike was an affront to the "faith" of the community in the nature of its' protector and creator.

The willingness of the HBM&S to vociferate the threat of complete withdrawal,<sup>31</sup> in essence told the community to oppose the group whose agitation was provoking its downfall.

Despite the validity of its claims, the workers' movement had not only the awesome task of overpowering the will of its employer, but the impossible one of convincing the town that its cause was a worthy one. When the first cracks appeared in the unified front of the MWUC, emanating as they did from an alleged communist foundation, it quickly

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<sup>29</sup>Robson, "Strike", 65.

<sup>30</sup>At the time of the strike, the municipal council had within its ranks a number of employees of the company whose allegiance to the HBM&S could not be questioned. George Mainwaring, accountant for the HBM&S was to become one of the most conspicuous figures on the anti-strike side.

<sup>31</sup>R.E. Phelan "announced (upon receipt of two telegrams denouncing the MWUC as radical and communist) that the plant could be closed for ten years, saying that the company had every legal right to close and remain closed indefinitely." Hedman et al., 122.

became apparent that the town could not be expected to risk municipal suicide for a tainted ideal.

### III

To say that the strike in Flin Flon was typical of labor disputes from 1930 to 1935 necessarily implies the involvement of the WUL<sup>32</sup> without question the single most important motivational and organizational force of the period, it was also easily the most controversial.<sup>33</sup> At the time, the WUL seemed almost enigmatic in individual conflicts. Though its operatives were visible, its tactics identifiable, and its presence freely admitted, the WUL generated controversy because of what was unknown, not known. It was this feature which would doom all WUL efforts to failure at the hands of the government propaganda machine.

Certainly, language and tactics were employed which would convey a determined approach.<sup>34</sup> Leadership and organizations apt to be "smashed" by such a mandate ~~would be understood for their apprehension~~ <sup>were understandably apprehensive</sup> of the

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<sup>32</sup>Comments of the following type appear in virtually every article and book chronicling labour disputes of the 1930-35 period: "Strikes were few and usually hopeless, but what strikes there were almost always organized and led by the Worker's Unity League." Irving Abella and David Miller eds., The Canadian Worker in the Twentieth Century (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978), 260.

<sup>33</sup>As often as the WUL is cited as an instigating force on the most important labour conflicts of the period, it is related that the debate "was that of recognition of the refusal of employers to deal with that organization." Jamieson, 200.

<sup>34</sup>The program of the WUL at the outset of the Bienfait/Estevan conflict: "To unite the miners of all camps...on the basis of struggle against the operations, to smash the United Mine Workers and to smash the leadership of the MWUC, to transform the MWUC into a militant fighting union for the miners..." Jamieson, 220.

group so inclined. Its creation by the Communist International is documented, but the suppression of a movement because of what it might entail reveals more an inherent hypocrisy on the part of the democratic state than any wrongdoing on the part of the suppressed. Prime Minister Bennett's avowal to "see Communism stamped out by the iron heel of ruthlessness"<sup>35</sup> and the implementation of Section 98 of the Criminal Code to deal with "seditious, subversive and Communistic influences and activities"<sup>36</sup> may be seen as relevant examples of this.

While the Communistic influence of the WUL, parent of the MWUC ) ? which operated in Flin Flon during the strike is undeniable, evidence of a hidden agenda designed to overthrow Canadian Capitalism is scarce.<sup>37</sup> What may be seen is a pattern which becomes apparent in the holistic consideration of the 1930-35 period. The pattern itself is suggestive of the cloak-and-dagger infiltration which has ~~stereotypically~~ categorized the "insidious" nature of Communism since the Bolshevik Revolution.

Rationally however, one may see that regardless of the sponsoring agency, secrecy was vital in organizing workers. Summary dismissal of

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<sup>35</sup>Jamieson, 217.

<sup>36</sup>Jamieson, 217.

<sup>37</sup>The author realizes that such evidence would hardly be likely to be found in a perusal of second-hand information, and that the information required as proof may simply be unavailable to the amateur researcher. The author concedes that the timing of the Flin Flon strike in accordance with several other notable events (such as the strike at Noranda, Quebec) may indicate a central controlling strategy but not a "failed" or "aborted" revolution of any kind.

whole groups of suspected union men were not uncommon.<sup>38</sup> Companies had been known to employ spies to infiltrate their own workforce and report regularly to management. The fact that a similar organizational pattern was present should not therefore be construed as proof of the revolutionary intent of the WUL, but merely as indicative of the Leagues' willingness to repeat a successful formula for reaching large numbers of men safely.

Most commonly, as small core of disgruntled workmen, often with some experience with unionism, would contact the WUL for help. One or more organizers would be dispatched to assess the viability of the endeavor and begin preliminary organization.<sup>39</sup> To preserve secrecy "cells" of men, numbering five or six would be indoctrinated.<sup>40</sup>

Once organization was complete, events often unfolded so similar to other areas of the country, one might almost assume they were choreographed. Whether provoked by firings or as part of a pre-planned campaign, an orderly procession would peacefully leave the plant after having been informed that management refused to recognize the newly-formed organization. Regardless of the industry being organized, demands would typically begin with some article pertaining to

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<sup>38</sup>At Noranda, Quebec, a strike engineered by the WUL and which happened in conjunction with the Flin Flon dispute was preceded by the dismissal of "several (strike) leaders" in April of 1934. Dumas, 31.

<sup>39</sup>Mitch Sago, as an "organizer for the WUL (and its many member groups)...(was) involved in scores of strikes. Jim Mochoruk, "An interview with Mitch Sago," Manitoba History (M. Mott Ed.) Spring 1985. 19.

<sup>40</sup>Sago referred to "cells" as part of his strategy, and this was also seen in an interview with Norman Penner. Mochoruk 20 and Abella and Miller 150 respectively.

recognition of the local. Prominent but secondary to this would be specific concerns unique to the area and occupation.

Throughout the duration of strike activity, rallies would be held daily to bolster and maintain morale. Several local persons, coached and groomed by the outside organizers, would emerge as local leaders at these rallies. They would give speeches, create a complex and effective committee structure and ~~delegate~~ <sup>delegate</sup> duties and authority in such a way as to ~~maximally~~ <sup>maximally</sup> maintain activity and interest among the strikers.

Women, as well as unemployed persons in the area, were made part of the effort. It is likely that as part of the preliminary work of the union that ~~unemployed~~ drifters would be sent to the area to swell the ranks of supporters in the vital public image facet of the campaign.<sup>41</sup> Funding would be procured by support pledged by other labor groups or by "tag days".<sup>42</sup>

A propaganda campaign would distribute inspirational news of progress, vehemently refute allegations of Communist intent and implore peaceful picketing and the maintenance of a positive public image. The Publicity Committee would facilitate this as well as maintain relations with the local municipality on as amicable a level as the situation would allow. The tendency of the WUL to organize in a committee structure was perhaps the most distinctive sign of its involvement and

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<sup>41</sup>Although there is no documented proof of this tactic, reports of two thousand persons meeting trains in Flin Flon tend to lend it credibility. To amass that number, union organizers would have had to mobilize the entire thirteen hundred men workforce as well as seven hundred additional souls.

<sup>42</sup>The 'tag day' fundraiser seems as much a part of the WUL as Sago's cells. Notably, Jamieson refers to it in his discussion of the Regina Riot. Jamieson no pg. # available.

the mechanism by which the greatest number of people were kept directly involved with the union. The parallel struck between this structure and the ideal Communist society should not be lost on the reader.

The reaction of the companies to the presence of union activity seemed to follow an equally predictable sequence. Committees announcing formation of the union would be rejected unseen or formally and told that their organization would under no circumstances be recognized.<sup>43</sup> Once the strike was under way, allegations regarding the Communistic affiliations of their leaders would be levelled at the men. This reaction on the part of management during WUL instigated strikes was utilized without fail. The beauty of the tactic lay in its ability to effectively defer consideration of the strikers' actual demands.

An appeal would be sent to the province for ~~and~~ <sup>ASSISTANCE</sup> in defending life and property from the menace, and as provincial or federal police forces steadily massed, local constables would be recruited in anticipation of an imminent conflict all too often provoked by the anti-strike forces. It was truly tragic that this method proved as effective in ending strikes as the stalling tactic mentioned previously was in effecting a stalemate. The amount of suffering meted out in terms of injury, death and the lasting division of communities subsequent to its use cannot be

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<sup>43</sup>The reasons for this refusal varied from case to case. Most often it was deemed that the Committee in no way commanded the membership of the workforce as a whole. Robson concedes that, in the case of Flin Flon, "It would appear that the union had the support of the department heads but not necessarily the workers themselves. Robson, "Strike," 70. One man reported that "(he) had no desire to go on strike. However after pressure put on me by my friends and neighbors, I found myself on the picket line beside my fellow workers." Recollections of the Strike, 2.

adequately conveyed in a recitation of statistics alone.<sup>44</sup>

Provincial governments, sensitive to the precarious nature of the depression-riddled economy would support the industry often well beyond liberal interpretations of legal standards. Police could be and were placed at the disposal of the company<sup>45</sup> and would become embroiled in direct physical confrontation with the strikers. Leaders of the labor groups would be arrested on a variety of charges as would local members unfortunate enough to be singled out or foolish enough to interfere.

The violence so typical of these disputes which could, as in Estevan,<sup>46</sup> prove fatal, almost always divided the town and frequently signalled the imminent end of the strike. Arrests made during this period of the strike would be followed up by trials at which "the purpose of the arrests (was) revealed by the withdrawal of charges as soon as the strike was ended."<sup>47</sup> Often, charges laid here were preposterous interpretations of Section 98 of the Canadian Criminal Code.<sup>48</sup> Members of WUL unions were entitled to defence by the Canadian

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<sup>44</sup>In Sydney, B.C. provincial police provoked a riot by breaking up a peaceful march (Abella and Miller, 265). In Estevan, Saskatchewan in a similar situation three marchers died (Jamieson, 220). In Corbin, B.C., police drove a bulldozer into a crowd "breaking the limbs of several women" (Jamieson, 221).

<sup>45</sup>The Winnipeg Free Press, reporting the initial arrests of strike leaders in Flin Flon documented the "presence of 'R.H. Channing, W.A. Green and (HBM&S supporters), Peter McSchefferty and C.C. Sparling at the (police) barracks" Winnipeg Free Press, Friday July 6, 1934, 9.

<sup>46</sup>Jamieson, 220.

<sup>47</sup>Jamieson, 221.

<sup>48</sup>Charges ranged from intimidation and obstructing police while in pursuit of their duty to being members of unlawful assemblies and vagrancy.

labor Defence League which "arranged bail, obtained legal council in all cases of arrest, and organized protest actions against the campaign of arrests and jailings in cases where there was absolutely no justification."<sup>49</sup>

That the Communistic Genesis of the WUL was real is undeniable. Debate may well rage unchecked when one attempts to discern whether their ultimate intentions involved an attempt to drastically alter the woefully vulnerable position of previously unorganized labor groups or a subversion of the democratic foundations of Canada. Perhaps, as Evelyn Dumas pontificated, "The USSR was often in competition with Canada in the world market for minerals and wood, whence the interest of a Communist union injuring production of these materials in Canada."<sup>50</sup>

It need not be too seriously argued that the industrial entities which opposed the efforts of the WUL did so not out of any sense of patriotic duty, nor paternalistic worry over the fate of their poor deluded employees, but rather for the simple economic fact that unions would create higher production costs and drop profits. The fact that communism had a role in the background of the hierarchy of union structure enabled business to circum<sup>vent</sup>~~navigate~~ the issues presented and simply but effectively shunt debate into a stalemate position which would easily facilitate an effective and successful wait-and-see defence to the threat of unionism. "It was too bad for (the workers who went on strike)" related one eye witness. "They were not Communists, but

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<sup>49</sup>Abella and Miller, 281.

<sup>50</sup>Dumas, 37.

because of their involvement with those people they were branded as such."<sup>51</sup>

#### IV

The strike in Flin Flon was very nearly a textbook example of the schedule presented above. Although labor organization was not untried in the area,<sup>52</sup> the arrival of Mitch Sago and Eddie Edwardson in the winter of 1933 signalled the local beginning of a process already at work in dozens of industrial centers across the country.<sup>53</sup> According to Sago,

A number of miners had been talking for some considerable...time that it would be very good if someone came and organized a union because they sure wanted one.<sup>54</sup>

Sago and Edwardson proceeded to recruit individuals, creating five or six man "cells" of the union until "quite a few hundred were brought together."<sup>55</sup>

The result of that groundwork was the formation of a local unit of the MWUC. When the months of May and June saw the dismissal of twenty-

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<sup>51</sup>Recollections of the Strike, 9.

<sup>52</sup>In the summer of 1930 a group known as the Independent Labour Party, arrived in Manitoba, sponsored a speaking tour of prominent party men. In Flin Flon, this represented the first serious discussion of a union. Robson, "Strike", 67.

<sup>53</sup>Mitch Sago, "One of Canada's most famous radical labour leaders" was the first indication of WUL presence in Flin Flon. His version of the community tends to be more violent than others but should not be considered improbable. Mochoruk, 19.

<sup>54</sup>Mochoruk, 20.

<sup>55</sup>Mochoruk, 20.

seven men for suspected union activity, a delegation representing the new union confronted company superintendent W.A. Green. The strikers committee presented Green with seven demands and informed him that refusal on his part would result in a walk out. Heading the list was the inevitable "recognition of the MWUC and shop committee of this union."<sup>56</sup> The remainder addressed protection from dismissal of those involved with the union and restoration of pay scales to a level comparable to levels enjoyed before a wage cut in 1932. A twice weekly (as opposed to monthly) pay day, an eight hour day with overtime rates and preservation of accident sites for independent investigation rounded out the list. Green's refusal led to the initiation of strike action which commenced at six p.m., Saturday, June ninth, 1934.

Despite a statement from "representatives of the union...that they would...not cause trouble,"<sup>57</sup> R.H. Channing, President of Mining Operations and R.E. Phelan, General Manager of the mine returned the next day from Winnipeg with a detachment of RCMP dispatched by Premier John Bracken.<sup>58</sup> The Provincial leader emphasized the neutrality of the police and promised they were "not to be regarded as a threat to the strikers so long as they conduct(ed) themselves within the law."<sup>59</sup>

Mere days after the strike began, telegrams arrived from federal and provincial government representatives condemning the MWUC as Communist. W.J. Major, Provincial Attorney General and W.M. Dickson,

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<sup>56</sup>Flin Flon Daily Miner, 9 July, 1934.

<sup>57</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 11 July, 1934, 5.

<sup>58</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 11 July 1934, 5.

<sup>59</sup>Robson, "Strike," 71.

Federal Deputy Minister of Labour sent virtually identical communiqués to Flin Flon Major E.E. Foster.<sup>60</sup> These two telegrams would prove to be sufficient to set in motion the machinery of hysteria which eventually divided the camp and destroyed the unity of the workers.

Channing's reply to the demands was an adamant refusal to recognize the committee or the union and the provision of questionable statistics indicating that the "present scale of pay (was) as high as any where for similar services."<sup>61</sup> He contended that "(a) Communistic organization had come to the camp to cause trouble for their own purposes."<sup>62</sup>

Amid the accusations and denials which rapidly proliferated, public opinion polarized over the uncertain affiliations of the union organizers. The local busily went about the organization of strike committees, a soup kitchen, picket schedules, and support groups.

Delegations met with an increasingly skeptical and distant municipal council to attempt to refute the allegations of communism, and all efforts to continue peaceful conduct of the strike were maintained.<sup>63</sup> Despite the determination of the strikers to avoid it, initial public support wavered. Once that process was in motion, the disintegration of union solidarity began in earnest.

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<sup>60</sup>Strike Bulletin, June 14, 1934.

<sup>61</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 11 July, 1934, 5.

<sup>62</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 11 July, 1934, 5.

<sup>63</sup>Surprisingly, up to the Main Strike Riot there were remarkably few instances of physical conflict. In a community where the typical citizen was a single male, hand rock miner and tensions over the strike had polarized the opinions of the men, violence was certainly a dangerously real possibility. It is likely that the insistence of the MWUC that the liquor stores and beer vendors remained closed went a long way towards maintaining that peace.

By the twenty-eight day of June,

The Flin Flon Miner's (front page) editorial...characterized the growing anti-communist sentiment within the community...The question was no longer whether or not Communist agitators had infiltrated (Flin Flon), but rather how to get rid of them.<sup>64</sup>

The sensationalistic nature of the editorials in the Miner, which referred to the strikers as "dupes (of) an international organization seeking world revolution,"<sup>65</sup> and reported that "the citizens of this town are as solidly behind the employees of the HBM&S Co., as they are against communism"<sup>66</sup> seemed to belie the claim that "the HBM&S (is) not sponsoring this edition and are totally unaware that this appeal is being made to you."<sup>67</sup>

On Saturday, June thirtieth, attempting to prevent voting on a ballot prepared by "sponsors (who) have no connection with any organizations" and which read: "Do you wish to return to work on the terms of the circular issued by Mr. Channing on June twenty-third, 1934?"<sup>68</sup> The strikers became involved in a full-scale riot. The circular alluded to on the ballot announcement had contained word from the president that "every man...who is taken back can be certain that he will not later be discharged or discriminated against in any way on

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<sup>64</sup>Robson, "Strike," 78.

<sup>65</sup>Flin Flon Daily Miner, 28 June, 1934, 1.

<sup>66</sup>Flin Flon Daily Miner 28 June 1934, 1.

<sup>67</sup>Flin Flon Daily Miner 5 July, 1934, 1.

<sup>68</sup>Strike News Bulletin, 29 June 1934.

account of his participation in the strike."<sup>69</sup> This, reinforced by a promise from Premier Bracken that there would be "protection from union retaliation"<sup>70</sup> created tension appropriate for the ensuing alteration. Mayor Foster's swearing in of one-hundred spacial constables, some of whom were, in fact ex-strike committee members, "did more to provoke the strikers than to ensure peace."<sup>71</sup>

The riot may be interpreted in one of two ways. It was either the result of an indescribably stupid and dangerous mistake on the part of the organizers of the ballot, or a careful manipulation of events designed to effectively cripple the credibility of the strikers and pave the way for additions to the already sizeable provincial police force. Regardless, once the violence had erupted the strike was virtually doomed.

Premier Bracken lost no time in making his way to Flin Flon and, over the course of two days of meetings with local interest groups, formulated an opinion on the strike. He interviewed the Municipal Council three times; the Board of Trade twice; the Businessmen's Association and the Anti-Communist League once each; and he met with R.H. Channing for an extended period. His meeting with the strike committee at five p.m. Sunday lasted slightly less than an hour<sup>72</sup> and the premier remembered later that they had "mentioned their demands."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Strike News Bulletin, 24 June 1934.

<sup>70</sup>Robson, "Strike," 79.

<sup>71</sup>Robson, "Strike," 80.

<sup>72</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 9 July 1934, 2.

<sup>73</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 9 July 1934, 2.

Robson summarized the visit and its effect: "The position of the strikers was completely undercut."<sup>74</sup>

By Sunday, the eight of July, when Bracken stated that, in his opinion "the plant had closed largely due to the activities of communists (and that) the majority of men "manfully acknowledged (their mistake),"<sup>75</sup> the demise of the MWUC was all but assured. On Monday, July ninth, led by R.H. Channing, W.A. Green and a strong arm police guard of "approximately one-hundred steel-helmeted RCMP,"<sup>76</sup> between seven hundred and one thousand employees returned to work. It was noted that the police in the area "were armed and carried billies...(and) a machine gun was also visible in the vicinity."<sup>77</sup>

In the aftermath of the strike arrests and prosecution of many of the principals was carried out by the RCMP. In evidence presented at the ensuing trials, two things became apparent:

- 1) that the scales of justice were tipped in favour of the prosecution, and<sup>78</sup>
- 2) that the main outside agitators had been involved with other Canadian labor disputes and one in particular had been arrested and served jail terms for his activities

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<sup>74</sup>Robson, "Strike," 83.

<sup>75</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 9 July 1934, 2.

<sup>76</sup>Winnipeg Free Press, 10 July 1934, 7.

<sup>77</sup>Recollections of the Strike, 3.

<sup>78</sup>At one point in the proceedings, Provincial Judge Simpson vowed he would "commit on any charge as soon as sufficient evidence has, in the opinion of the court, been entered." Winnipeg Free Press, 18 July 1934, 1.

four times in five years.<sup>79</sup>

Of course this cursory summary has necessarily omitted many details of the labor conflict. Intense personal feelings were at work on both sides of the issue and indeed many subsidiary conflicts arose as a result of the overall dispute. It will serve the purpose of this report that the key events may be seen to have a direct relationship to the sequence described in Section III, and that without a profound stretch of the imagination, the actions of the provincial, federal and municipal governments cannot be seen as impartial. ✓

#### V

Chronicling the similarity of labor conflicts during the early thirties would not be a difficult task. Although two events are seldom identical, significant elements of the treatment received by labor groups sponsored by the WUL defy discrimination. Cowansville, Estevan, Stratford, Thunder Bay, Sydney, Noranda, Corbin and Flin Flon are all settlements in which, during the 1930-35 period, the forces of labor attempted to rise in unity and were quashed.

Whether the WUL would have, if bargained with in good faith and with the respect due its members, undermined the fabric of democracy and instigated a Canadian version of the Bolshevik Revolution is doubtful. Fear and rabid anti-communism were however two of the common denominators in all of the above settlements. That in most cases the

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<sup>79</sup>It was discovered during the trial of one of the organizers, James Coleman, that the individual had spent time in jail under two different aliases in Regina, Vancouver, Toronto and Kitchener. In each case it appeared Coleman had been doing the work of the WUL. Winnipeg Free Press, July 1934.

workers did not realize the ideology behind their advisors and would have conceivably been as adverse as their bosses to communism seems not to have affected the finality with which their demands were met. The fact that the laborer of the early thirties had almost nothing to lose when contrasted with the fact that his boss had everything to protect illustrates that perhaps the real conspiracy was much less foreign inspired than domestic; that the persons who would subvert the democratic system for their own means were the Capitalists which epitomized it and that their allies were the elected officials of an inefficient and floundering political system.

The events which occurred in Flin Flon fifty-six years ago formed a chapter of a very distinct period in Canadian history. For a time, the tiny frontier community symbolized a national struggle in which the extent of the frustration produced by The Great Depression and the lengths to which rational men would go in the grip of adversity were shown to be great indeed. ✓

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This is an extremely well researched paper on an  
interesting subject. You have correctly identified  
the pattern of labour disputes in the 1930s and the  
ways in which T. E. Wilson, 1954, revealed that  
pattern.

I have made some suggestions on style here and there.

You should have consulted Beadle's biography of  
Becker to see how Beadle viewed the strike.

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