

KESEVAN STRIKE.

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Short Chronological Review of the Labour Dispute -

Saskatchewan Lignite Coal Fields - September - October  
1931.

August 27, 1931.

The Secretary-Treasurer of the Village of Sienfuit notified the Department that some six hundred men had joined the Miners' Union, that the Union would undoubtedly demand a very considerable improvement in the wages and working conditions of the miners and that there was a grave possibility of a difference of opinion arising as between the mine operators and the men with a consequent strike and labour trouble.

September 3rd.

I went to Kesavan and attended a meeting of the Miners' Union, which was presided over by James Sloan. At this meeting Mr. Sloan refused to inform me concerning the grievances of the men or impart any other information that was necessary before any attempt might be made to negotiate a settlement between the operators and the men.

Asked as to whether or not the Union which he had organized was affiliated, either directly or indirectly, with the Red Internationals of the Trade Unions, Mr. Sloan denied any such affiliation, claiming that the Kesavan Union was not a "Red" organization.

September 4th.

I attended a meeting of the operators held in the Village of Sienfuit, at which practically all the operators of the larger mines were present, and at which meeting I suggested the possibility of a conference between the operators and the men.

The operators at this meeting agreed to send a committee of the men provided the committee was composed of men employed in the mines in the Saskatchewan lignite field.

At two o'clock in the afternoon I conferred with Messrs. Sloan, Forbin and one or two members of the miners' executive in the dining-room of the house in which Mr. Sloan was living. I submitted to Mr. Sloan the proposition of the operators to meet a committee of the men employed in the field. Mr. Sloan replied that the question was one for the miners themselves to decide and that he would submit the proposition to a meeting of the men to be held that evening in Sienfuit.

Mr. Forbin, who was <sup>present</sup> president, intimated that the men should not accept the proposal of the operators, giving as a reason that Mr. Sloan and himself should be present at all negotiations in order that any agreement reached should be as uniform as possible with the Alberta miners' agreement, and that as Mr. Sloan was familiar with the terms of the Alberta agreement he should be present when any agreement was drafted respecting the Kesavan field.

I again requested to be informed as to the terms or conditions which the men were submitting to the operators as an adjustment of the dispute, and was again informed that the information would be divulged only at a meeting at which all operators were present and at which the operators would first agree to recognize the Union.

September 5th.

A meeting of the operators again convened at the offices of the Trunk Tracer Company. The decisions of the men's meeting at Hienfeld, which had been communicated to me only by persons who were present, indicated that while Sloan had informed the meeting of the conditions under which the operators would meet the men, he nevertheless advised the men against any such meeting and at the same time informed the men that as a representative of the Government I had endorsed their Union and wished them every success in their dispute with the operators.

The operators again stated they were still prepared to meet a committee of the men employed in the field but that they would not recognize any union or other organization which was in any way affiliated with the Red International of Labour Unions.

On September 5th Hon. Jas. F. Bryant, Minister of Public Works and Hon. John A. Werkley, Minister of Railways, Labour and Industries, Saskatchewan Government, arrived in Estevan and conferred with the operators. The operators again repeated their willingness to meet the men providing the committee to meet them was made up of men employed at the local field. The ministers endeavored to get in touch with the representatives of the Miners' Union, but were informed that the executive would not consult with them without the presence of Mr. Sloan, their president. Mr. Sloan at that time being in Arcadia. At the request of the ministers Mr. Sloan was communicated with by telephone, and after some hesitation he agreed to return to Estevan the following day and to interview the ministers. Hon. Messrs. Bryant and Werkley remained in Estevan for the balance of that day and all day Sunday, but were unable to get into communication with Sloan. Sloan apparently did not return to Estevan until after the Ministers had departed for home late Sunday night, September 5th.

September 7th.

The Miners' Union ordered a strike of all miners in the Saskatchewan lignite field, to become effective on the morning of September 8th.

On being advised of the decision to strike and being aware of the provisions of the Industrial Disputes Investigation and Conciliation Act which makes it illegal for employees of certain industries to go on strike or for employers to declare a lock-out before submitting the questions in dispute to a Board of Conciliation; and being anxious that the men should have the full benefit of the provisions of the Act, I wired Sloan at Estevan on September 7th as follows;

"Am informed operators refusing to meet your Union tonight and strike to take place tomorrow STOP Would strongly urge you advise men to observe the law in such matters and that you apply immediately for board under Industrial Disputes Act."

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Act for thorough investigation working conditions and that men remain at work pending investigation."

No reply was received from Sloan and the order to strike was issued for the following day, September 8th.

September 8th.

The strike having been definitely started contrary to the Industrial Disputes Act, and as certain provisions of that Act were drafted to cover such cases, the Saskatchewan Government immediately communicated with the Department of Labour at Ottawa and the federal authorities directed their Chief Conciliation Officer to go to Estevan.

September 15th.

Pending the arrival of the Federal Government's Conciliation Officer the Attorney General of Saskatchewan made several attempts to have the questions in dispute referred to a voluntary board of conciliation composed of a representative of the miners, a representative of the operators, these two appointees to name a third man for chairman, or failing to agree the Government would appoint the chairman. The operators agreed to this proposal and nominated their representative in the person of Mr. Freeman, but Mr. Sloan on behalf of the men refused absolutely to appoint a man or to have anything to do with such a group or conciliation board.

September 18th.

By Joint Order in Council of both the Federal and Provincial governments His Honour Judge Sully was issued a commission to investigate the working conditions of the mines and miners in the lignite field.

September 21st.

Chief Conciliation Officer Campbell of the Federal Department of Labour arrived in Estevan and began an effort to effect a conciliation as between the operators and the men. It was apparently Mr. Campbell's intention to have the men return to work in order to place the dispute in order for investigation under the Industrial Disputes Act which Act can function only whilst the men are actually employed. In order to accomplish this end as an inducement for the men to resume work he secured some concessions from the operators including an undertaking to re-engage all men on strike without discrimination. During these negotiations which were for the purpose of legalizing the whole situation and permitting the proper operation of the Industrial Disputes Act, arrangements were made to hold in abeyance the enquiry of the Royal Commission. The leaders of the men, however, refused to participate in any way in the negotiations or to return to work on the concessions granted by the operators, with the result that the negotiations completely broke down on September 25th.

September 25th.

The negotiations of Conciliation Officer Campbell having failed, Judge Wylie immediately made arrangements for his commission to begin its enquiry and announced the first sitting for Monday September 26th.

September 26th.

Royal Commission ready to proceed.

September 26th.

Town Council of Estevan refused an application for a parade of the strikers through the streets of Estevan and communicated their decision to Mr. Sloan. The parade was held however in defiance of the orders of the town council and a riot developed.

October 5th.

I went to Stenfelt, where I spoke to a meeting of returned men in that district, informing them that since my last visit to the Estevan area and despite the statements made by Mr. Sloan, the Mine Workers' Union of Canada was affiliated with the Red Internationals of Trade Unions and that its affiliation was through the Workers' Unity League of Canada; that this League was organized according to its official organ "The Worker" in June 1930 and that its constitution provided as follows:-

**NAME.** - This organization shall be the Workers' Unity League of Canada; the Canadian Section of the Red Internationals of Labour Unions.

**PURPOSE.** - To organize the Canadian workers into powerful revolutionary Industrial Unions, created on the basis of the widest rank and file control; to fight for the defense and improvement of the conditions of the working class, mobilizing and organizing the Canadian workers for the final overthrow of capitalism and for the establishment of a Revolutionary Workers Government.

I explained further that as an organization which was pledged to revolution and the overthrow of our present system of government, it was impossible for the Saskatchewan Government or the Federal Government to recognize such an organization or to negotiate with it in any way.

The vast majority of the men present at the meeting denied any knowledge of the fact that their Union was affiliated with the Workers' Unity League of Canada and through that affiliation was a branch of the Red Internationals of Trade Unions, which is one of the departments of the Communist Internationals of Moscow.

October 6th.

On October 6th there was convened at the Court House at Estevan a conference attended by the operators and a delegation representing the miners. This conference continued in session until 3.30 o'clock in the afternoon, when the following agreement was reached:-

We, the Mine operators and employees in conference at the Court House, Estevan this 6th day of October, 1931, hereby agree that the mines be opened immediately and the men return to work on the following conditions, viz:-

(1) That this be considered a temporary arrangement pending the findings of the Wylie Royal Commission and the possible drafting of a working agreement between the operators and the men.

(2) That Pit Committees for each mine be a recognized organization in each mine.

(3) That the provisions of the Mines Act be observed in relation to check weighers.

(4) That all water in the roadways and working face be removed by the Company and that such places be kept as dry as possible.

(5) That the terms of any schedule or agreement finally reached between operators and men be made retroactive to the date of the re-commencement of work by the men.

(6) That there shall be no victimization or discrimination against men on account of the strike, particularly in reference to men on the payroll as at September 7th last.

(7) That contract men be employed on an 8-hour basis, face to face, and the Company men work nine hours a day.

(8) That because of working conditions in the various mines, the removal of slack and questions of overweight be left to negotiations between the operators and the men's committees.

October 7th.

The above findings were submitted to a mass meeting of the miners in Bienfait and approved of by a vote of 130 to 40 against.

October 19th.

Reports having reached the department that the operators and men were experiencing some difficulty in reaching final settlement as proposed in the agreement reached at the conference on the 6th, I again went to Bienfait where I interviewed a number of men on Monday evening.

October 20th.

I attended a meeting at the Court House assisting in various ways at the conference between the men and the operators when some twenty-seven (27) items on a schedule of working conditions were agreed to.

October 31st.

I visited practically all the deep seam mines in the area, conferring with the men on such questions as inspection of scales, enforcement of the provisions of the Mines Act and health regulations, and answered a number of questions apparently satisfactorily to the men.

October 29nd.

A vote of all the miners employed in the district was taken on the proposals agreed to between the men's committees and the operators, and resulted in 221 voting to accept the agreement, 88 voting to continue the strike or in opposition to the agreement and 8 spoiled ballots.

*Thos. M. W. W. W.*