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SMELTER UNIONS IN TRAIL, B.C.:TERM

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This is an essay on the unions at the Trail smelter: The early history of the smelter and early unions are looked at in somewhat of a summary form. The rise and fall of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, Local 480 is looked at in greater detail.

The smelter at Trail had its origins in the mines of the Kootenay area. The first mine discovered was the mine which is now known as the Blue Bell mine on the Kootenay Lake. Lead ore was so prominent in this area that Indians came to the spot to obtain lead which they would use for bullets. Archibald McDonald, the Chief Factor in charge of Fort Colville was credited with the discovery of Blue Bell in the year 1845. In the 1860's Georg Hearst, a prominent American mining speculator visited Blue Bell and set up a hearth furnace to treat the lead ore.

With interest in the area aroused by the Blue Bell finds, prospectors began coming into the area. Two Americans, George Bowerman and George Leyson began prospecting in 1887. They sank a shaft into Deer Park Mountains which is located between Christina Lake and the Columbia River. The shaft followed a vein down twenty feet where the vein grew small. Bowerman and Leyson became discouraged and abandoned the location. The mine called Lily May was relocated by Joseph Bordeaux in 1889. He found another out cropping close by which he called the Homestake mine.

In 1890 more discoveries were made in the Trail Creek area. On Red Mountain the Central Star, War Eagle along with other mines were opened. Colonel E. S. Topping, an associate of some of the prospectors went to Spokane in an effort to raise capital to develop the finds. In 1890 the Le Roi Gold Mining Company was formed by Topping.

The ore from these mines were packed by mules down to the Columbia River. There it was loaded onto boats and taken to Butte Montana for treatment. In 1895 F. Augustus Hunee negotiated a contract with the Le Roi company to treat 75,000 tons of ore and to build a smelter close to the mines. The first furnace of the smelter was located on the sand bluffs above the Columbia River and began treatment of ore in February of 1896.

W. H. Aldridge was responsible for the formation of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada. He was a man of foresight, able to understand the future prospects of the area. In 1906 he obtained control of the leading mines in the district. The Central Star, War Eagle and St. Eugene. He amalgamated these mines with the Rossland power company and with the smelter in Trail, the resulting company was registered as the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada Ltd. In 1909 it acquired the Sullivan mine and in 1912 the Le Roi properties.

The history of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Unions began in the Trail area in the 1890's. The Trail area had a Board of Trade which was affiliated with the Western Federation of Miners. The Board of Trade was formed in 1898 and was a weak union. It was kept ineffective by the mine and smelter owners use of the Pinkerton Detective agency. The agency was used in attempts to destroy the W. F. M. The use of unorganized Italians and Slaves also tended to keep the union weak. Lack of support for the union resulted also from many of the workers being stock holders in the company.

In 1905 The Board of Trade held a vote to decide if a eight hour day should be introduced. The result of the vote was the rejection of the plan.

One report supports the idea of the men being stock holders and not wishing to damage the company. The men felt the implementation of an eight hour day would "put an unnecessary burden on ore from the district."

A union spokesman said

"those voting were Italians and Slave..." and that they were unorganized. He goes on to say that the British workman was in favor of the eight hour day.

In 1916 the Western Federation of miners changed its name to the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union. one of the prominent leaders of the M. M. S. W. was Arthur Goodwin "Ginger" an ex-vice-president of the B. C. Federation of Labour. He was killed in Comox while leading the 1916 general strike. Another labour leader was Romeo Albo. He worked along with Goodwin in organizing the Italian workers in Trail. Albo was arrested for causing unrest and while in jail awaiting deportation back to Italy he died from deficiency in diet.

In the first World War a company union was organized. This union was known as the Consolidated Workmens Co-operative Committee. It remained bargaining agent for the smelter workers until the Second World War. The committee consisted of a group of workers who represented the men. The committee would meet to vote on various proposals. In August 1940 there was a "strike vote" a yes vote meaning the committee would make applications for negotiations for wages, a "no" vote meaning acceptance of wage offer. The strike vote was settled without a strike in 1940 as were all other such conflicts during these years. The undisputed acceptance of wage offers brought the committee much criticism. Many of the men felt that

the committee, was just a reflection of its organizer Mr. Blaylock the general manager of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company.

Existing along with the Workmens Committee was another union referred to as the Smeltermans union. The employment of immigrants and lack of members kept this union weak. The workers were interested in the war effort during the late 30's and lacked interest in the union. It was not until the late 1940's that the Smelter men's union was able to raise the required 51 % of the workers as members which were needed to gain appointment as bargaining agents.

The first development in the rise of the Smelterman's union came in October of 1940. Harold Prichett, president of the International Wood workers of America arrived in Trail to assist the union. He addressed a crowd of union members and other smelter workers. Prichett spoke of "Reil Robinson" the president of the Smeltermans union who was being "kept out of Canada," and of the possibility of, "voting the committee out of existence."⁽²⁾

Anti-union material began to appear in the local newspapers. In September 1942 a letter by J. M. Paulsen who refers to himself as an "old-timer" writes,

"we see by the papers that the C-I-O over on the other side of the international boundary is appropriating large sums of money to start organizing the northern part of Washington and Idaho and to put pressure on Trail D. C."

He goes on to say of the unions that

"this area has had unions and knows what they are, they don't care if you go on strike as long as they get your per capital

tax and have a good time at your expense. They only exist by constantly stirring up strife."

Paulsen speaks of the benefits of the C. & S co. referring to the hospital, the artificial ice rink and the advantages of living without, "strife and lost time." (3)

In March of 1943 an amendment to the Industrial Disputes Conciliation and Arbitration Act forbid "all forms of company contributions to company unions." (4) This would make the Workmen's Committee illegal as the committee was a company union which held board meetings on the company's time. The idea of the introduction of a new union was met with mixed reactions.

"Consolidated has never been opposed to labor unions," says Blaylock. "But we think we have something better...." (5)

Blaylock, general manager of the consolidated company and organizer of the Workmens Committee had always referred to the company and its workers as a happy family. David Kenneway, chairman of the Committee said,

"We're a friendly crowd up here because if anyone has a grievance we have the machinery for dealing with it..." (6)

In an article called the New Era support was given to the union.

"From the looks of things the local unions of the International Mill and Mine Worker's here have a "clear sailing signal" and from the manner in which its organizers and workers have been received bespeaks it a long and useful career..."

"Recent legislation which outlawed the makeshift 'company union' better known as the Workmen's Committee (which is in no sense of the word representing anyone except those who did the handpicking) and practically places the union in complete command of the labor situation in Trail..."

"We believe we are safe in saying that the Consolidated

company has spent more money trying to evade the unionizing of their plant than they would have spent under a union set up."

The article goes on to speak of " stool pigeons " " apple polishers " and the " Comingo " (the company's publication) "lost time at board meetings " and of the,

" thousand and one things done to keep the men's attention away from their own best interest and to keep the " happy family " idea uppermost in their minds."

Speaking of Mr. Blaylock sitting across the table to discuss wages the article said that he " will soon have a better conception of human rights..." and that he would, " find a difference in the manner in which his opinions are gruted." ⑦

On March 26th, 1943 speakers from the C. I. O. came to Trail to explain the new legislation. Harvey Murphy of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMSW) read the act and explained its scope. Application forms of Local 480 of IUMSW were passed out and a large number of those present signed. Once again a number of letters speaking against the union were printed in local newspapers. The letters which speak of " count your blessings boys " of Trails high wages and the disadvantages of unions are signed as " Strike-Shy ", " Security " and " Committee Man." ⑧

On April 3rd. 1943 Harvey Murphy announces,

" The company union at Trail, the oldest in Canada's now out of existence...the men are joining the IUMSW. They have opened an office in downtown Trail." ⑨

Although the miners at the Sullivan mine voted to accept the union, Murphy spoke to soon for Trail. On the 21st of April the workers in Trail voted 1977 to 1830 to retain the Workmen's Committee as bargaining agent. The following day the Minister of Labour, G. S. Pearson stated that the B. C. conciliation and Arbitration Act is automatically superseded by the Dominion's Industrial Disputes Investigation Act during times of War. The reason for the change was that the consolidated company was to be considered part of the mining industry which was covered by Orders-in-Council passed by the federal government under the War Measures Act. The effect of this ruling was to make the Workmens Committee once again legal.

The leaders of Local 480 were not discouraged and continued to recruit members.

" Every effort is being made to secure the necessary 51 per cent and bets are being made that the number will be sign! by the end of the month." (10)

In May the employers drew up an agreement to present to the management asking that,

" the International Mine, Mill and Smelter Worker's Union be their bargaining agent." (11)

According to a bulletin issued by the C. I. O. the Local 480 ~~for~~ had established its 51 % goal in May.

While the Department of Labor is in the process of examining the application of Local 480 for bargaining power the Workmens Committee announced a base rate increase. The increase was handed down by the National War Labor Board. The Department of Labour announced in December of 1943 that Local 480 did not have sufficient membership to qualify for

registration as bargaining agents. In March of 1944 Local 430 applies again for certification as bargaining agents. George R. Currie, federal industrial relations officer was appointed to investigate the application. Three months later on June 3 his decision is announced.

" The International Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union (IUMSW) has been certified as bargaining agent for employees of the Tadanac and Warfield plants of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada Ltd. at trail." (12)

During the 1940's Local 430 of IUMSW suffered as a result of the anti-communist feelings of that time. With cold war between Russia and the U. S. and later the outbreak of the Korean war. The union became subject to question of national security. It was feared that the union leaders, some of whom were self-declared communists, would attempt to sabotage industry. The union improved its image at the bargaining table. In 1946 the union ended the bonus system of pay establishing a basic rate of \$1.60 an hour. It also brought a reduction of the work week from 42 to 40 hours. The wages of an average worker in Local 430 had climbed from \$5.27 a day in 1943 to \$13.20 in a day in 1952.

The fear of communism was first voiced by R. W. Diamond who had replaced Blaylock as general manager of the Consolidated mining and smelting company. On December 7 of 1947 Diamond said,

" miners should take the lead in weeding out persons with ulterior motives who will destroy us."

Warning that the mining industry,

" could survive only under a stable society." (13)

In April of 1947, Walter Owens warns that communists were in top executive

positions in trade unions of every basic industry in British Columbia. The existence of a top secret plant in Trail which was involved in the production of atomic fission materials created further tension. It was feared that the union might sabotage the plant which products were described,

"The constituents of the catalyst are not likely to be taken off the secret list until the world is in a more settled state internationally." (14)

The main link between Local 430 and communists was Harvey Murphy. Murphy was president of Local 430 and a member of the Labor Progressive party, a communist party. Feelings against communists were very strong. John Scott, like Murphey was a member of the Labor Progressive party.

In September of 1943, Scott was refused entry into the United States by the immigration officials at Northport. He was refused entry because he was a communist.

The U. S. government and the consolidated company were not alone in their anti-communist feelings. The CIL suspended the IUMSW on the grounds that the latter union had printed an article charging

"C. H. Mellard (Canadian director of the United Steel Workers of America) with settling for less than agreed upon by their unions." (15)

The Western Miner a local union publication says that the IUMSW was suspended for its communist leaders.

"The CCL and CIU have been after Murphy's scalp..." (16)

The CIL charged in July of 1950 the consolidated company with indifference to national security by dealing with the IUMSW. Pointing out that a communist controlled union holds the collective bargaining contract at a B. C. plant producing atomic fission materials. This criticism of Local 430 is

the begining of the CCL attempt to gain the bargaining power in Trail. The CCL felt that the employers in Trail were,

" playing ball with the communists...

The majority of employees in Trail want to belong to a Non-communist union..." (17)

Further abuse was directed at Harvey Murphy. In 1953 Pat Walsh who had just resigned from a number of communist front organizations in Vancouver reported that

" Communist cells there and in other large industries on the West coast are co-ordinated with a man named Harvey Murphy a Russian whose real name was ' Chernioviosky '..."

Walsh goes on to say that Murphy had,

" graduated from the Marx-Engles Institute of Moscow, a school for saboteurs." (18)

Anti-communist feeling was also effecting the IUMSW in the United States. The Salt Lake City copper strike of 1950 was reported by an FBI agent as part of a Communist plot to cripple the Korean war effort.

In Canada the International Mine, Mill and Smelter workers began to break under the strain. CCL and AFL raiding began to prove effective as many locals quit the IUMSW to join the CCL and AFL. In May 1954 the workers of the Alberta Nitrogen division of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting company ousted the smelterworkers union. They voted 124 to 69 in favor of replacing the IUMSW with the International Chemical Workers Union C.I.W. The Chemical Workers union was charged with starting a raid on the Cominco fertilizer plant at Marysville. The International Nickel Company's workers in Sudbury went out on strike in 1953. The IUMSW feared the strike would open the door for a raid by the United Steel Workers of America (C.I.O.)

In an effort to keep the plant with the IUMSW donations were sent to the strikers union from IUMSW locals across the country including ten thousand dollars from Local 430. The importance of the strike to the IUMSW was reported in the Financial Post.

"If M-M loses fire among its members because of the Inco strike and there are signs it is doing so-it will be weakened in its finish-fight with the United Steel Workers." (19)

The strike ended ninety-two days later and in the local union election the old leaders were ousted. At the Federal Conference of IUMSW in 1959 the unions split over the issue of communist domination. With support for proposals which would bar communists from holding office in the union coming from the nickel workers union. The United Steel Workers continued their raiding and by 1962 the nickel workers had replaced the IUMSW with the United Steel Workers of America.

The IUMSW further weakened by this loss of members attempted to affiliate with the CIO. The leadership of the IUMSW felt that it would be accepted into the CIO after Harvey Murphy quit the Labor Progressive party. The CIO had stated that those unions getting rid of communist leaders would be let into the CIO. The attempt at affiliation was rejected. Six months later in July of 1960 the Mine mill unions sign an assistance pact with the Teamsters unions. This attempt at making the IUMSW stronger was offset in 1962. After a five year investigation the Mine mills unions are barred in the United States for being communist-infiltrated.

The IUMSW was in a very weak state. The union had lost members from the communist scare, the split in the unions being barred in the U. S.

and from raiding by other unions. The union continued to collapse and in 1967 the IU MSW came to an end in Trail as workers wanted to replace the IUMSW with the United Steel Workers of America.

Footnotes

1. Nelson News 1905
2. Daily Ad-News August 21, 1940
3. Trail Daily Times September 26, 1942
4. Vancouver Province March 11, 1943
5. Vancouver Province March 11, 1943
6. Vancouver Province March 12, 1943
7. Trail Ad-News March 26, 1943
8. Trail Daily Times March 30, 1943
9. Nelson News April 3, 1943
10. Industrial Relations April 26, 1943
11. Nelson News May 13, 1943
12. Trail Daily Times June 3, 1944
13. Vancouver Sun December 7, 1947
14. The Star Weekly, Toronto November 29, 1947
15. The Trade Union Movement Charles Ilyton, Canadian Social Publication, Montreal, 1966, p. 295
16. The Western Miner June 1949
17. Trail Daily Times July 5, 1950
18. Vancouver Province February 23, 1953
19. Financial Post October 25, 1953

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