

[Page 48 - A Social Worker Visits Cape Breton, 1925](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 38](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1985/1/1

wages are a cost item to production, and are whittled down to the lowest possible minimum. Naturally, the man who receives wages, must, like one selling something, struggle vigorously for the best possible price. Unfortunately for us all, and for him in particular, the wage-receiver is selling himself, his labor-power, and so the struggle becomes one for the life and future of himself and loved ones. Like all merchants (but without the merchant dignity), the wage-earner's greatest blow comes when he has no market for his commodity, and hunger stalks in, robbing him of his stock. It has not been possible to trace what the wages were in the early days of coal mining. But to-day, after a series of reductions, the datal or day-laborer at, around, and in the mines, receives from \$2.60 to \$4.05 per day. The coal cutter, or contractor, who does the most dangerous and skilled work, at the "face" of the coal seam, receives from \$7.00 to \$12.00 per day; but it must be noted that the latter works only a few days a week, since he can only cut as much as the datal man can take away. When these men work full time each week, they can earn in their different capacities, from \$15.00 to \$35.00 or \$40.00 per week, or roughly, from \$800 to \$2,000 per year. Knowing the average rates of wages, the writer found it of interest to gather figures on the cost of living in that region. She found, when pricing the "Health and Decency Standard" budget compiled and used by the U.S. Dept. of Labor, that if a worker there desires to keep himself and family on a decent health level, he requires to earn all the year round at least \$31.08 per week, or \$1,616 per year; and this budget makes no allowance for ordinary dental or special medical or hospital costs, for savings, or recreation. Nine thousand out of the twelve thousand miners are day laborers. Less than half earn not more than at the highest rate, \$4.00 per day, or \$1,144 per year. More than half of these again, range from \$780 to \$1,000 per year, when working steadily. It is evident thus that even in the boom times, earnings do not allow them to live other than below, vastly below, the socially accepted "health and decency" standard. Since the termination of the war, from whose battle-fields more than half of the stalwart Scotch-Canadian miners returned, all have had only one or two days per week, ten to twelve days work per month. This at the rate of \$3.20 or even \$7.00 per day! For five years they have borne slow starvation and nakedness. And yet this year again the company demanded a wage cut! Thanks to the organized strength of the workers, and to their splendid morale, they protested against this threatened invasion on their sparse earnings. The company in answer took their credit from them at the stores! It was work at OUR price or starve! And the men walked out of the mines, fighting for the dignity of their manhood and for the future of their homes, as they did, so gallantly, at Verdun.- After years of labor, with the curse of unemployment, high living costs, lowering wages, what has the miner achieved for himself? What future do his children face? How have they all benefitted by the increased production of coal and wealth? Let us look inside a datal mine-worker's "home." A Scottish miner who had served for eighteen years in the coal pit, and for four years at the front. I found living with his family of wife and 8 children in the



usual half of a company "double" house. Two rooms upstairs could not be used because of bad disrepair. The two downstairs served for bed? room and kitchen-livingroom. The plaster from the kitchen walls and half of the ceiling was crumb? ling, the floor humpy, but covered bravely with a home-made ragmat; the woodwork dirty, and for years unpainted. The cesspool has overflown, and refuse flows into the street. There are, of course, no sanitary conveniences, but there is a wire cord for an electric light. The furniture consists of a small cookstove, a deal table, four chairs, a wood? en couch, a home-made kitchen cupboard. In the bed? room there are three beds, a rag mat. There is ab? solutely no bedding outside of two small pillows and a thin rag coverlet, and the mattresses are sagging and shedding cotton. For warmth the family go to bed in their clothing. Not one of them have other clothing but what they wear. There is no change of underwear for anyone, and the children wear none at all; I found them in bed trying to keep warm, with thin cotton dresses against their little bare bodies. They had that winter not been to school or outdoors, for they had no boots or stockings. The miner, his wife and the older children have bad teeth and red defec? tive eyes. The children have diseased throats and breathe badly. They all look undernourished; the children especially are wan, puny, with dark rings under their eyes. One little girl, three years of age, cannot yet walk--she still has rickets, and none for years have tasted cow's milk. It costs ten cents a pint in Glace Bay! The oldest boy, of 15, sells papers in the village in lieu of work in the mines. He has no boots; he was given that week a huge pair of lumberman's rubbers by the Relief Committee, together with an old coat. And they have no food! They were half starved when the lockout came, and now they live on the little food that the Relief Station gives, barely enough for two meals a day, every other day. This miner, like hundreds or thousands of others, worked last year 173 days, at an average rate of \$3.20 per day; totalling \$553.60 for the year. His running expenses for the year are as follows: House rent, at \$7.00 per month \$ 84.00 Coal 92.00 Sanitation (cleaning toilet box) 3.00 Light 28.80 Doctor, Hospital, church, and other Relief 49.40 \$257.20 The mine-worker must provide himself with pit clothes and other equipment, which costs as fol? lows, yearly: 3 pairs of shoes, at \$3.50 \$10.50 4 suits of overalls, at \$2.75 11.00 3 suits of underwear, at \$2.00 6.00 5 pairs of sox, at 40 cents 2.00 1 cap, belt 1.00 Lunch cans 2.00 \$32.50 The total expenditure is, \$289.70; his earnings for the year were \$553.60; he had then \$263.90 left for the year with which to provide all the necessaries of life, at the prices in his town, for himself, his wife and eight children, and also meet the many obligations of a citizen. Consequent? ly the family has not bought any dry goods for