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Floors.. jj J. B. MCLACHLAN CONTINUES FROM INSIDE FRONT COVER What a floor that was! How it talked to me of victorious struggle." pare, and you give her yellow bricks and 'whirlie-jigs' to rear your baby on!" That floor would stab me to the heart, making I me fighting mad. AWAY BACK IN 1918 the miners of Cape Bre? ton were struggling for an increase in wages. At last the Minister of La? bor called a meeting in Ottawa of the miners' leaders and the coal op? erators. The meeting was held in the big hotel at the C.P.R. Station. The floor in this hotel seemed to jeer and laugh at me as I walked over it. If I walked on its carpets my feet sunk up to the shoe-tops. If I walked on the sides, where the carpet did not cover, I would slip and stumble and slide as if I walked on polished glass. This floor sure was class-conscious. It seemed to shout out at me: "Can't you see you're out of your element! Feet black and dirty from the coal mine should not walk here. I am for the gentle feet of idle men and fine women which are never soiled by labor." This floor, too, made me mad. Oh, if the miners from Glace Bay's wind-swept shacks could only have one walk over this floor, how it would make them fighting mad! Floors can teach workers a lot of things. Floors are not like men, they never lie to you whether they are mud-patched or have soft carpets. THE HNEST FLOOR I HAVE EVER SEEN, and one that made me feel real happy was in a miner's house. In the winter of 19311 was in the Soviet Union, down in the Don-Bass among the coal miners. I wanted to see the miners' homes and was taken there. I said to the Russian comrade who was with me "Let's go into this house here, I see the old mother at the wash-tubs." Yes. The little old mother was glad to show us her home. Her husband had been murdered in 1919 by the Whites, her son worked in the mine. It was a fine worker's home, clean and neat with lots of light and flowers growing in the windows. In answer to the little mother's question, I tried to tell her where Canada was. She asked if tiie miners' houses in Glace Bay were as good as hers. I told her that as far as space was concerned I thought they were as well off as she was, but she had a very much better constructed and more comfortable home. She pointed to the hollow below where things like small pig-houses stood, and said: "I lived there all my life till after the Revolution. Those huts had mud floors. But look at the fine wooden floors I have now." What a floor that was! How it talked to me of victorious strug? gle. This widow of a miner murdered in the class struggle was so proud of her floor. It was holy ground, made sacred by the blood of a struggling triumphant working class, where peace at last could live. Yes, comrades, I think floors can talk to us if we know how to listen to them. • Afterword by David Frank • What a remarkable autobiography J.B. McLachlan could have written! During his lifetime (1869-1937), McLachlan witnessed the evolution of unions from their pioneering days in the 19th century to the time when they had become an accepted part of social and political life. McLach- lan's part in that revolutionary change is one of the epic stories in Ca? nadian labour history. There are remarkably few workers' autobiogra? phies from this period, and although McLachlan often wrote for the



labour newspapers of his time, it is unfortunate that he did not leave a detailed narrative of his own life story. In the course of my work on McLachlan's biography, I had heard about this article ("Floors That Have Talked to Me") from one of McLachlan's daughters. She described the article, but did not have a copy. Years later one of the staff at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa suggested I take a look at some newspapers and magazines which had been collected by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as part of their policy of keeping a close watch on the activities of the Canadian Left. In among the other "subversive" publications in those boxes, there were several copies of *Always Ready*, and I was delighted to find that one of them contained this short personal essay by McLachlan. In these paragraphs McLachlan takes us first to his grandmother's home in Ecclefechan in the south of Scotland (the village where McLachlan was born in 1869 and later left for Newmains, Lanarkshire). Then he takes us to his own home as a young father in the miners' row at Blantyre (where his first daughter was born in 1894). After that McLachlan takes us forward in time to the days when, as an elected union officer, he was negotiating successful contracts with the coal operators in Montreal. He ends with a visit to the Soviet Union, which for him (and many other radicals of the time) represented a socialist alternative to the crisis-ridden capitalism of the Great Depression. Altogether, this is an intense piece of personal testimony, written with McLachlan's usual vigour and style and effectively conveying messages that are both personal and political. It is good to know that it can now be stored to its place in the cultural legacy of his people. Our thanks to David Frank for supplying this story. In his continuing work to give J. B. McLachlan his place in the cultural legacy of us all, David has written the definitive biography. And we're pleased to announce: The biography is coming! The biography is coming! Over 25 years in research and writing, the definitive biography of J. B. McLachlan is finally available. Excellent for popular readers and schools. *J. B. McLachlan: A Biography The Story of a Legendary Labour Leader and the Cape Breton Coal Miners* Published by James Lorimer and Company (1-800-565-1975), *J. B. McLachlan* is available in bookstores everywhere, and direct from Cape Breton's Magazine. (See pages 76-77.) ISBN 1-55028-677-3 • 400 pages • Hardcover • \$34.95 'CC /fu('om '