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Published by Ronald Caplan on 1979/8/1

The Coming of the Trade Union Act (1937) In Issue 22 of CAPE BRETON'S MAGAZINE, we told a story of the 1923 strike in steel, and "the miners' sympathy strike. The strike was broken when John L. Lewis forced the miners back to work, leaving the penniless steelworkers helpless and with no other "choice but to go back to work themselves, those that could get back on the plant. Then the management of the steel plant set up the Plant Council (also known as the Bischoff Plan, named after a BESCO manager at the steel plant) to head off further organizing." In Issue 22 Bernie Galloway made it clear that the Plant Council had no strength to help the steelworkers with their real problems • such as low wages and long hours • and Emerson Campbell told us that "what you got in concessions you lost in wages." He made it clear that "if the workers are going to get anywhere they've got to fight for it." The Plant Council was the closest thing the steelworkers knew of a union for the next thirteen years (1923 to 1937). And when they did finally achieve recognition of a union of their own, that recognition came via machinery won in a different kind of fight from what everyone had expected. The machinery was won politically, using the threat of the workers' vote at the polls. The machinery was the Trade Union Act of 1937. legislation which said that a company cannot arbitrarily ignore the existence of a workers' union. It was the first Trade Union Act adopted by any Canadian province. 'I talked with George MacEachern, who with Carl Neville and Dan MacKay researched and drafted the Trade Union Act (Bill 92, An Act Respecting the Rights of Employees to Organize). George MacEachern; We got an independent union going (Independent Steelworkers' Union of N.S.). The guide was given to those of us WHO were militant by the Communist International. Their advice was that in plants where there was a plant council, militants were to join the plant council and use it to build a union. And this was done pretty generally. When I got on the plant, and the election for plant council came up, I ran. And mind you, the workers generally knew what the plant council was. They had no illusions about it at all. In some departments the boss had to go around and ask the men to vote, you know, because they knew it was a useless bloody thing. So I got on the plant council and started to raise issues. Tried to get blacklisted men back on the plant, but I couldn't. So then we raised the wage question with Sir Newton Moore, he was president of the corporation. And he told us that it wasn't a matter of more wages but how long they could afford to pay the 28 cents an hour they were then paying, and that we better be careful because there was talk in the board of directors about moving the plant to Three Rivers, Quebec. And on like this. And when we left that meeting I managed to corral 3 or 4 of the plant councillors. I said, "Are you prepared to go back and tell the workers that the situation is hopeless?" "What else can we tell them?" "Well, you can tell them that there's hope, but that- you can't get it with just discussion with the boss." So I invited them up to the house. Four came. We chewed the thing over. We decided all we could do was go out and ask the men flat out, would they support a union. And if they would, we'd build a union for them, give leadership. And we'd meet the next



Thursday night at my house. And the next Thursday only one fellow arrived • his name was Harry Davis, a Newfoundlander. Harry and I waited till 9 o'clock. No sign of anybody else. What are we going to do? We'll try it ourselves. So we decided that Harry would act as president, I would act as secretary. Next day I took the day off and went out to Glace Bay to get union cards and dues stamps printed at Brodie's. Get minute books, financial books, call a meeting. And we did, and we got a pretty good turnout. 50 or 60 came. That was encouraging. Of course on the percentage basis that wouldn't be big. But according to our expectations it was big. And we decided to continue organizing. If we had more experience I guess we would have put in wage demands and rallied the workers around a set of demands. But of course we weren't experienced. And on the day our next meeting was held, the plant council was called in and given a 10 per cent increase in wages • after Sir Newton Moore telling us