16 September 1913
They met at the old Oddfellows Hall on Union Street in Saint John on Tuesday, 16 September 1913. It was a small assembly, but the delegates represented a large constituency and an even larger body of expectations. They came from Sackville, Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John, carrying credentials from local unions and labour councils, and from a range of occupations, including barbers, blacksmiths, bricklayers, carpenters, cigarmakers, electrical workers, iron moulders, longshoremen, painters, plumbers, printers, railway carmen, and stonemasons. There were, in all, only twenty delegates in attendance, all of them men and mainly from Saint John and Moncton, but the Eastern Labor News did not hesitate to describe the event as “a large and representative meeting.”

"An Accomplished Fact" 1913–1929
The day after that short meeting, local newspapers in Saint John underlined the significance of the event. “A movement of importance to the working men of the province was advanced a stage yesterday,” reported the Standard. “A Provincial Federation was formed and arrangements made for closer cooperation in promoting labor legislation and all matters in the interests of the working class.” The Daily Telegraph described the aims of the new organization in similar terms: “to bring all the unions of the different towns of the province into closer touch so that demands made by the new body may have greater weight than those of any separate existing organization.” Only a few items of business were transacted, but participants were pleased with the outcome. P. D. Ayer of the Moncton Trades and Labour Council, who presided at the event, predicted that, as more unions joined, “the federation will speedily become the legislative medium and the fighting machine for organized labor within the province.” And a correspondent in the Eastern Labor News observed with satisfaction that the New Brunswick Federation of Labour was now “an accomplished fact.”

Plans for a federation of labour were underway at least as early as the spring of 1912, when the Saint John Trades and Labour Council invited their counterparts in Moncton to discuss the idea. In June that year, the veteran union leader J. J. Donovan, of the Saint John cigarmakers’ union, spoke at a meeting of the Moncton Trades and Labour Council. Donovan explained that the provincial government too easily turned a deaf ear to labour concerns from any one section of the province: “A Provincial Federation would accomplish the desired result and lead to united action by every union in New Brunswick which no government would care to ignore.” The proposal received ready endorsement, and on Labour Day that year delegates assembled at the Longshoremen’s Hall in Saint John, where they voted unanimously to form “an organization to be known as the New Brunswick Provincial Federation of Labour.” Also in attendance was Warren Franklin Hatheway, the Saint John reformer and former Member of the Legislative Assembly, whose efforts to advance the cause of labour had often been frustrated by the political leadership of the province. He congratulated the meeting and
again underlined the logic of a federation: “A body representative of all the labor interests of the province would have a much greater influence than the individual union or the Trades and Labor Council of a particular section.” Provisional officers were elected, including Donovan as president, and it was agreed to meet as early as Thanksgiving Day or at another time “at the call of the executive.”

Such a call was never issued, and over the course of the winter the movement for a federation came to a standstill. This did not sit well with two Saint John labour men, who used the pages of the Moncton-based *Eastern Labor News* to breathe new life into the idea. Longshoreman Fred Hyatt was an Old Country union man who had served in the British Army in India before immigrating to Canada. He was also a vocal proponent of socialist ideas, who underlined the idea that organizing workers was part of a larger effort to reform society: “The Provincial Federation of Labor could be made an actual fact and its influence felt if it was organized along the lines followed by British Columbia and Alberta, and adopted a platform which stood for the worker to receive the full product of his labor, which would be something worth fighting for.” In his view, capitalism had arrived in full force in New Brunswick, and workers would have to combine for their mutual protection: “The slogan should be ‘workers unite’ and wake up New Brunswick.”

Hyatt was ably, if more moderately, seconded by James L. Sugrue, one of the younger generation of labour leaders coming to the fore in Saint John: “I think it time the matter of forming a Provincial Federation of Labor was resurrected. It would certainly be a pity to allow this matter to fall through as the time seems opportune for the formation of such an organization.” Sugrue gave a telling example of labour’s inability to secure meaningful reforms. After a year and a half of agitation by the unions for a fair wage clause in government contracts, the legislature had passed a Fair Wage Schedule Act that was barely two sentences long and notably lacking in standards or provisions for enforcement. “What a splendid piece of legislation,” scoffed Sugrue. “The workers should certainly be proud of the lawyers, doctors and business men who are representing them.” He concluded with a call to action:
“Let’s quit acting comedy, brothers, and get down to business. We need a Federation of Labor in this Province and the time is ripe for its formation.”

A portrait of Sugrue shows a youthful, energetic face, hair brushed high, steady eyes, and the hint of a smile. Although Saint John had a long labour history and there were plenty of local labour veterans, Sugrue was still in his twenties when he came to prominence. Born in 1883, he had grown up in west-end Saint John, the son of an Irish immigrant who was an influential teacher in the city’s Catholic schools. His older brother John Sugrue became an officer of the bricklayers and masons union, and “Jimmie” Sugrue became a leader of Local 919, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, named as their financial secretary in 1910 and in 1913 as business agent. In 1912 Sugrue was elected president of the Saint John Trades and Labour Council. The emergence of Sugrue as a local leader coincided with an upsurge of labour activism. The Saint John carpenters, for instance, had won a $3 daily wage and an eight-hour day in their trade, and in the summer of 1913 more than 1,000 men at the local lumber mills were off work seeking wage increases and union recognition. On Labour Day that year, Saint John workers came out in large numbers, estimated at 2,000, to march in the biggest...
Labour Day parade in years. The unions were demonstrating their presence in the community, and leaders such as Sugrue were setting optimistic goals. As he explained in 1912, “In the long run we hope to so improve conditions here that the people won’t leave for the west in search of better wages and shorter hours of labor.”

Sugrue’s part in the renewed effort was recognized when he was elected as the first president of the Federation of Labour in September 1913 and again at the first regular convention in Saint John in January 1914. On this occasion the thirty-five delegates represented fifteen union locals as well as the labour councils in Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John. The largest group consisted of eight men from the Saint John longshoremen, the oldest union in the province. Sugrue must have been chagrined that fully twenty-eight of the official delegates were from Saint John. When they voted on a constitution and bylaws, one of the first amendments was to elect vice-presidents in order to strengthen support in other places. Vice-presidents were chosen for Moncton, Fredericton, Sackville, and Saint John, including three men who were not present at the meeting. In addition, P.D. Ayer of Moncton was elected as secretary-treasurer and Frank Lister of Fredericton as vice-president.

In setting their course, the Federation adopted resolutions on several matters to be presented to the government. Although the texts were not reported in the handwritten minutes, the list shows the scope of their agenda: scaffolding at construction sites, payments for jurors and witnesses, free school books and supplies for children, a Fair Wage Clause, a Bureau of Labour, Workmen’s Compensation, and an item headed simply “women workers.” Beyond this, the officers were instructed to procure a charter from the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, and the next meeting was set for July 1914 in Fredericton. It was a modest beginning, but the Federation of Labour was now visible on the province’s political landscape. When they met six months later at the Pythias Hall in Fredericton, the delegates were welcomed by the city’s mayor, and there was the same formal recognition when they met at the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union Hall in Moncton the following year.
Before the War

Meanwhile, two notable events in 1914 kept the larger labour question in the public eye and did so in contrasting ways. The first of these, in Saint John in late July, was a large and violent strike that reminded workers of the weak position of unions seeking recognition, even in a city with a long history of unionism. In this case, the hundred or more men who worked on the city’s street railway line had organized themselves into a union. Like other workers, they were hoping to win improvements in wages and working conditions, but only three weeks after the local was formed, their president was fired for an alleged violation of company rules; it was claimed that Fred Ramsay had stopped his streetcar and gone into a saloon, a charge the union president vigorously denied. Meanwhile, the company also refused to negotiate with the union. Because they worked in the transportation sector, the street railway workers were in a position to make their case to a conciliation board appointed by the Dominion Minister of Labour. The board, to which they appointed Sugrue as the union representative, recommended a settlement. However, the company had no obligation to accept the recommendation — or even to negotiate with workers or recognize their union at all.

This was the kind of impasse that workers faced all across the country in this era, and in this situation it led directly to a test of strength on the streets. On 22 July, the workers marched through the streets in their uniforms carrying banners and calling on fellow citizens to support their strike. On every streetcorner, crowds cheered and shouted support for the strike slogan “Let Everybody Walk.” The company was already unpopular in the city for its overcrowded cars and its failure to build new lines, and public opinion was lining up on the side of the workers. When the company attempted to operate cars the next morning, with strikebreakers brought in by train from Montréal, there was trouble. The assembled crowds jeered the scabs, threw stones, broke windows, and stalled the cars on the tracks. From the point of view of municipal authorities, this was a deplorable breakdown in civil order. Standing on the curb of a fountain, the mayor read the Riot Act and called out a detachment of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, who charged down King
IN THE STREETS  In the early twentieth century there were no laws protecting the right to collective bargaining, and the Labour Question was often decided in the streets. When Saint John street railway workers went on strike for union recognition in the summer of 1914, large crowds came out to support the workers and stop the use of strikebreakers. This was the scene at Market Square, Saint John, on the morning of 24 July 1914.
Source: New Brunswick Museum, x12493 (2).

Street into the crowds at the bottom of the hill at Market Square. The men on horseback wielded their flat-edged ceremonial swords, and the crowd fought back with sticks and stones. Two streetcars were overturned in the street. When crowds went on to attack the company’s barns, there were gunshots from a force of company detectives bunked inside. An attack on the company’s power plant plunged the city into darkness.
Order was eventually restored that night, but not before the mayor had called out the militia as well. Municipal leaders also intervened, and helped to broker a settlement. The union would be recognized, there would be gains for the workers — and union president Ramsay would take a job with the city. As in similar street railway strikes across North America, this one succeeded because there was animosity towards the company and support for the workers in the community. As historian Robert Babcock has written, “a deep-seated local tradition of crowd action reinforced the developing class-consciousness of Saint John workers.” The settlement was nonetheless an improvised solution, a form of “collective bargaining by riot.” It demonstrated the obstacles that workers faced in seeking the right to union recognition and pointed to the need for better recognition of the place of labour in provincial society.7

A few weeks after the strike, there appeared to be a higher level of acceptance for unions when delegates from across Canada arrived in Saint John for the annual convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. The TLC had met annually since the 1880s, but only once in the Maritimes, in Halifax in 1908. When Sugrue attended the 1912 convention in Guelph, Ontario, he proposed that the next meeting be held in Saint John. Sugrue was determined to bring the TLC to New Brunswick, once arguing, for instance, that “Montreal is not the eastern extremity of Canada, despite the fact that some of our international executive officers seem to think so.”8 Once Saint John was chosen for the 1914 meetings, Sugrue served as chair of the Reception Committee, which published 2,000 copies of a souvenir booklet whose publication was supported by a grant of $500 from the provincial government.9 In welcoming the delegates, he hoped that the event “would tend to give an uplift to the organized workers of the Province of New Brunswick.”10 Certainly the New Brunswickers turned out in force, with a total of 36 delegates from Fredericton, Moncton, and Saint John among the 147 delegates from across the country. For a full week, the meetings at the St. Andrews Rink featured numerous speakers capable of debating labour issues with much expertise. President James C. Watters, a Vancouver Island coal miner and socialist, who often wore a stetson, presented a wide-ranging report on labour conditions, and there
were well-informed speeches by delegates such as George Armstrong of the Winnipeg carpenters, who discussed the problem of counterfeit union labels, and James Simpson of the Toronto printers, who called for the payment of wages to apprentices attending technical school. James Sugrue was on the platform throughout the congress, and other New Brunswick delegates also joined the discussions.11

One of the highlights of the meetings was a speech by Leonora O’Reilly of New York. O’Reilly had started work in the New York garment industry at the age of eleven and joined the Knights of Labor at sixteen. As a leader of the Women’s Trade Union League, she was at the peak of her influence, having won wide attention for exposing conditions at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory, where 146 women workers lost their lives three years earlier when they were unable to escape from the burning building. “Fighting O’Reilly,” as she introduced herself, gave the delegates a “striking description” of organizing efforts in the United States and made “a strong plea for the organization of women.” When O’Reilly declared that “we want an eight hour day, a living wage and full citizenship for women,” she was interrupted by applause and went on to add: “All we have accomplished through fights, we should have written into the laws of the land so that the next generation can avoid the struggles which we have been compelled to make.”12

The presence of O’Reilly and others drew an optimistic picture of opportunities for solidarity among workers across lines of gender, region, and country. But by September 1914 the union movement was already divided by the arrival of the Great War. For the past three years the TLC had passed resolutions denouncing capitalist wars, and on the first day of the Saint John
convention one resolution condemned the war as the “organized murder of the workers of the various countries” and called on Canadian workers to bring about “a speedy termination of the war.” This resolution did not come to a vote, and before the meetings ended the TLC had affirmed its support for the war effort. Still, delegates were concerned about maintaining union rights under wartime conditions. Tom Moore of the carpenters called for union rates and hours on all government contracts. When Dominion Minister of Labour T.W. Crothers arrived at the convention, he was treated to a long round of criticism for the government’s failures to follow its own fair wage policy in letting contracts for public works. Sugrue and others joined in presenting resolutions for the appointment of fair wage officers for each of the provinces.¹³

**Workers’ Compensation**

During the war years the labour cause in New Brunswick was far from dormant. Like other social reformers of the time, union leaders continued to advance a progressive agenda. At the January 1915 meetings, the Federation called for protection of the interests of New Brunswick workers in the distribution of wartime contracts. But the war effort did not loom large in their proceedings. Other resolutions in 1915 called for municipal and provincial governments to use union label supplies. There was talk of establishing a new labour newspaper, to carry on the work of the *Eastern Labor News*. Other resolutions called for free textbooks for schoolchildren as well as the provision of free medical, dental, and eye examinations in the schools.¹⁴ In the later stages of the war, the Federation took no position on issues such as conscription but opposed the employment of interned prisoners or the importation of “Orientals” to deal with labour shortages. In 1918, they were also calling for the protection of women and girls working in factories, agricultural training for returning soldiers, representation of labour on public boards, government ownership of railways and utilities, proportional representation in politics, and extension of the franchise to women.¹⁵
Most of all, the Federation continued to press for improved laws for the compensation of workplace death and injury, regularly passing resolutions and sending delegations to Fredericton. This was an issue with a long history. A Workmen’s Compensation for Injuries Act had been adopted by a Liberal government in 1903, but it was more accurately considered an act to limit the liability of employers for accidents. The act was based on the premise that injuries at work were a risk assumed by the individual worker, unless the employer could be proved negligent in some respect; even if the employer was held responsible, awards could not exceed a total of $1,500. At the time of the 1908 election, the Conservatives called for an improved law and increased benefits, and the election of Hatheway as a government member was a promising sign. But the revisions that followed were a disappointment: they raised the limit on benefits and closed a loophole by including accidents caused by “any person in the service of the employer,” but the law still excluded many workers; moreover, claims would still have to be pursued in court, a costly and uncertain undertaking for a working-class family.16

With the emergence of the Federation, the compensation laws had a high priority on the labour agenda. Sugrue pressed the case at an interview with the cabinet in March 1916, where union leaders were told that a commission of inquiry would be appointed shortly. When this did not happen, Sugrue renewed pressure, writing repeatedly that summer.17 The turning point came in early 1917, when the government named a commission of inquiry. In addition to a chairman and two employers’ representatives, there were two labour members. One of them was Sugrue, due recognition of the part of the Federation in the agitation, and the choice of Fred Daley of the Saint John longshoremen acknowledged the importance of the issue on the docks, where Daley’s brother, president of Local 273, ILA, had lost his life in an accident four years earlier. Although the Conservative government was not re-elected in the February 1917 provincial election, the new Liberal government continued to support the work of the commission.

One of their first tasks was to examine the new compensation laws enacted in Ontario in 1914 and Nova Scotia in 1915. These were laws of a new type,
for instead of assuming individual responsibility for workplace danger they introduced a system of public insurance. At the time of the Federation’s annual meeting in Fredericton in May 1917, a committee of delegates was named to meet with the provincial government. This included several key union leaders: James Tighe and John Kemp from Saint John, F.C. Wilson from Moncton, and J.C. Legere and George Crawford from Fredericton. Their timing was right, as the commission had prepared an interim report. With that in place, the delegates met with the provincial cabinet and, according to their own report, “in able manner presented the claims of labour for about 2 hours.” Returning to the convention hall on Regent Street, they reported that the government was prepared to amend the existing legislation in accordance with union recommendations. That afternoon the convention was also addressed by the veteran Hatheway, who was undoubtedly pleased that his long struggle for better compensation laws had now been taken up vigorously by the province’s unions.

The promise of social reform was often invoked in the course of the Great War. At a time when the war was taking a bloody toll at the front, provincial politicians could do little about those casualties, but there seemed to be steady progress in addressing the costs of injuries and fatalities in the workplaces of the home economy. The commission’s report was tabled on 15 March 1918, and a bill was introduced the same day by Attorney-General J.P. Byrne, who stated that “the principles of the bill had been approved by the Federation of Labor and also by a number of employers of labor in the province.” The new law accepted the premise that workers and their families were entitled to compensation for death and injuries arising out of their employment and that the costs of accidents should be a charge upon the employers. The change was “revolutionary in its character,” noted one of the opposition leaders — with approval. Sugrue watched the progress of the bill closely, and at one stage he appealed to the Saint John longshoremen to send a representative to Fredericton to help him lobby the members. There were definite limitations in the bill: important categories of workers were excluded — farm labourers, domestic servants, clerical workers, police and firemen, and a variety of “casual” workers — and there was no debate on an amendment that
added fishermen to the list of excluded occupations, even though at least nine men had been lost in a disaster on the water at Caraquet as recently as 1914. There was controversy about including workers in the lumber industry, as recommended by the report; but in the course of the debate, the government amended its own bill to exclude from coverage both logging in the woods and working on the river drives, two of the most hazardous occupations in the province. Opposition members charged that the government was giving in to powerful lumber interests: “The proposed amendment would destroy the effectiveness of the Compensation Act and would not be satisfactory to the province as a whole or to the labor interests.”\textsuperscript{22} With this amendment, the bill was adopted on 26 April, imperfect legislation but a sign that the province was prepared to introduce reforms in response to the expressed needs of organized workers. Much would depend on the administration of the act, and union leaders were pleased with the appointment of Sugrue as one of the three full-time members of the new Workmen’s Compensation Board. He was associated above all with the Federation, and the campaign for compensation had demonstrated the effectiveness of an organization that could claim to represent the interests of provincial workers at large.\textsuperscript{23}

It was hardly an age of harmony, however. Union membership continued to grow again after 1917, but there were no guarantees for unions. A sensational case erupted in Saint John in 1917, when a standoff between the master plumbers and the plumbers’ union culminated in charges of intimidation, arson, and murder. Local 531 of the United Association of Journeymen Plumbers had been organized in 1911, and in early 1917 they were seeking a new agreement with higher rates and the eight-hour day. When employers refused to settle, the plumbers went on strike, and the union’s general organizer for Canada, the spunky Australian-born John Bruce, remained on the scene almost continuously that spring and summer. The situation worsened as replacement workers were hired. A chalkboard at the union hall listed names for the “roll of dishonour,” and Bruce urged the strikers to take a strong stand: “Hound the scabs, keep after them and hound them out, call them rats, but use no violence and stay away from booze.” In his diary, Bruce
reported “spirit good” among the strikers, but he also noted that there was “nothing doing” with the employers.

Suddenly, at the middle of June, the union was in trouble. A magistrate fined four members for liquor offences and warned against intimidation of strikebreakers. Bruce suspended strike benefits in order to pay the fines. The situation worsened when a Loch Lomond cottage belonging to one of the master plumbers burned to the ground, and two union men, John Hughes and Joseph O’Brien, were charged with arson several nights later. In addition, the local union president John O’Brien and secretary Everett Carland were arrested, initially charged with intimidation and then, more sensationally, with murder. It was alleged that the union officers were responsible for the death of a young man who was hit from behind late at night after coming off work.

Throughout these events, organizer Bruce worried about the use of trumped-up charges to discredit unions. It was only two years since the execution of the radical organizer Joe Hill in Salt Lake City, and now unions across the continent were trying to save the life of another union man, Tom Mooney, who was on death row in San Francisco. Was the situation in Saint John another frame-up to destroy a local union? After consulting with Sugrue and other leaders, Bruce moved quickly to defend the Saint John men. The local unions had already shown good support for the strike, and Bruce went on to hire lawyers, organize a defence committee, raise funds, and pay benefits to the families. The case was discussed in union newspapers across the country as well as at meetings of the TLC in Ottawa and of the international union in Toledo, Ohio. The arson charges were tried twice in court, but the juries were unable to reach a verdict, and the charges were dismissed. The murder case was heard for several days at the end of August; there was no direct evidence against the accused, and it took less than an hour for the jury to acquit them. If the outcome was a kind of vindication for the workers, none of this was reassuring for the union movement. The charges of arson and murder seemed to put unions on the wrong side of the law. Moreover, the strike itself was lost, and the issues of hours, wages, and union security had been swept aside. Within a few years, the local was dissolved, and the union was not reorganized in Saint John until 1929.24
Reconstruction

When the war ended, the unions hoped to leave such desultory situations behind. After the 1918 Armistice, there was renewed energy in the ranks of labour, much of it directed at building a world in which the rights of workers occupied a central place in society. This was the main theme in the Reconstruction Programme adopted by the Federation of Labour in March 1919:

The world war has forced all people to a fuller and deeper realization of the menace to civilization contained in autocratic control of the activities and destinies of mankind. It has opened the doors of opportunity, through which more sound and progressive policies may enter. New conceptions of human liberty, justice and opportunity are to be applied.25

This extensive document, prepared by three of the Saint John delegates, outlined a prescription for postwar reconstruction that recognized the rights of workers and their place as citizens of the province.

The programme insisted on the right to union organization as a fundamental requirement for cooperation between workers and employers and argued that the same right should be extended to workers in the public sector. The importance of the eight-hour day was underlined as essential to health, citizenship, productivity, and moral, economic, and social well-being; to this end, the working week should be no more than five and a half days, and overtime hours should be prohibited except in emergencies. The employment of children under the age of sixteen should be prohibited as well, and women workers were to be entitled to “the same pay for equal work”— although they were also to be protected against performing jobs that “tend to impair their potential motherhood.” Concerns about the labour market were also addressed: immigration was to be suspended for three years while society adjusted to postwar conditions, and private employment agencies were to be abolished in favour of public employment services jointly operated by workers and employers. There was a strongly worded statement on freedom of speech and public assembly, an echo of concerns about the use of the War...
Measures Act and other restrictions in wartime. Public ownership of utilities and resources, particularly the province’s waters, was seen as necessary to protect the public interest, and cooperatives were encouraged because they protected the worker from the profiteer. Educational opportunities were to be improved, especially in technical subjects (and teachers were encouraged to affiliate with the union movement). Home ownership was to be promoted by offering low-interest loans and by constructing new housing through public works in times of under-employment.

This was not a radical programme by the standards of early 1919. Indeed, the section on political policy warned that independent action by labour could divide their political influence and that improved legislation could be achieved through “the education of the public mind and the appeal to its conscience.” Nonetheless, the Reconstruction Programme embraced a broader distribution of social rights and economic rewards as the basis for a democratic society. It was a call for recognition of the needs of workers and their place as full citizens in provincial society: “No element in this province is more vitally concerned in the future of this province than the working class.”

When the Federation met in March 1919 to discuss and adopt this document, the organization was without a president. Sugrue had taken his place at the Compensation Board as a member of the provincial labour bureaucracy in late 1918. Attention turned to the first vice-president, a young railway machinist from Moncton. Célimé Antoine Melanson was born in rural Kent County in 1885, the descendant of a long-established Acadian family. As a young man he had come to work in Moncton, where the Intercolonial Railway was the city’s largest employer. He started as a labourer and was soon promoted to more skilled work as a machinist. As a member of the International Association of Machinists, Melanson acquired a good knowledge of labour matters; he also improved his skills and his English by taking correspondence courses. In 1914, members of IAM Local 594 chose him as a delegate to the TLC convention in Saint John. They also named him as a delegate to Federation meetings, where he was elected a vice-president in 1915 as well as in 1916 and 1918. In January 1919, he was one of four labour candidates elected to the
Moncton city council and the first Acadian to win election as alderman-at-large. The choice of Melanson as the Federation’s new president in March 1919 was recognition — even encouragement — for the participation of Acadians in the labour movement.\(^{27}\)

The election of Melanson also drew attention to the importance of organized labour in Moncton, second only to Saint John as a site of labour activism. Indeed, Moncton was very much on the march in 1919. The working-class presence was visible in the streets when the Moncton Amalgamated Central Labour Union sponsored local Labour Day celebrations on 1 September. The parade was headed by the Chief of Police, the City Fathers, and the Great War Veterans’ Association. There were six bands, several fire brigades, and a variety of automobiles, bicycles, and merchants’ floats. Among the unions in the line of march, the railway workers were out in force, from the international unions such as the conductors, trainmen, engineers, firemen, and enginemen and telegraphers in the running trades to the machinists, carmen, and electricians in the shops. Their ranks also included the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, the new union that was founded among Intercolonial Railway workers at Moncton in 1908 and was now expanding across the country. One of the highlights in the parade was a float from Melanson’s own machinists local, which was described years later by a leader of Unity Lodge No. 10, the IAM Ladies Auxiliary, in terms that convey this historical moment’s hopeful investment in democracy and progress:

\[\text{THE ACADIAN} \] Célimé Antoine Melanson (1885–1957) was the second president of the Federation (1919–21). Originally from Kent County, he came to Moncton to work in the railway shops. He was the first Acadian to serve as president and took office at a time when the Federation endorsed a far-reaching Reconstruction Programme. Source: \[L’Évangéline, 28 février 1952.\]
“Four symbolic figures draped in white and standing under a double archway. There was Liberty with her flaming torch, Blindfolded Justice with her balance scales, Education with her open book and Progress carrying machine gears.”

A souvenir booklet published by the labour council promoted the city’s prospects, identified the unions as partners in the march of civic progress and stated that labour relations in Moncton were on a sound footing: “Very cordial relations exist between employers and workers, with the result that when labor difficulties arise they are usually quickly adjusted.”

There was also evidence that union ideas were spreading into parts of the province where organized labour had a weaker presence and employers were less accustomed to unions. At the end of the summer in 1919, a spontaneous rebellion broke out among workers along the Miramichi River in the heart of the lumber country in Northumberland County. It started on the morning of 20 August at Robinson’s Mill in Newcastle, and workers then proceeded to call out men at other workplaces up and down the river. They marched in turn to Chatham Head, Nelson, and Douglastown, calling on men to quit work and join the protest. By the middle of the day a dozen different operations were shut down, and some 2,000 men were on strike. They gathered on the town square in Newcastle to form a negotiating committee and present their demands to local employers. The strike was settled swiftly, and the next night the men crowded into the Opera House to approve a settlement that reduced the working day from ten to nine hours. Joseph P. Anderson, a returned soldier who worked at one of the mills and led the negotiating committee, proclaimed that times were changing: “The niggers had been freed, the Belgians had been freed, and now it was time for us to be freed from the lumber lords.” Other speakers included the social reformer Henry Harvey Stuart, who urged the advantages of establishing a permanent organization. The longshoremen’s organizer from Saint John, James Tighe, who was also vice-president of the Federation of Labour, arrived by train and undertook to secure a union charter from the International Longshoremen’s Association. A new union local was formed on the spot, and a popular local storekeeper, J. S. Martin, was elected as secretary-treasurer. The Miramichi Waterfront
Union was chartered as Local 825 of the ILA. By the end of September they reported 1,600 members. Early the next year they sent five delegates to the Federation meetings, where they made a strong impression. Martin was elected second vice-president, and Stuart as district vice-president for the Miramichi.

**Broader Horizons**

Melanson was leading the Federation in a time of expansion and expectation. In March 1919 there were only 29 delegates at the annual meeting, but in the convention call for the 1920 meeting, he and the new secretary-treasurer George Melvin of Saint John appealed for all New Brunswick unions to send delegates: “We need the support of every Union in the Province — let this Convention be the greatest one in the history of the Federation.” At the 1920 convention there were almost twice as many delegates as in 1919. The following year the 1921 convention in Saint John was the most representative provincial assembly of labour to date, with 86 delegates from nine centres in attendance, representing 7,000 workers. Although more than half the delegates were from Saint John, there were also delegates from places such as Campbellton, Chatham, McAdam, Milltown, Minto, and Woodstock as well as Moncton and Fredericton, and they came from at least twenty different unions. One of the two delegates from the Hotel and Restaurant Employees in Saint John was Nellie Thorne, the first woman delegate to appear in the records of the Federation. With as few as five delegates among the total, however, Acadian workers were under-represented in a province where Acadians accounted for 31 percent of the population.

During this time the Federation also sought to marshal the political influence of workers. In 1918, delegates had adopted a report calling for labour candidates and a Labour Party, stating that “both political parties are so wedded to the capitalistic interests that it is practically impossible to impress upon them the necessity of working for the interests of the masses.” However, a report on lobbying efforts after the convention also drew attention to the enactment of workmen’s compensation, stating that the spring session
had produced “some first class legislation in the interest and for the benefit of the working class and it only requires renewed interest and activity on the part of the working people of the province to assure further success.” The spring session of the legislature in 1919 again produced reforms, including the extension of votes to women and the application of the Workmen’s Compensation Act to workers in the woods. In 1920 there were upward revisions in compensation rates (monthly payments to widows were raised from $20 to $30, for instance, and a clause limiting total compensation to $3,500 was repealed); there were also amendments to provide free hospital and medical care to injured workers; in addition the board adopted regulations listing industrial diseases covered by the act. These were the result of intensive lobbying, what Melanson called “keeping at them.”

While acknowledging the cooperation of sitting members, Melanson told delegates that “the workers now realize that it is necessary for them to have representatives on the floors of the House, if they ever expect to accomplish anything.” Following the convention, he did not hesitate to predict changes in the next provincial election: “We will have some of our own men in the house to look after our interests there for us.” The same theme was echoed in the pages of the Union Worker, a monthly newspaper launched in February 1920 and “Devoted to the Interests of Organized Labour in the Province.” The Union Worker made the case for the direct representation of workers in politics in these terms: “The time has gone by when a few labor men will get on their knees in a committee room of the house of assembly and be satisfied with that stereotyped phrase, ‘the government will give the matters their serious consideration’. In most cases that was as far as the matter went. The delegates went away pleased that they had basked in the sunshine of the premier and a few of his henchmen for a few minutes instead of being actually thrown out the sacred precincts of the house.”

The announcement of a provincial election for 9 October 1920 caught the labour forces unprepared. The Liberals advertised their record of labour legislation, but they did not return to power without a challenge. In an important breakthrough in provincial politics, the well-organized agrarian
reformers in the United Farmers of New Brunswick elected nine members. The new assembly also included, for the first time, two labour members. Both were from Northumberland County, where John W. Vanderbeck and John S. Martin benefited from the militancy of the local workers and an electoral alliance with the farmers in the four-member constituency; Vanderbeck led the polls with 5,663 votes and Martin was elected with 5,111 votes. Vanderbeck had suffered a bad leg injury in 1920 and died shortly after taking his seat in the legislature in 1921; his son Abram Vanderbeck won the subsequent by-election by a large margin and served with Martin as a labour member until 1925. There was also cooperation between farmer and labour interests in Westmorland County, where Stuart (who had taken a position as a school principal at Sunny Brae, near Moncton) was nominated as the labour candidate; however, the school board forced him to withdraw before the election, and James A. Robinson stood in his place and, with 4,513 votes, came close to winning. In Moncton, labour candidate Clifford Ayer received 1,132 votes, about 25 percent of the total. To Stuart’s dismay, there had been no labour candidates at all in Saint John, and no general alliance between farmer and labour forces across the province. Yet the traditional party system had shown its vulnerability, and the Federation meetings in January 1921 again passed resolutions calling for the formation of an Independent Labour Party.

Even at this relatively high point in the early history of the Federation, in 1921 the scope of representation was far from complete. In January 1914, delegates had represented 18 of the 101 existing union locals in the province; in January 1921 they represented 34 of the 128 locals in the province listed by the Department of Labour — a larger proportion but still little more than one in four union locals in the province. In 1922, the cotton mill workers at Milltown, members of Local 1394, United Textile Workers of America, were represented by two women delegates, Lettie Glover and Sara Shannon. They were welcomed and both were elected to executive positions (Glover as third vice-president, and Shannon as vice-president for Charlotte County); but a year later there were no delegates at all from their local, and it would be another twenty-two years before women delegates appeared again at
Federation meetings. Similarly, the coal miners, who attended the 1920 and 1921 meetings and submitted resolutions for the inspection and regulation of coal mines, also disappeared from future meetings after their United Mine Workers of America local was broken by employer resistance. After 1921, the total number of delegates at Federation meetings dropped to smaller numbers for the remainder of the decade, reaching a low of 25 delegates in 1925 and rising only to 33 by 1929.41

Meanwhile, there was also a change in the leadership of the Federation. Melanson stepped down as president at the 1921 convention and later that year took a post as an assistant city clerk at Moncton City Hall.42 In making adjustments to a more defensive position after 1921, the Federation had an experienced union leader at the helm. James Edmund Tighe was already a power on the Saint John labour scene before the formation of the Federation in 1913, and in the 1920s he was rising rapidly in the ranks of his international union. Born in Saint John in 1878, Tighe as a young man had worked on railway lines in Canada and the United States. Those experiences had introduced him to the international labour movement, and when he returned to Saint John and went to work on the docks, he helped bring the local longshoremen into affiliation with the International Longshoremen’s Association in 1911. By 1912 he was the business agent for ILA 273 and also a vice-president of the international and a leading force in the ILA’s Atlantic Coast District. He was considered a pioneer of the Federation, as he was present at the original meeting in September 1913 and played an active part in the successful campaign for the new compensation laws. On
several occasions he had been elected a vice-president, most recently at the 1919 and 1920 meetings.\footnote{43}

In Tighe’s first report as president in 1922, he drew attention to the troubled economic conditions spreading throughout the province. Workers faced shutdowns, wage cuts, and unemployment. A growing number of strikes and lockouts were provoked by employers who were no longer prepared to accept collective bargaining: “When the employers are approached they refuse to recognize the organizations and wish to adopt ‘individual bargaining.’” The situation at the street railway in Saint John was particularly alarming in light of their dramatic battle for union recognition in 1914. The New Brunswick Power Company announced wage reductions in May 1921 and stated that the union contract would not be renewed; a conciliation board on which Hatheway represented the men failed to convince the company to renew the agreement, even with reduced wages. Instead there was a lockout, and strikebreakers were brought in from Montréal and other locations. As before, crowds attacked the cars, and there were parades of support for the strikers, but this time there was no settlement. The union operated a Union Bus Company providing an alternative jitney service on many routes in the summer and fall, with union leader Fred A. Campbell as president. The bus company was harassed by fines and bylaws and eventually collapsed, as did the strike. The conflict ended when officers of the Trades and Labour Council were arrested for unlawful assembly for parading in support of the strike.\footnote{44} The deteriorating conditions were documented in the pages of the Union Worker: “Unemployment is rampant and the ‘big interests’ are taking every advantage of the situation to crush the worker under the iron heel of the golden god.” Nonetheless, the newspaper had little to suggest in addressing the crisis: “It will be well to give a little for the time being and when matters assume a more nearly normal state improvement in working conditions can be advocated and insisted upon.”\footnote{45} Meanwhile, the Union Worker itself ceased publication in April 1922.
“No Short Cut”

The turn to a more cautious approach was already evident at the 1921 meetings. In part this took the form of adherence to the increasingly conservative and exclusionist policies of the TLC, especially under the presidency of Tom Moore, who had replaced the socialist Watters in 1918. Melanson had encouraged all unions in the province to join the Federation, regardless of their history or affiliations, but this was no longer an acceptable policy. The test case in 1921 was the status of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, who were expelled from the TLC in 1920 for failing to resolve jurisdictional conflicts with the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks. At the Federation meetings a special motion was presented to enable CBRE members to participate as fraternal delegates, a position supported by delegates such as Stuart who argued that “everything possible should be done to keep all branches of labor in agreement and to heal all existing differences.” However, the expulsion was confirmed by the TLC convention later in 1921, and the 1922 Federation meetings even included an evening dance and social sponsored by the rival brotherhood. Meanwhile, TLC loyalists in New Brunswick were also directing similar attacks at other labour organizations that challenged the place of the TLC as the principal house of labour: the One Big Union movement was early on identified as “One Big Failure” contrary to the spirit of true trade unionism (and was more fully denounced after Minto miners started to join the OBU in 1925); and the formation of a Catholic trade union centre in Québec was also deplored: “The formation of Unions on a Provincial Religious basis cuts deeply into national unions; employers are not so organized.”

Even in a time of contraction, Tighe was reluctant to abandon the Federation’s reform agenda. The most important new initiative was the call for protective legislation for women workers and lone mothers, a characteristic early maternal and labour feminist campaign in which the Federation collaborated with groups such as the Local Councils of Women to assist those whom they regarded as the most vulnerable workers in the labour market. Progress was notably slow. In 1921 the Federation called for a Minimum Wage Act, with a board empowered to investigate the wages, hours, and
conditions of female workers and to issue binding orders. A related proposal called for a Mothers’ Pensions Board to support impoverished mothers and their children. A year later, Tighe reported that the province had agreed to set up a commission to investigate the matter and that the Federation had nominated a Saint John union man, F.S.A. McMullin, and Estella Sugrue, the spouse of the former Federation president.49 At the time of the 1923 meetings, however, they were still waiting. The commission was finally appointed in September 1923 and included the two Federation nominees; a report was tabled in March 1925.50 Soon afterwards, the Conservatives returned to power, and there did not seem to be any likelihood of action. After 1925 there were no labour members in the assembly to provide assistance, and Premier J.B.M. Baxter was less sympathetic to labour reform than his predecessors had been. Again in 1926 the Federation passed resolutions urging the introduction of Minimum Wage and Mothers’ Allowance Acts, to which they also added a call for legislation to enable the province to participate in the new Dominion plan for old age pensions. In 1927 the Federation demanded to know whether any of the additional revenues secured for the province by the Maritime Rights campaign of the time could be applied to implementing “at least some of this most urgent social legislation.” Baxter’s response was unequivocal: “Insofar as the increased subsidy from the Federal Government was concerned there would be none of it available for such legislation.”51

The Federation was more successful in protecting its major legislative achievement. In the years after 1918, Sugrue himself attended regularly at the Federation meetings to report on the administration and progress of workmen’s compensation. At the 1923 meetings, however, Tighe drew attention to “the various attempts by the employers to destroy legislation by amendment” and recommended that efforts be focused on resisting employers’ attacks on the Workmen’s Compensation Act. Resolutions from Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John also urged action, and the convention endorsed a plan to collaborate with the railway unions, who were equally alarmed about the situation. The labour concerns could not be ignored, and Premier P.J. Veniot appeared at the convention to announce that he would call a conference of employers
and unions to discuss any possible changes to the Compensation Act. Veniot delayed the joint conference until January 1924, when it met for three days in Saint John under his chairmanship. The employers, led by Angus McLean of the New Brunswick Lumbermen’s Association, were proposing to lower the scale of benefits to the 1918 level, reduce two of the three commissioners to part-time status and permit employers to carry their own insurance in place of the government plan. Labour spokesmen, including representatives from the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen, defended the existing system and advanced a list of amendments to improve benefits and increase the powers of the board. By the end of the meeting, it was clear that the provincial government was not prepared to accept the changes demanded by the employers. The issue did not entirely disappear after the 1925 election. Tighe warned in 1926 that employers were again mustering their influence to have sections of the Compensation Act repealed. However, when Premier Baxter appeared before the convention that year, he assured the delegates that he was strongly in favour of the act and that the legislation “would not be interfered with by the Government.” For the time being, this appeared to be the end of sustained attacks on the underlying principles of the Compensation Act.

Unemployment and underemployment remained concerns throughout the 1920s, as large numbers of workers continued to leave the province for work. In 1925, Tighe lamented the poor conditions of employment and the number of industries that had closed down, “which were forcing many of our best tradesmen to move either to the United States or Western Canada.” In the context of the regional crisis, Tighe allied himself with the employer-dominated Maritime Rights movement and in 1925 was one of the few labour leaders to participate in the Great Delegation to Ottawa, where the interests of the port of Saint John were vigorously promoted. Yet with new developments underway in the north of the province, Tighe noted that employers failed to give preference to New Brunswick workers. In 1928, his frustration was evident when he objected that the employment of workers with “unpronounceable names” was “forcing our own men to continue leaving the Province.” His concerns
were also shared by delegates who objected to the recruitment of Welsh miners for work in the coalfields, another area of expanding economic activity, and the convention adopted a resolution in favour of excluding immigrants to the province’s mining district.\textsuperscript{57}

Tighe had already expressed a wish to retire from office in 1925, and perhaps came to believe in the following years that his own association with the Liberal Party put the Federation at a disadvantage in dealing with the new Conservative government. He was also rising in influence within the international union; in 1927 Tighe was elected first vice-president of the \textsc{ila}, placing him second only to “King” Joe Ryan of New York, who dominated the affairs of the \textsc{ila} for several decades.\textsuperscript{58} Before stepping down in 1929, Tighe had the satisfaction of reporting that the \textsc{tlc} would once again meet in Saint John, as it had in 1914. Though no longer president by the time of the meetings in August 1929, Tighe was headlined in the local press as “The Man Who Brought Labor Congress to Saint John.”\textsuperscript{59}

As in 1914, there was a large attendance of New Brunswick delegates, indeed somewhat larger than at the Federation meetings earlier in the year: twenty-two delegates from Saint John, as well as nine Moncton delegates (including the new Federation president E. R. Steeves), four from McAdam, and one each from Fredericton and Campbellton. Premier Baxter and former premier Veniot, now a member of the Dominion cabinet, both addressed the convention, and \textsc{tlc} President Moore pointedly expressed the hope that the province would make advances in enacting labour legislation. In welcoming the delegates, Saint John labour council president James Whitebone pointed out the significance of Saint John in Canadian labour history, noting that the delegates’ badges included a replica of the waterfront bell erected in 1849 by the original longshoremen’s union in the city, the Labourers’ Benevolent Association. This historic bell, said Whitebone, was “the bell which had first rung out the message of hope for the workers and marked the beginning of the struggle for the shorter work day.”\textsuperscript{60}

Whitebone also introduced J. H. “Jimmy” Thomas, a longtime leader of the National Union of Railwaymen in Britain. The presence of a well-known
international figure served to underline the transnational context of the labour movement, much as the visit by Leonora O’Reilly had done in 1914. Thomas himself had started work at twelve years of age and come to prominence as a union leader and then as a minister in the 1924 Labour government; in 1929 he was a member of Ramsay MacDonald’s second Labour administration, with special responsibility for unemployment. Even before he spoke, the delegates gave Thomas a standing ovation and three loud cheers, and he went on to deliver an entertaining address that, according to one reporter, “convulsed the gathering with merriment.” On a more serious note, Thomas stated that he would never forget his humble origins and his main goals in public life: “To bring comfort, happiness and hope to homes that are down-trodden is the greatest source of satisfaction to any man.” In the context of British labour history, Thomas was a moderate who had opposed the British General Strike in 1926, and his message in Saint John conveyed a narrower version of trade union consciousness than that articulated by O’Reilly fifteen years earlier. Thomas warned Canadian unionists to follow a cautious path: “Speaking of the progress the labour movement had made in the past he said that this had been accomplished by the process of evolution rather than revolution. Revolution and bloodshed never did anything for the workers, he said and warned the delegates to beware of those who advocated the ‘short cut’ to Labor’s aims.”

At the end of this first chapter in the history of the Federation, organized labour had emerged as a new force in provincial society. The house of labour had succeeded in attracting the attention of governments and in achieving legislative reforms that were important to many workers, including those who did not belong to unions. The Federation had helped win the establishment of vocational schools in several locations and worked with women’s organizations to obtain free textbooks for students up to Grade 8. They had assisted women in gaining the vote and had helped elect the first labour members to the Legislative Assembly. The Federation’s major achievement was a Workmen’s Compensation Act that provided modest but relatively certain benefits to injured workers and their families. By the 1920s, the annual conventions
of the Federation were considered notable public events, and Premiers Veniot and Baxter had accepted an obligation to address the meetings, even when they were sure to face criticism from the delegates. Yet thesolidarities represented by the Federation remained incomplete. The unions were strongest in Saint John and Moncton, and even at the high tide of expectations at the end of the Great War, most union locals in the province did not send delegates to the meetings of the Federation. In the house of labour, international unions representing skilled male workers were dominant, and the Federation attracted few women workers and relatively few workers from the regions and industries beyond the biggest cities. Large ambitions for social and economic democracy had been spelled out in the Reconstruction Programme of 1919, but the rhetoric calling for “new conceptions of human liberty, justice and opportunity” was little heard at Federation meetings by the end of the decade. Provincial labour solidarity was evolving slowly. It was threatened by the regional economic crisis that took hold in the Maritimes during the 1920s, and the Great Depression soon presented new challenges.

In Sugrue, Melanson, and Tighe, the Federation had produced leaders who were pragmatists rather than radicals, but each in his own way had sought to win recognition of the Federation as the voice of labour in the province. They pursued their aims with a brave face, optimistic about the prospects for a progressive consensus within provincial society. For union stalwarts such as Fredericton Labour Council President George Crawford, a bricklayer who had been in attendance at almost every meeting since 1914, the Federation of Labour was “an unselfish organization working in the interests of both organized and unorganized labour in the province.” When he addressed the convention in 1927, his sense of satisfaction was marked by a warning that “every effort must be made by the Federation to maintain what had been secured for labour.” 62 To recall the terms of the hopeful predictions in 1913, the Federation had constructed itself more as a “legislative medium” than a “fighting machine.” Provincial solidarities remained far from complete, but the Federation of Labour had nonetheless become “an accomplished fact” within provincial society.

“An Accomplished Fact” 43
Standing Fast  The Great Depression of the 1930s brought new challenges for the Federation of Labour. President E. R. Steeves (centre) stands among a large group of delegates at the 1931 convention, including (at left) James Johnston, McAdam; Norman Van Horne, Durham Bridge; Secretary-Treasurer George Melvin; John Mack, McAdam; John H. Wallace, Nelson; Steeves; and (at right) James A. Whitebone, Saint John; John S. Martin, Chatham; Thomas McDonald, Saint John; and J.A. LeBlanc, Moncton. Source: Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, New Brunswick Federation of Labour fonds, mc1819, box 247.