"What We Were Promised"

"The Prevention of Unemployment"

After two days of rough weather, there was a break in the snow, rain, sleet, and hail of a winter storm in Saint John. In early January 1931, a large group of men posed for an outdoor photograph on the steps of a public building. They were dressed in long coats, collars, and ties, everyone wearing a dress hat or a workingman’s cap. The ribbons on their lapels indicated that these men were attending the eighteenth convention of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour. These were the early days of the Great Depression, a devastating time for workers and a discouraging time for organized labour, but in a time of hardship and difficulty, workers still continued to seek reforms and build unions. As the challenges of the Depression loomed before them, many workers looked to the Federation for leadership. In 1931 there were sixty-eight
delegates in attendance at the meetings, a larger number than in most recent years, and the photograph shows them peering into the future with mixed expressions of concern and resolve.¹

As in the past, most delegates that year were from Saint John, Fredericton, and Moncton, though there were also men from the Miramichi, McAdam, Milltown, Campbellton, and smaller centres. Near the centre, standing between vice-presidents John Wallace, the veteran woodsman from the Miramichi and James Whitebone, the motion-picture projectionist from Saint John, we see Eugene R. Steeves, the successor to Sugrue, Melanson, and Tighe as president of the Federation. Steeves had attended his first convention in 1919, when he was one of two delegates (the other was Melanson) from Local 594 of the I.A.M. Born in rural Albert County in 1887, Steeves had worked for the Maine Central and Canadian Pacific Railways before starting work as a machinist at the Intercolonial shops and settling down in Moncton. Always interested in civic matters, he served for ten years on the Moncton school board and later on city council. Steeves was elected first vice-president of the Federation in 1925 and replaced James Tighe as president in 1929.²

At the time of his first report to the members in Moncton in January 1930, Steeves had remarked on the great progress of labour organizations since their early days: “Labour now had achieved a position of prominence in the state and in the community.”³ A year later in Saint John, he could point to at least one success, the enactment of long-awaited legislation, including a Mothers’ Allowance Act, a Minimum Wage Act for Women and Girls, and an Old Age Pensions Act, and he urged the government to put these into effect without delay. The delegates went on to pass resolutions in favour of new legislation, including an eight-hour day and a minimum wage of 40 cents an hour on all provincial contracts.⁴ Even at the convention, statements from government spokesmen were disappointing, and by October 1931, the Federation’s legislative representative reported that the government was taking no interest in their proposals; indeed, the 1930 laws had still not been proclaimed and as such were “just so much printed matter and of no benefit to anybody.”⁵
But the biggest question of the day, Steeves told delegates at the convention banquet at the new Admiral Beatty hotel in 1931, was unemployment. What had started as a downturn in 1930 was rapidly turning into a deep depression with dangerous consequences for workers and society at large: “This condition would have to be remedied, as unemployment bred evil, which would result in an increase in crime, if something was not done.” Steeves argued that shorter hours and higher wages would “ease the situation considerably as working men had to have money to buy products before production could be greatly increased by demand.”6 Steeves and other labour leaders welcomed the emergency funding provided for public works in the early years of the Depression, but they also reported that unscrupulous contractors were demanding long hours and paying the lowest wages. At Chatham, stated J.S. Martin at the 1931 convention, until the unions intervened contractors had been paying 27.5 cents an hour and charging workers 75 cents a day for board, including Sundays and other days when there was no work.7

Delegates such as Martin had more to say the next year, when the meetings took place in Chatham, the first time the Federation had met outside the province’s three major cities. On the Miramichi that winter, Martin informed the delegates, not a wheel was turning in the mills and there were ten men for every job available. The unemployment crisis was the constant theme in the sessions, and Steeves again denounced employers who took advantage of conditions to reduce wages and lengthen hours. The report from the executive officers stated that “cases of under pay and unfair conditions” on public contracts in Saint John, Devon, Woodstock, McAdam, and Tracadie had been brought to the attention of
government and “at least some of them have been corrected to the workers’ advantage.” Relief work would continue to be needed—“to the very limit of the country’s resources”—but this would not be enough:

The time has come when the prevention of unemployment must be taken up and given serious consideration by our governing bodies, and some scheme or plan devised, such as unemployment insurance, which will assure each and every worker of an opportunity to either earn a living for his family, as he desires, or a decent living will be obtainable by him out of the country’s surplus production, which he has assisted in creating, and which inevitably occurs with such periods of unemployment.

A Special Committee on Unemployment was named, chaired by former president James Tighe, and in the discussion delegates reported “similar bad conditions” throughout the province. The committee brought in a resolution stating that “immediate relief must be extended to many families” and calling on the federal government to hold an interprovincial conference on unemployment, with labour representation from all provinces.8

One of the few areas of the province experiencing some growth in employment in the early 1930s was the Grand Lake coalfield, where a new power plant opened in 1931. More than a thousand men worked in the shallow underground coal mines and were often exposed to dangerous conditions. In the space of six months in 1932, there were eight deaths in the mines. Three of the victims were children who were overcome by the lack of air in an abandoned pit where they were playing, and two of the miners who died were among the dozen men who attempted to rescue them. Although they no longer had a union to represent them, the miners made their views on this tragedy well known, in part through the findings of local coroners’ juries. The Federation of Labour had been calling for mine safety legislation for more than ten years, and they repeated the appeal again at the 1933 convention. In the spring of 1933, the province finally introduced the province’s first mine safety legislation, which provided for the protection of abandoned mines and
the inspection of machinery; it also prohibited boys under the age of sixteen from employment in the mines and limited the working day to eight hours.9

This was a small and isolated success, and in the early 1930s the Federation of Labour continued to worry about their declining influence. This was visible in a long campaign to maintain labour representation on the Workmen’s Compensation Board. After the death of James Sugrue in 1930, the government named a commission to review the board’s operations and failed to appoint even a temporary replacement. When the premier requested the names of potential members in 1931, the officers agreed to submit suggestions, although the Federation preferred to provide only one nominee for such appointments. Eight different names were proposed by the affiliated locals, and the Federation submitted the two leading names, Secretary-Treasurer George Melvin and President Steeves. Several months later, they were still protesting the “undue and unwarranted delay” in appointing Sugrue’s successor. At the 1932 convention, delegates reaffirmed the policy of submitting only one nominee, and on a vote of the delegates Steeves was chosen. By this time, the inquiry into the board was completed, and in July 1932 Steeves was appointed. It had taken two years, but the Federation preserved the principle of labour representation on the board they had helped to create. In August 1932, Steeves submitted his resignation as Federation president and went on to serve as vice-chairman of the compensation board for the next twenty years.10

On Steeves’s departure, the first vice-president, James Whitebone, became acting president and was then elected president at the convention in March 1933. With the exception of two years in the 1930s, Whitebone would occupy
the office of president continuously until 1959 (and again from 1960 to 1964). Like Sugrue and Tighe before him, Whitebone was the son of an immigrant. His father Jacob had come to Saint John from Amsterdam as a boy and spent most of his working life as a cigarmaker and tobacconist; he was buried in the Jewish cemetery after his death in 1917. James Alexander Whitebone was born in 1894 and was raised in the Anglican church of his mother. His generation of Whitebones were assimilated into the dominant culture; Whitebone was listed as a Church of England adherent at the time of his marriage to Lillian Gertrude Lynch, a Catholic, in 1918. Whitebone started work as an assistant projectionist in one of the city’s moviehouses at the age of thirteen. In 1920 he was a founder of Local 440, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Machine Operators, for which he became the longtime secretary and business agent. Whitebone was elected president of the Saint John Trades and Labour Council in 1926 and continued in that office until 1942. He began attending meetings of the Federation of Labour in 1920 and was elected first vice-president for several years prior to becoming president. Whitebone proved to be a pragmatic, often cautious, leader of the Federation, and its history for several decades often reflected his personality. As one account of his career later noted, “He could be forceful but preferred to be quiet and deal in reason and good sense rather than emotion. He was a doer, not a shouter, although he could shout with the best of them if the circumstances demanded it.”

Whitebone dominated the provincial labour scene for so long that he came to be described as New Brunswick’s “Mr. Labour.”

A New Politics?

The beginning of the Whitebone era was not auspicious. There were only thirty-two delegates in attendance at the Federation’s 1933 meetings, and Premier C.D. Richards asked them to cooperate with the government by not requesting any new legislation. Delegates nonetheless renewed calls for implementation of earlier legislation; one of their arguments was that failure to implement the Old Age Pensions Act had already cost the people of New Brunswick almost
$1 million in taxes paid to the federal government without any return to citizens of the province. It was also clear that the appointment of Steeves to the board had not satisfied concerns about Workmen’s Compensation, as there were no fewer than twenty resolutions calling for improvements in the act. When board chairman John A. Sinclair appeared at the convention, former Federation president James Tighe charged that Sinclair had instigated amendments that altered the method of calculating eligible earnings, to the detriment of most claimants. The debate lasted most of an afternoon and became so heated that Whitebone, as chairman, was forced to call the meeting to order.  

Meanwhile, several resolutions that year asked the province to do much more to address the worsening economic crisis. Delegates called on the province to prohibit foreclosures on farms and homes, to prevent the disenfranchisement of workers on relief, and to support plans for a system of unemployment insurance. They also called for enactment of a six-hour day and a five-day week, without reductions in weekly wages, in order to distribute existing work more fairly. The banking system in particular came under attack on the grounds that it was “holding in its hands the economic destiny of practically the entire community.” There was also support among delegates for the formation of a branch of the new Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, the party of social reform organized by labour Member of Parliament J.S. Woodsworth at Calgary the previous summer. At the 1933 convention, Moncton delegates submitted a resolution stating that “large numbers of our people are unemployed and without the means of earning a livelihood for themselves and their dependents” and that “the prevalence of the present depression throughout the world indicates fundamental defects in the existing economic system.” They called on the Federation to “sponsor and use its machinery to bring into being a branch of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.”

To the surprise of those who knew him as a longtime supporter of the Liberal Party, the CCF resolution was introduced by Tighe, who was chair of the Resolutions Committee. He spoke in support, stating that there was a need for more labour representation and that the resolution proposed only to assist in calling a convention, after which the Federation could “step aside.”
Secretary-Treasurer Melvin was opposed “on account of the Federation not being a political body,” and former president Steeves worried that “it would undo what had already been accomplished.” Delegates also heard from the original authors of the resolution, notably machinist A.W. Jamieson of the Moncton Trades and Labour Council, who stated that the CCF platform was “fundamentally sound” and that “this is the body to push it and this is the opportunity to get it going because farmers and labourers are down and out.” After a lengthy debate the resolution was approved on a standing vote of 21 to 9.¹⁵

Within months the CCF was underway in the province. On 23 June, Whitebone, as president of the Federation, chaired a founding meeting of the New Brunswick Section of the CCF. The call had gone out to labour and farmer organizations and social reform groups across the province, and ninety-eight delegates arrived in Moncton for the occasion. Whitebone stated that the Federation did not intend to dominate the new organization, and he warned that for it to succeed, “some very deep rooted convictions” would have to be overcome. Delegates then proceeded to adopt a constitution calling for “the establishment of a planned system of social economy for the production, distribution and exchange of all goods and services.” The spirit of the meeting was also captured by lively resolutions on “Youth,” “Unemployment,” and “Lying Propaganda”; one resolution stated that “we appeal to the peoples’ reason rather than their passion and selfishness and will endeavor to prove to them that we can be more truly loyal to our country and our fellow citizens than the Conservative Party which calls itself Liberal and the Liberal Party which has proven itself Conservative.” Harry Girvan of Coal Creek, in the Grand Lake area, was elected president of the CCF New Brunswick Section.¹⁶

The guest of honour was J.S. Woodsworth himself, the Methodist minister and union supporter who had been arrested at the time of the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919 and had served as a Labour MP since 1921. That evening he delivered the CCF message at a public meeting at the Moncton Stadium. Some one thousand people turned out to hear Woodsworth denounce the failure of the capitalist system and argue the need for a new economic and
social order that placed people before profits. “Capitalism is failing,” he told them, “and nothing short of a new system could bring any permanent relief. We will have to change the way things are done.” There would be government control of the banking system, and the CCF would bring new priorities to economic policy: “Where there is conflict between property rights on one hand and the needs of men, women and children on the other hand, the men, women and children ought to have priority over anything else.”\(^{17}\)

Later that year, Moncton delegates took the CCF cause to the annual meetings of the Trades and Labour Congress in Windsor, Ontario, with a proposal to endorse the new party. The resolution, proposed by IAM Local 594 President Vance Dalzell, denounced the old political parties and their leaders as “complete failures” and pointed to the New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States as an example of “what real political and statesmanlike leadership will do to lift a nation out of complete chaos and back to prosperity and happiness.” The TLC establishment was not pleased with this resolution, and President Tom Moore objected that endorsement of any political party was contrary to congress policy. After several hours of strenuous debate, the so-called “Moncton resolution” was withdrawn.\(^{18}\)

Meanwhile, back in New Brunswick, the CCF message was being distributed by a monthly newspaper sponsored by the Moncton branch, The Pilot, which published the full text of the new party’s Regina Manifesto in August 1933. In September, a public meeting at City Hall in Moncton, presided over by machinist W.R. Rogers, attracted several hundred people. The branch president led the audience in singing from CCF song sheets. Then they heard a lecture on the history of socialist thought by a local young man who had recently graduated from the University of Toronto; in his “lengthy and interesting address,” H. Northrop Frye stated that “we are now living in a Socialistic world and have to grow up far enough and learn to become Socialist.” However, the progress of the CCF was slow. An old-time socialist from Saint John who had attended the founding meeting complained that the new provincial executive was inactive, and another supporter claimed that one of the key officers was “put in by opponents to block the work and he
had to do as he was told to by the Trades + Labor Council.” A more vigorous secretary-treasurer was in place by early 1934, but Woodsworth’s hope to have CCF candidates in the province in the 1935 elections was not fulfilled.\textsuperscript{19}

The progress of the Federation itself also remained stalled, and only thirty-two delegates attended the February 1934 convention. “Unemployment,” Whitebone stated, “is still the major problem confronting the Federation in common with every Labour organization in the land.” Under these conditions, membership was falling, and the Federation reported 2,911 members among the affiliates, a substantial drop from the 3,700 workers of 1931 or the much larger numbers at the end of the Great War. Whitebone noted the recent organization of workers in the pulp and paper mills on the North Shore and hoped that they would soon join the Federation. But in the woods, workers were labouring under “disgraceful conditions,” he said. “Men are compelled to work 12 to 14 hours a day for starvation wages, at the same time being housed and fed under primitive conditions.” Whitebone stated that the province had started an investigation into wages and hours in the woods, and he congratulated Premier Leonard Tilley for doing so. He even saw indications that the economic situation was improving: “Let us be fully prepared to take advantage of the return to normal conditions by strengthening our organizations and maintaining a united Federation.”\textsuperscript{20}

In like optimistic fashion, Whitebone also presented delegates with copies of a new publication entitled \textit{History of Federation of Labor of New Brunswick}. The 100-page booklet was not so much a history as a statement of past achievements — “an outline of the great work which has been carried on for the past twenty years by the New Brunswick Federation of Labor in its unselfish efforts in the interests of the welfare of working men and women and their families.” The cover art was a modernist depiction of a giant male worker surrounded by mills and chimneys — an idealized, and highly masculinist, image to demonstrate the strength of the industrial worker. The text consisted mainly of short articles by stalwarts such as Melvin, Steeves, Whitebone, and others, as well as contributions from government officials such as the minister of health and the director of the vocational school. There were also more than
two hundred commercial advertisements, an indication that the patronage of union workers was appreciated in the local business sector. In a few of the ads the sponsors described themselves as “Friends of Labour,” and a full-page advertisement from the Province of New Brunswick extended best wishes to the Federation “in its efforts to maintain a strong, active and sane labor organization within this province.” There was little in the book to indicate the frustrating conditions facing the Federation at the middle of the 1930s, although the articles on pensions, the minimum wage, and mothers’ allowances each noted the continuing failure of the province to put its own legislation into effect.21

The 1934 convention brought Whitebone’s first mandate as president to a close. The reports state only that former president Tighe, who had retired from the office in 1929, was elected in 1934 and again in 1935. It is unlikely Whitebone offered for re-election in 1934, as he had stated in his report to delegates that “some of my actions while serving as your president have displeased some” and called for cooperation with the incoming officers. Tighe may well have been alarmed that Whitebone had adopted a too-favourable attitude towards Premier Tilley. On his return to office, Tighe was certainly not slow to remind the province of its commitments. He attacked the
administration of the Workmen’s Compensation Act — “only a skeleton of the former act” — and protested the curtailment of grants to the vocational schools and the repeal of provisions for free schoolbooks. He was particularly angry that the government had still failed to proclaim the legislation that the Federation had agitated for at length in the 1920s and that the Conservatives had finally enacted in 1930: “What it has taken us years of hard work and money to attain has been taken away from us in a very short time, and New Brunswick stands alone among the Provinces of this Dominion as the only Province without social legislation. . . . I would recommend to this convention that you still press with every power within your means for this legislation, to get back what we have lost and to receive what we were promised.”

When delegates to the 1935 meetings heard addresses from Premier Tilley and Leader of the Opposition A.C. Dysart, it was a kind of dress rehearsal for the coming provincial election that summer. Tilley congratulated the Federation “for the magnificent way they have conducted themselves in the past four years,” while Dysart praised the value of labour organization as “very far reaching as the scope of duties is the uplift of humanity.” Tilley pointed to the formation of a Forest Operations Commission, which had introduced a $32 monthly minimum wage in the woods; for his part Dysart objected that there were too many loopholes and that “the minimum wage is liable to become the maximum.” Dysart promised to implement the federal old age pension in New Brunswick, while Tilley cautioned that “it was a mistake for any public man to make promises before election that could not be redeemed afterward.”

In the election, the Liberals scored a sweeping victory, winning 43 of the 48 seats. The following year Tighe reported favourably on the new government’s first Speech from the Throne and commended the Liberals for finally proclaiming the 1930 Old Age Pensions Act; although it was a limited, means-tested programme, some of the most impoverished New Brunswickers would now be eligible for the support available to citizens in most other provinces, and the Federation could claim another small victory. When Tighe also announced that he was retiring from office “to make way for younger men,” the door was open for the return of Whitebone, in whom Tighe now expressed his “absolute confidence.”
The Right to a Union

By the middle years of the Great Depression, much was happening in the world of labour beyond New Brunswick. Protests against unemployment had culminated in the famous On-to-Ottawa Trek of 1935, and workers who had jobs increasingly recognized the need for strong unions to protect them against economic insecurity. In the early 1930s, the Communist-led Workers’ Unity League had fought several big battles, and by 1937 workers in Canada and the United States were joining new unions started by the Committee for Industrial Organization, led by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers. In New Brunswick, the affiliation of pulp and paper workers at Edmundston and Dalhousie was an important addition to the ranks of the Federation, but there were still only thirty-six delegates at the annual meetings in March 1937. When Minister of Health and Labour Dr. W. F. Roberts addressed the Federation meetings in Fredericton, he stated that “he was glad there was little or no labor trouble in the Province when there was so much in other places.” Before the year was out this observation proved misleading, as two large labour upheavals shook the province and raised challenges for the Federation.

There was a stronger note of militancy than usual in Whitebone’s report as president in 1937. While he commended the government on the first payments under the Old Age Pensions Act, he stated that many pensioners were receiving less than the full amount of $20 per month. He also objected to the “alleged enforcement” of the Fair Wage Act brought in by the new government: “Not one instance has been reported wherein any worker has been benefitted”; one of the weaknesses of the Act was that, despite the Federation’s suggestions, no labour representatives were appointed to help administer the legislation. Whitebone also reported that the Liberals had attempted to remove former president Steeves from the Compensation Board, and he warned of “disastrous consequences should the Act be permitted to become a creature of political vagaries.” Whitebone was also critical of the Federation’s own weak record in winning concessions and suggested that “we have, perhaps, been prone to depend too much upon the willingness of the government of the day for alleviation of conditions.” More influence could be achieved by strengthening the
ranks of organized labour: “Let every worker in this province take up membership in the legitimate organization of his or her trade or employment and then, by sheer force of our economic strength [we] will be enabled to abandon the hat-in-hand, begging policy into which we seem to be drifting.”

The most important change sought by the Federation during the 1930s was the enactment of legislation to protect the right to union membership. Although the Trade Union Act (1872) had established that unions were not illegal in Canada, there was nothing to prevent employers from firing or otherwise punishing anyone who joined a union — or even talked about joining a union. The need for unions was one of the conclusions workers were drawing from their experience of powerlessness during the Great Depression, and at the 1937 meetings the Federation approved four separate resolutions calling for union rights. One of the new affiliates, Local 146, International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite and Paper Mill Workers, representing workers at the Dalhousie paper mill, introduced a resolution stating that the need was becoming urgent:

 Whereas: Most industries in the Province of New Brunswick still refuse to bargain collectively with their employees; and,

 Whereas: Such refusal is all the more insistent when the workmen are organized into unions; and,

 Whereas: Such a situation has placed New Brunswick as the most backward Province in social and economic progress; and finds the New Brunswick workers ranked amongst the lowest paid in their respective industries, particularly in the pulp and paper industry; be it, therefore,

 Resolved: That this federation endorse the principle of “collective bargaining,” through the Labor Unions, wherever they are in existence, and their accredited representatives; and that our Provincial Government be urged to pass the necessary legislation giving such rights to all New Brunswick workers.

26

27
In passing such resolutions, New Brunswick workers were joining a larger movement for union rights. The Wagner Act adopted in the United States in 1935 was a model of the kind of positive union law unions were seeking, and in 1936 the Trades and Labour Congress launched a campaign to secure new provincial laws. As drafted, the TLC’s Freedom of Trade Union Association Act provided that workers were entitled to organize and join unions free from employer domination and to engage in collective bargaining through their chosen officers; employers were prohibited from limiting these rights by threats, dismissals, or contracts such as the notorious “yellow dog” agreements that required workers to abstain from union membership as a condition of employment.28

While the province failed to respond to this agitation, the spring session in 1937 established a Fair Wage Board to direct the work of the fair wage officer appointed a year earlier.29 This board provided for two employer and two worker representatives. On behalf of the Federation, Melvin made a strong case for the appointment of John S. MacKinnon, a Saint John labour council and Federation leader who was president of the longshoremen’s union. The second name, Raymond Roy, came from the opposite end of the province; Roy was a native of Restigouche County who had worked in paper mills outside the province before returning to work at the new mill at Dalhousie, where he was an officer of the local of the International Brotherhood of Papermakers; moreover, Melvin pointed out, Roy was “a French-Canadian, having a thorough knowledge of both the English and French languages as spoken in this province” — a matter of much relevance, as the board would likely “find it necessary to hold hearings in districts where very little English is spoken.” The Federation’s efforts were successful, and both MacKinnon and Roy were appointed to the board. Their satisfaction was qualified by the additional appointment of Moncton’s Frank Gillespie, a longtime officer of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees who had been endorsed by the provincial council of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, an organization that was beginning to challenge the Federation’s claim to be the main voice of labour in the province.30
Miramichi and Minto

The fight for union rights extended well beyond the Federation’s meeting rooms. Shortly after the 1937 convention, officers were pondering their response to a new organization that had appeared on the Miramichi, only loosely connected to any of the Federation’s affiliates. Established at a public meeting at the Labour Hall in Nelson on 13 January, the Northumberland County Farmer-Labour Union announced itself as the defender of the labouring classes of the Miramichi. Their populist rhetoric was directed not just at employers but at members of the public and business community who shared the workers’ concerns. It was time, they said, for “government of the people and for the people, rather than government of the Privileged Few for the Privileged Few.” Speakers at the first Farmer-Labour Union meeting in January included two local leaders long associated with the Federation, John Wallace and J. S. Martin, who supported the agitation for better wages and conditions. The campaign featured strong rhetoric — “We, the labor people of the Miramichi here assembled” was the beginning of one resolution that went on to state that “the laboring Class feel that their wages are insufficient to sustain themselves and their families in a decent manner.” They called for higher wages for the longshoremen, mill workers, river drivers, and boommen who worked on the river.

During the spring and summer months, new branches of the Farmer-Labour Union were organized, and union demands were presented to the Fair Wage Board. At the middle of August, workers at one sawmill walked out — it was one of the worst operations, where workers put in ten-hour days for as little as 17.5 cents an hour and the employer refused to discuss any changes. This was the spark, and a week later the new union was leading a general strike along the Miramichi. In a remarkable display of the union’s appeal, on 20 August 1937 President Gregory McEachreon carried a Union Jack from mill to mill, rallying hundreds of workers to join the strike, much as had happened in the summer of 1919. After a similar parade the next day, more than a thousand workers were off work at twelve different operations along a 40-mile stretch of the river. Premier Dysart responded by expressing
his regrets that the workers did not wait for the Fair Wage Board to complete its investigations. From Saint John, however, James Tighe sent a telegram to congratulate the union “on the great fight you are waging for the working man’s rights” and added: “All labour men in province solidly behind you and trust you will win out.”

The strike ended within ten days. There were no direct negotiations, but a citizens’ committee arranged for a settlement that included a minimum wage of 28 cents an hour and a nine-hour day. There was no formal recognition for the union, but the success of the strike was instructive for the Federation of Labour, which had played no part in organizing the union or leading the protest. In this situation a large number of workers ignored existing unions and improvised their own forms of organization and action. The New Brunswick Farmer-Labour Union, as it came to be known, was a multi-occupational, community-based union that did not fall within the jurisdiction of any existing “legitimate” union. Although it had been Federation practice for years to disparage “outlaw” unions that did not conform to the policies of the Trades and Labour Congress, Whitebone welcomed representatives of the new organization at the 1938 meetings of the Federation and stated that “their objects coincide with those of the International Trade Union Movement.” In their own way, the workers of the Miramichi were reminding the Federation of the continuing need among New Brunswick workers for union organization and leadership.

They were not alone. During that same year, in 1937, workers in central New Brunswick were also looking for union recognition, and their struggle precipitated a long battle over the future of labour relations in the province. The coal miners of the Grand Lake district had formed a local of the United Mine Workers of America in 1919 and then a unit of the One Big Union in 1925, but each effort had ended in failure. In 1931, one local worker wrote to the Workers’ Unity League requesting that the legendary Cape Breton union leader J. B. McLachlan be sent to the district: “He knows how to organize the men . . . . we want him here in the worst condition.” But even without an organization to join, the coal miners continued to form committees, sign
petitions, and send delegations to visit the provincial government. In 1934 they formed a short-lived union with a deliberately parochial name — the Northfield Central Provincial Miners’ Union — in the belief that the operators would be less hostile to an entirely local union. All this was to no avail in gaining recognition, and the coal miners turned again to the United Mine Workers of America. In February 1937 they received a charter as Local 7409 of the UMWA, signed by international president John L. Lewis, whose name was becoming synonymous with the “CIO idea” and the cause of industrial unionism in North America. In Minto the local president was Mathias Wuhr, one of the heroes of the 1932 mine rescue efforts who had received a Carnegie Medal for his bravery.

In October the new union was confident enough of its support to call for negotiations, and when none of the coal operators agreed to meet, they voted almost unanimously to go on strike.37 By 15 October some one thousand men were off work at eleven companies in the coalfield, and additional RCMP officers were called in to patrol the district. Every morning at 5 a.m. hundreds of men marched in parades, traveling from mine to mine to discourage strikebreakers. They also crowded into public meetings to hear visiting union speakers from District 26 headquarters in Nova Scotia and the occasional sympathetic clergyman such as the Reverend John Linton of Fredericton. Students from the University of New Brunswick raised funds and delivered supplies, and women students from the Student Christian Movement encouraged the miners’ wives to take part in strike demonstrations and join a women’s auxiliary to distribute food and clothing. As Allen Seager has written, the “big strike” was “a remarkable demonstration of the power of the union ideal in Minto in the late 1930s.”38 The Minto Strike News was articulate in defending the miners’ right to a union and arguing against “Stone Age Conditions” in the local mines: “An individual miner airing a just grievance stands a chance of being fired. Only a union can protect him. . . . The miners want recognition as an absolutely necessary first step in their fight for better wages and working conditions.”39
The strike dragged on for almost two months. In November the province attempted to have the Fair Wage Board investigate the situation, but the coal miners considered this a poor substitute for negotiations. This provoked Attorney-General J. B. McNair to announce that the strike was turning into a question of “whether the CIO or the government is going to run New Brunswick.” For their part, the coal operators prepared to issue eviction notices on 1 December, to take effect within thirty days and threatening to turn four hundred families out of company houses into the snow in winter conditions. At this stage the union announced a change in tactics, ending the strike and applying to the federal Department of Labour for a conciliation board. As a result, many strikers returned to work — at first on the condition of signed individual “understandings” with the operators — while militant local leaders such as Wuhr remained on the blacklist.
The strike failed, but it had a large impact in the province. The miners had aroused public concern about the powerlessness of workers and the inadequacy of provincial labour laws. The Fair Wage Officer recommended better housing, better working conditions, and standard wage rates; and by the summer of 1938 the federal conciliation board produced a catalogue of deplorable living and working conditions. These findings helped explain why there was discontent in the mining communities, but both reports failed to acknowledge that union recognition and collective bargaining were the central issues in the dispute.

As Whitebone pointed out at the Federation convention in January 1938, the Fair Wage Board might be useful in improving conditions for unorganized workers, but it was not suited to meeting the needs of workers who were already organized and wanted to negotiate with their employers. The Minto situation, he said, was important for all workers in the province: “The whole question now simmers down to whether or not the mine workers of this province shall have the right to belong to the recognized union of their craft or whether they must continue to be dominated by local representatives of big business and autocratic government officials.” This was a strong statement, and for making these remarks Whitebone was forced to resign from the conciliation board, which at the time was still considering the Minto situation. In his address to the convention two days later, Premier Dysart announced that the province was considering new labour legislation: “I think men should be allowed to stand in a body and organize and bargain collectively”— but almost immediately he added a qualification: “It is wrong, however, for workers to band together to compel acceptance of their solution to a problem.” However, a day earlier the Federation had already adopted a resolution, sponsored by Local 7409, UMWA, for an Act Respecting the Right of Employees to Organize, with key provisions copied from the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act of 1937.

The highlight of the spring session of the legislature in 1938 was a bill for a Labour and Industrial Relations Act, announced in the Speech from the Throne as a measure to “promote the security and well-being of labour and industry.” Bill 64 was introduced by Attorney-General McNair, who
stated that the new legislation “declares as positive law of this Province that employers and employees have the right to organize and bargain together collectively. No longer will there be any question raised in this Province on that point.” One section of the bill incorporated the existing Fair Wage Act, which would continue to be available for establishing employment standards. Another section provided for the compulsory conciliation of disputes before a legal strike could be permitted, a provision that had been a staple of federal labour legislation since 1907. In the course of the debate, McNair added a further section to provide penalties for employers who threatened dismissal or punished workers for joining a union. In the debate, there was recrimination over which political party was to blame for “fomenting” the Miramichi and Minto strikes of 1937, but the bill received unanimous approval from both Liberals and Conservatives.44

Although the bill was almost thirty pages in length, there was less substance to the new law than met the eye. A young lawyer in Fredericton, a McGill University graduate originally from the Miramichi who was sympathetic to the cause of labour, watched in wonder as the new legislation was “hailed in the press as a Bill of Rights for N.B. labor.” At the time the bill was before the assembly, Frank Park had written a sharp critique of its deficiencies. To begin with, the definition of “employee” was too limited — it excluded agricultural workers (“Is this aimed at the Farmer-Labor Union?”) and domestic servants (“in many cases . . . the worst treated class of labor in the province”) as well as employees “by or under the Crown” (“There is no reason in the world why this class of Labor should be set apart and marked off from the rest of the labor movement”). As for the provision to make it lawful for employees to bargain collectively with their employer, this was hardly a breakthrough, for the simple reason that collective bargaining was already lawful and had been so for many years. The real trouble came from the fact that employers refused to recognize unions and engage in bargaining: “The Act is as flat as a pancake if there is no provision dealing with Union recognition.” Specifically, the law did not contain the essential provision contained in the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act: “Every employer shall recognize
and bargain collectively with the members of a trade union representing the majority choice of the employees.”

Reviewing the 1938 Act at the time of next Federation convention, Whitebone was very aware of its deficiencies. He pointed out that the Federation had withheld support until several amendments were added, but he was also prepared to state that McNair “evinced a sincere desire to meet our wishes” and that the government had introduced the law “in an honest endeavour to reduce to a minimum the possibility of future serious labor disturbances in this Province and to this end we lend our fullest co-operation.” Like Park, he objected to the exclusion of public employees from the Act: “Surely the Government, the largest employer of labor in the Province, is exercising discriminatory powers when they practically serve notice on their own employees that it is illegal for them to belong to a union, while at the same time declaring the legality of organizations of employees in private industry.” Moreover, in almost a year of operation, the procedures for solving disputes had been of little benefit: “It is doubtful if any labor organization in the Province has been successful in securing assistance under this part of the Act in adjusting a dispute with their employers.”

Certainly the new law did not help the Minto coal miners. They were warmly supported at the 1939 Federation convention, which adopted resolutions for revision of the act to prohibit the recognition of employer-dominated unions and to meet the standards of the Nova Scotia legislation for union recognition and collective bargaining. Since the defeat of their strike, some coal miners had now joined organizations favoured by their employers, such as the Miramichi Mine Workers Union and Rothwell Mine Workers Union, but the Federation rejected applications for affiliation from employer-supported unions in the strongest terms: “The company union is the lowest most despicable weapon ever devised by unscrupulous employers to crush the worker and prevent his belonging to the legitimate union of his trade or calling.”

Even without recognition, Local 7409 survived, stubbornly leading protests at individual mines and agitating in favour of free textbooks to Grade 12 in light of the impoverished conditions in the district. As local president Joseph
Vandenbroeck informed Whitebone in early 1940, an amended law was still needed: “The past year and a half have not given us any benefit under the present wording, as the operators take the stand they are not compelled to recognize any Union.”

**Ending the Depression**

While the unions faced frustrations and obstacles in their quest for recognition, the Great Depression had also demonstrated the need for stronger social legislation to help all citizens. At the 1939 convention, delegates called for the introduction of public hospital, medicine, and health insurance. The Federation also went on record in favour of giving the Dominion government the power to legislate in areas such as pensions, health insurance, hours of work, and recognition of unions. In this they were critical of provincial governments, including New Brunswick’s, who opposed the extension of federal power in these areas. The most pressing situation was in the case of unemployment insurance, a reform that was stalled by debates over the constitutional authority of the Dominion and was waiting for an amendment to the British North America Act. In words that recalled the comments of Steeves at the start of the decade, Whitebone warned that it was time for action:

Unemployment remains the most distressing problem in New Brunswick as well as throughout the entire country and as yet the solution of this great blight on civilization is not in sight. . . . Millions have been spent in relief and in providing temporary work but these methods are admitted only palliatives. In our own province of New Brunswick thousands of men tramp the streets and highways desperately seeking any kind of work. By all the laws of nature this condition cannot much longer exist and productive employment of a permanent nature at decent wages will soon have to be provided for all employable persons if we are to prevent the collapse of modern civilization.
At the very least, it was time to introduce a contributory unemployment insurance plan for all Canadian workers and for New Brunswick to withdraw its objections. Delegates went on to adopt a resolution calling on the Dominion government not to wait for an amendment to the British North America Act but to declare a state of emergency and enact the legislation without delay.\(^52\)

In his reports of the late 1930s, Secretary-Treasurer Melvin was able to report signs of renewal in the ranks of the Federation. There was an increase in participation at the convention in 1938, when 42 delegates attended, and by the time of the 1939 meetings, there were 75 delegates in attendance, the largest number since 1921, and they represented an affiliated membership of 5,500 workers.\(^53\) However, there had also been warnings during the course of the decade that the Federation’s claim to be the voice of labour in the province was not unchallenged. On several occasions in the early 1930s, Federation delegates debated the question of relations with “outlaw” organizations that did not fall within the jurisdictional scope of the TLC and its international unions affiliated to the American Federation of Labor. In 1931, a resolution in favour of “amalgamation” among Canadian unions was overwhelmingly rejected, and in a 1932 visit, TLC President Moore singled out threats from a list of rival groups, including “the One Big Union, the Communists, National Catholic Union and the National Union or All-Canadian Congress.”\(^54\)

Women workers were not a priority for most of the Federation’s affiliated unions, and no women delegates attended Federation meetings between 1923 and 1943. New industrial unions showed more ambition in organizing the unorganized, and in 1937 workers at the Atlantic Underwear factory in Moncton joined a textile workers’ union belonging to the rival New Brunswick Council of Labour, established in 1935. Source: Moncton Museum Collection.
Of these the most important in New Brunswick was the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, which was established in 1927 as a federation of purely Canadian unions and had a core membership drawn from the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees, which continued to enjoy strength in the province’s railway towns.

The conflict had deepened when ACCL unions formed their own “federation” of labour in the province. In 1935, delegates from Saint John, Moncton, Fredericton, Edmundston, Campbellton, and Newcastle met to establish a New Brunswick Council of Labour, with R.J. Harrington, a CBRE member from Saint John, as president. Following that meeting, Federation President Tighe was reported to have stated that “the newly-formed organization has no connection whatever with the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, and will have no effect on it whatever”; of this claim, one of the Council leaders observed sardonically: “That, of course, remains to be seen, and we will do our utmost to see that the new organization does have some effect on the NBFL.”

In short order, the new Council was operating as a rival provincial federation of labour, pressing the government for appointments to bodies such as the Fair Wage Board and for a list of legislative reforms. Most importantly, the ACCL was also organizing new groups of workers in the province. In 1937, for instance, they issued charters to textile workers at Atlantic Underwear
and J.A. Humphrey and Sons in Moncton, factories where large numbers of women workers were employed, and they also organized workers at the Atlantic Sugar refinery in Saint John. The skilled craft unions that dominated the Federation of Labour had little to offer these workers, and the ACCL’s new industrial unions were filling a need. By the time of their fifth annual meeting in June 1939, the New Brunswick Council of Labour boasted more than fifty delegates from seven centres in the province, including labour councils at Minto, Moncton, and Saint John. Their numbers included at least three women delegates, from beauticians in Saint John and biscuit factory workers in Moncton. In his address to the delegates, ACCL President A.R. Mosher congratulated the Council on their progress and stated that New Brunswick was “one of the most active provinces insofar as the National Labour Movement was concerned.” In accordance with the conservative nationalism of the ACCL, Mosher repeated the usual criticism that “the so-called international unions” were American-dominated, but he also pointed out that they were failing to meet the needs of workers for new forms of organization: “These old Unions were now disorganizing the workers, due to the determination of the old-line Labour Leaders to stick to the outmoded craft system of organization.” As one organizer for the Council stated, there was ample scope for union efforts in a province where some employees worked ten to twelve hours a day for wages as low as $3 a week. The rivalry between “old” and “new” unionism was not going to go away, and the new industrial unionism had significant effects on the Federation in the years ahead.

Also on the horizon in these years was the threat of a worsening international situation and the spectre of a new world war. In 1938 the Federation convention was addressed by Dr. R.H. Wright of the Fredericton Peace Council, and in 1939 Whitebone commented directly on the need to open Canada’s doors for “sorely oppressed minorities who are being persecuted in certain totalitarian European countries” and stated that “our sympathies are whole-heartedly with the movements under way to alleviate their sufferings and to find homes for those of them who are being forced to leave their native lands.” At the 1938 meetings, delegates called for an embargo on
the export of war materials to Japan, and at the 1939 meetings a resolution called for the boycott of imports from Nazi or Fascist regimes, although it was adopted in a milder form than first proposed.  

At the end of the 1930s, workers, employers, and governments increasingly recognized that the promise of industrial legality had arrived in New Brunswick. The Federation’s agenda had expanded during the 1930s. The devastation of unemployment in the early years of the Great Depression underlined the need for more aggressive government intervention in the economy. By the time of the strikes of 1937, New Brunswick workers were on the move, and the Federation was calling for the extension of union rights under the law. Although the Fair Wage Act had a limited effect and the Labour and Industrial Relations Act was only symbolic, the expectations of New Brunswick workers were rising. In the worst years of the Depression, there was support for the CCF, but the established parties had responded by once more presenting themselves as the friends of labour. By 1939 the Liberals could even claim the election of a “labour” candidate in the person of Campbellton machinist Samuel Mooers, who would later become minister of labour. Progress was painfully slow, but social legislation was advancing. Even the enactment of unemployment insurance was imminent — although it had taken an entire decade of unprecedented unemployment for Canada to begin to address the need. The most hopeful sign for organized labour at the end of the Great Depression was the desire of large numbers of workers to join unions and achieve greater security in their work. The years of war and reconstruction that followed would create renewed expectations for union recognition and for social and economic democracy.
The Second World War was a turning point for organized labour in Canada. In February 1945, an army officer discusses conditions at the front with a delegation from the Trades and Labour Congress, including (from left) J.A. Sullivan of the Canadian Seamen’s Union, C.S. Jackson of the United Electrical Workers, TLC Vice-President James Whitebone, and Nigel Morgan of the International Woodworkers of America. In 1945 they were all on the same page as supporters of the war effort and the recognition of unions. Source: United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America / Library and Archives Canada, PA-094333.