Labour/Le Travailleur

Organizing on the Waterfront: The St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU), 1890-1914

Jessie Chisholm

Volume 26, 1990

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt26art02

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)
1911-4842 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Chisholm, J. (1990). Organizing on the Waterfront: The St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU), 1890-1914. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *26*, 37–60.

Article abstract

This article studies the initial organization and development of the St John's Longshoremen's Protective Union in the years 1890 to 1914. Undoubtedly the city's most important union the LSPU organized all waterfront workers in the city, including the numerous boys who worked on the docks, and later extended the organization to include the city's sanitation workers. Through militancy and frequent strikes the LSPU established a permanent presence in St John's. The success of the LSPU is contrasted with the experience of longshoremen in Atlantic Canadian ports to raise questions about earlier interpretations of class solidarity within merchant capital.

Organizing on the Waterfront:

The St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU), 1890-1914

Jessie Chisholm

IN 1890 THE CITY COUNCIL in St. John's voted to increase the wages of its municipal labourers to $1.00 per day. The decision prompted a local reporter for the *Daily Colonist* to interview three dockworkers about wages and working conditions on the wharves. Why were earnings so low, only 70 to 80 cents a day? Why was organization so difficult?

"Were the men always satisfied with the four shillings (80 cents) a day up to now?
No...there have been strikes on one or two wharves where cargo was being discharged and on one occasion men got an increase of 10 cents for a while, but the old rates were soon resumed."
"How do you account for this?"
"The men were too poor to stick it out...and the absence of anything like a combination among the men, account for the low wages they have been receiving ...."[1]

The labourers complained that the wages were further reduced by the autumn influx of "strolling outport men" from Conception and Trinity Bays, fishermen "willing to work for less money than eighty cents, aye, and even 'take it up' in the shops."[2] Commonplace in rural Newfoundland, the practice of paying wages in truck or in kind by certain city firms was deeply resented by St. John's labourers.[3]

Dock labour in St. John's was seasonal, its rhythms determined by the ebb and flow of maritime traffic and the fluctuating patterns of the fish trade. Union organization of waterfront workers was impeded by the seasonal nature of port employment, by a diversity of hiring practices and wage schedules, and by the determined resistance of the city's mercantile interests. Yet a remarkably successful labour organization was established in 1903. Initially organized by steamboat

[1] *Daily Colonist* (St. John's), hereafter *DC*, 20 September 1890.
[2] *DC*, 22 September 1890.
[3] *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), hereafter *ET*, 10 August 1899; *Evening Herald* (St. John's), hereafter *EH*, 23 January 1895; *EH*, 12 February 1895.

Jessie Chisholm, "Organizing on the Waterfront: The St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU), 1890-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 26 (Fall 1990), 37-59.

labourers, the Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU) extended its membership to all dockworkers, including juveniles. Within ten years, membership had increased more than ten-fold, from 200 in the spring of 1903 to 2,600 in 1914. The LSPU stabilized employment on the waterfront through the exclusion of non-unionized and transient labour and by a uniform schedule of wages and hours. A successful strike in May 1903 forced concessions from reluctant employers; these concessions were upheld by a series of disciplined strikes in subsequent years.

This essay details the emergence of the LSPU and its organizing activities among St. John's workers. It explores select themes: the conditions of dock labour and patterns of worker resistance prior to unionization; the establishment of the LSPU in 1903 and its consolidation across the waterfront; and the involvement of the LSPU in the organization of the city's common labourers and juvenile workers. I intend to place the LSPU within the context of a rich international historiography on dock activism, indicating that Newfoundland longshoremen have also possessed a vibrant tradition of collective resistance.

I

"THE MOST DRAMATIC BATTLES, triumphs and defeats of the 'new unionism' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," maintained Eric Hobsbawm, "occurred on the British waterside."[4] Escalating strikes on the St. John's docks in the 1890s and the establishment of the LSPU in 1903 were part of the international emergence of waterfront organization between the years 1885 and 1914.[5] In many major ports longshoremen possessed traditions of dockside unionism and strike activity which had pre-dated the late 19th-century insurgence. The most resilient of the dockworkers' associations had existed in maritime cities dominated by a specialized export trade, such as the ship labourers' unions in the timber ports of Quebec City and Saint John, or they were labour organizations which represented the most highly-experienced and deft of the longshore labourers.[6] The difficulties in organizing labourers across the waterfront were legion, however, for dock work was characterized by intermittent employment and irregular earnings, seasonal variation, and a fluctuating labour demand. Dockworkers were casual employees, hired by the day or by the hour, frequently for an eighteen-hour stretch, and paid

[4]E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour*, (London 1986), 204.

[5]Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*; See also David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925*, (Cambridge 1987), 96-110; Eric Arneson, "To Rule or to Ruin: New Orlean Dock Workers' Struggle for Control, 1902-1903," *Labor History*, 28 (Spring 1987), 139-166; Philip J. Leng, *The Welsh Dockers* (Ormshirk UK 1981), 3-71; P.J. Donovan, "Australia and the Great London Dock Strike: 1889," *Labour History*, 23 (1972) 17-26.

[6]J.I. Cooper, "The Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society," *Canadian Historical Review*, 30 (1949), 336-43; Judith Fingard, "The Decline of the Sailor as Ship Labourer in the 19th Century Timber Ports," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 2 (1977), 35-54; Ian McKay, "Class Struggle and Merchant Capital: Craftsmen and Labourers on the Halifax Waterfront 1850-1900," in Bryan Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle* (Toronto 1986), 30.

an hourly rate based on the task performed.[7] Despite the tendencies of observers to categorize dock labour as unskilled, the waterfront workforce was stratified by experience and expertise.[8]

The international character of longshore activism reflected the ascendancy of a maritime steam technology which affected the structure and pace of dock labour.[9] The steamship intensified the irregular nature of employment on the docks. British historians Philipps and Whiteside concluded that "pressure was put on dock companies, wharfingers and contractors to increase labour output and they were compelled ... to deploy their men in large numbers and short intensive bursts of activity at whatever cost to regularity of employment."[10] While steamship stevedoring created a small cohesive group of specialized labourers, it also heightened the casual nature of port work by encouraging a large pool of surplus labour. Ironically, it allowed waterfront employees a degree of autonomy because steamship agents were prone to concede limited worker demands rather than risk delay, while it intensified those variables which made dock unionism difficult — sporadic employment, a stratified work force, and an oversupply of labour.

In St. John's, as in other maritime cities, dockworkers were ill-paid and erratically employed. In 1914 only 500 men in the 2,600 member LSPU (19 per cent) were permanent employees of mercantile firms; they were generally older, familiar hands, employed ten hours a day, and paid weekly ($6.00 to $8.00).[11] The majority of city wharf labourers were hired by the day or by the hour; they seldom secured more than nine months work, probably averaging six months yearly.[12] In 1890 the dockworker interviewed in the *Colonist* complained that for many years he had not worked more than 100 days (four months); his yearly earnings were less than $100.[13] In 1914, the annual wages of waterfront employees ranged from $200 to $250; the minimum budget for a working-class family of seven in St. John's was estimated at $420 per year.[14] The St. John's waterfront attracted transient workers: rural handymen and labourers, outport fishermen in the off-season, the crews of

[7]For contemporary descriptions of dock work, see Charles Barnes, *The Longshoremen* (New York 1916) based on first-hand investigations in New York 1910-1911; J.S. Woodsworth, *On the Waterfront* (Ottawa 1928); ILWU Local 500 Pensioners, *Man Along the Shore: the Story of the Vancouver Waterfront* (Vancouver 1975), especially 32-40.

[8]Concerning sectorial unionism on the docks, see Montgomery, *Fall*, 99-101; James Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action in the Working Class of Vancouver, British Columbia 1900-1919," PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 1986, 472, 502; Robert Babcock, "Saint John Longshoremen during the Rise of Canada's Winter Port, 1895-1922," *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 20-2.

[9]McKay, "Class Struggle and Merchant Capital," 31-2; Montgomery, 103-4.

[10]Gordon Philipps and Noel Whiteside, *Casual Labour: the Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry 1880-1970* (Oxford 1985), 18.

[11]*ET*, 16 May 1914.

[12]*ET*, 16 May 1914

[13]*DC*, 19 September 1890.

[14]Estimates by LSPU President, James McGrath, *ET*, 16 May 1914. In New York, the average yearly earnings of longshoremen were estimated at $500 to $600; the family budget for a "family of normal size" was calculated at $800 to $900. Barnes, *Longshoremen*, 92.

fishing schooners. These "strolling outport men" competed for employment, driving down the wages of dock labour.[15]

Despite the erratic character of employment, however, there was a regular workforce attached to the harbour, city labourers who thought of themselves as dockworkers, and who resented the influx of other labourers willing to work at lower wages. The most skilled of these dockworkers were the steamboat labourers, longshoremen who discharged and loaded the steam vessels:

> Their work is arduous and often dangerous and can be done only by those who are well experienced in the proper handling of goods of a breakable nature and skilled in the manipulation of special tackle required for the hoisting of heavy packages from ship to pier. Men engaged at this line of work are sought after...and come to be regarded in time as attaches [sic] of premises where steamers discharge so that they engage rarely at other work and rely on the handling of freight for a living....[16]

Although small gangs (eight to ten men) worked the hatches, large numbers of labourers (200 or 300) were required to sort and pile cargoes, and to truck them by barrows from the quays to the warehouses. Steamship stevedoring in St. John's had increased in importance over the pre-war years as the number of steamers entering and clearing port increased almost threefold and the volume of their cargoes tripled.[17]

St. John's was a fishing port as well as a shipping center, its wharves crowded by small fishing schooners. Cullers assessed and graded the fish; fish handlers employed during fine weather packed it in barrels, often under the direction of master coopers. Large numbers of boys were employed on the fish wharves and by the merchant firms, favoured by employers for their agility.[18] Handling fish was commonly viewed as unskilled and untaxing; when it was rumored in 1903 that dry fish handlers were demanding higher wages, the *Trade Review* responded impatiently: "This class of work is not very hard .... Most of the men employed in handling dry fish are steady-going old pacers, who don't rush themselves to death,

[15]*DC*, 19, 20, 22 September 1890; *EH*, 9 July 1900.

[16]*ET*, 16 May 1903.

[17]The ascendancy of the steamer and the decline of the sailing vessel is clearly indicated in the statistics of vessels and tonnage entering and clearing port at St. John's.

Year	Vessels entering port (tonnage)	Vessels clearing port (tonnage)
1890	516 sail (75,000)	423 sail (65,000)
	175 steam (169,000)	179 steam (171,000)
1914	136 sail (25,000)	126 sail (23,000)
	305 steam (462,000)	291 steam (449,000)

Statistics compiled by Ann Coady, "Total Number, Tonnage and Crews of Steamers and Sailing Vessels entered and cleared at the Port of St. John's in the years 1880-1930," unpublished student paper, April 1974. Filed at Maritime History Archives, MUN.

[18]For interesting descriptions of fish handlers, see terms "cullers," "tally-man" and "yaffle" in G.M. Story *et al.* eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto, 1982), 129-30; 556-57; 621-22. Fish-handlers were sometimes referred to as "yafflers" in the daily press [from yaffle "to gather up an armful of dried and salted cod..."]. It is impossible to calculate the number of men employed at various tasks on the wharves as the Newfoundland census provided no breakdown of these labourers.

and are perfectly content with their pay and work."[19]

In earlier decades women had worked on the wharves in St. John's. The Earl of Dunraven, who visited the city in the 1870s, left a vivid description of fish handling on the waterfront and the place of the women in the labour process:

> The fish ... are brought to St. John's on small schooners and thrown into heaps upon the wharves .... There they are culled over, sorted into three or four piles according to their quality by experienced cullers .... Women with hand-barrows attend upon the cullers, carry the fish into an adjoining shed and upset their loads beside barrels. A couple of boys throw the fish into a cask ... [and] roll the barrels under a screw-press where two men stand ready. Grasping the ends of the long arms of the lever, the men run quickly around ... [and] bring down the stamp with a dull thud .... The cask is then rolled out from under the press and handed over to two coopers. In a trice the hoops are driven on, the cask is headed up, and then trundled ... into the hold of some vessels .... The rapidity with which the whole process is managed is remarkable.[20]

The custom of women barrowing fish persisted in outport Newfoundland into the 20th century: in 1906 American tourist Bertha Arnold complained to the *Trade Review* of the "hard and unnatural work ... (of) women carrying barrows over slippery and uneven stages ... (and) crawling on hands and knees all day striving in the hold of a close and stuffy boat."[21] The editor of the *Trade Review* noted that the employment of women on the St. John's wharves had been halted some years previous because of a fatal accident involving two female employees.[22] By 1890 longshore work and fish handling were "male" occupations in the capital.

"Unlike so many other trades during the age of monopoly capital changing technology was not a critical variable at the longshoreman's workplace," observed historian Robert Babcock of the Saint John waterfront; "the longshoremen carried, wheeled or trucked goods in the early Twenties in much the same manner as their fathers and grandfathers had done."[23] He noted that the shipping companies relied on hard-driving foremen to get the work done as quickly and cheaply as possible.[24] Although there were no dramatic technological changes, St. John's longshoremen complained that the installation of larger winches on the cargo vessels forced the men to work more quickly and reduced actual employment. In a series of letters to the *Evening Telegram* LSPU President James McGrath protested:

[19]*Trade Review* (St. John's), hereafter *TR*, 22 May 1903.

[20]Windham Thomas Wyndham-Quinn, 4th Earl of Dunraven, *Canadian Nights: being Sketches and Reminiscences of Life and Sport in the Rockies and the Canadian Woods* (London 1914), 196-7. On women employed on St. John's wharves, see Philip Tocque, *Kaleidoscope Echoes, being Historical, Philosophical, Scientific and Theological Sketches from the Miscellaneous Writings*. Ed. Annie S.W. Tocque (Toronto 1895), 46; "Long-shore-women in Newfoundland," *The Youth's Companion* (19 September 1878), n.p.

[21]*TR*, 1 September 1906.

[22]*TR*, 1 September 1906. For responses, see *TR*, 8 September 1906.

[23]Babcock, "Saint John Longshoremen," 19-20.

[24]Babcock, "Saint John Longshoremen," 20.

Under the old conditions with a different type of ship the work of landing was a much slower process. Now coal is handled more quickly; the present day carriers are fitted with larger winches, [and] a larger drum ... as a natural consequence the men have to work more lively .... All we want is a just share in the saving which present day conditions have brought about by lessening the hours of labor and accomplishing more work per hour.[25]

Occasionally St. John's longshoremen refused employment at certain premises which had acquired a reputation for driving its gangs of labourers. On 9 June 1910 city steamship agents met at the Board of Trade rooms to discuss a shortage of longshoremen; the meeting was in response to the labour difficulties encountered by Shea and Company in discharging the SS *Mongolian*. The LSPU quickly replied: Shea and Company had problems in obtaining longshoremen because "attempts are made to make them work harder and do more work than any other employer of labor."[26] James McGrath claimed:

When Shea & Co. have a steamer to discharge they always make it a point to employ a less number of men to handle cargo than any other steamboat agent ... when two derricks are working in the hold, eight men are employed at the two derricks; on other premises twelve men are employed .... Longshoremen, in consequence, are not at all anxious to work ... [at] Shea & Co.'s premises and would rather not go to work there at all ....[27]

Workers expressed their resistance to "speed-ups" by withholding their labour.

II

TWENTY YEARS EARLIER, on 8 October 1890, longshoremen employed by Shea and Company struck work to protest a reduction in their wages and to demand higher pay. The men had been hired earlier that morning to discharge 500 tons of freight from the steamer *Caspion*. A striker explained:

We had been getting ninety cents per day up to this present work, when the pay was cut to eighty cents. This we resented, but as the majority fell into line, the rest had to follow suit. However, there has been considerable grumbling and today ... a number of the men 'kicked' but, as usual some were willing to work and 'fell-too'. By dinner time, however, the men were talked over and ... those who were willing to work in the morning now refuse to work for less than a dollar a day.[28]

After refusing to pay the strikers more than the 80 cents promised in the morning, Shea and Company induced the ship's crew, firemen and passengers to unload the cargo at a dollar a day. By evening a compromise was effected; the longshoremen resumed work the following morning for 90 cents a day.[29]

Prior to the establishment of the LSPU, there had been at least 25 strikes on the city docks in the years 1890 to 1903 (Table One); strikes by dockworkers

[25] *ET*, 12 May 1914. See also 13, 16 May 1914.
[26] *ET*, 10 June 1910.
[27] *ET*, 10 June 1910.
[28] *DC*, 8 October 1890.
[29] *DC*, 8, 9 October 1890.

represented 30 per cent of work stoppages in St. John's.[30] Almost all dock strikes had been initiated by longshoremen discharging steamers and focused on higher wages and overtime rates. The pattern of strike activity was typical of non-unionized workers: ad-hoc strikes for immediate gains. On the surface, they were quite successful: 70 per cent of strikes ended in at least partial victory for the workers.

TABLE ONE

Strikes by Non-unionized Dockworkers, 1890-1903

Year	Number
1890	4
1893	3
1896	4
1897	1
1898	1
1899	1
1900	2
1901	1
1902	7
1903	1
Total	25

Source: Table One and subsequent tables based on data compiled from the daily press.

These optimistic statistics are misleading, however. Without institutional structures to protect gains or to extend concessions across the waterfront, dockworkers were forced to strike repeatedly to exact minimum concessions of little lasting value. An analysis of pay rates and wage demands (Table Two) indicates the discouraging trends. Wage schedules were not uniform from company to company, nor constant from year to year. In 1890 longshoremen at Shea's were paid 90 cents and demanded a dollar a day. Three years later, they received only 80 cents and successfully struck for $1.00; by 1896 their wages had been reduced to 70 cents and they were again forced to strike to obtain a dollar per day.[31] In 1902 dockworkers at several important mercantile firms were paid 80 cents per day, the common rate in 1890, and were striking for $1.00, the scale accorded municipal labour twelve years previously,[32] in marked contrast with other port cities where waterfront wages were often 40 per cent higher than those of common labourers.[33]

In July 1900, when the new fish from the summer fishery began arriving at St. John's, labourers employed at two fish premises struck for higher wages. The

[30]The data on strikes was compiled from the local newspapers; in the years 1890 to 1914 there were 181 strikes in St. John's. For an analysis of city strikes see Jessie Chisholm, "'Hang Her Down': Strikes in St. John's 1890-1914," paper to Seventh Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, University of Edinburgh, 4-7 May 1988.

[31]*DC*, 8, 9 October; *ET*, 14 June 1893; *EH*, 12 May 1896.

[32]*ET*, 21 August 1902.

[33]Philipps and Whiteside, *Casual Labour*, 6.

TABLE TWO

Wage Demands by Non-unionized Dockworkers, 1890-1903

Year	Current Rate	Rate Demanded	Company	Outcome
1890	70¢ day	80¢ day	Murray	Failure
	90¢ day	$1.00 day	Shea	90¢ maintained
1893	90¢ day	$1.00	Pitts	Success
	90¢ day	$1.20 day	Harvey	$1.00 given
	80¢ day	$1.00 day	Shea	Success
1896	70¢ day	$1.00 day	Shea	Success
1898	$1.50 night	$2.00 night	Bowrings	Success
1899	$1.20 night	$2.00 night	Harvey	
1900	80¢ day	$1.00 day	Bennett	Success
1900	80¢ day	$1.00 day	Rendell	Failure
1900	80¢	$1.00 day	Goodridge	Success
1902	15¢ hour	20¢ hour	Franklin	Failure
1902	15¢ hour	20¢ hour	Franklin	Failure
1902	80¢ day	$1.00 day	Thorburn	90¢ given
1902	80¢ day	$1.00 day	Job	90¢ given
1902	$1.00 day	$2.00 day	Pitts	Failure
			Harvey	
1902	80¢ day	$1.00 day	Rendell	Failure
			Goodridge	

Evening Herald reported that "laborers are forming a combine and it is said will try to make all the laborers on wharves east of Goodridge's quit work, unless paid the amount asked."[34] The following day the strike collapsed when men employed at the neighbouring wharves refused to join the strikers; they were fearful to gamble on a strike," prefer(ring) what they receive at present to nothing."[35] The strikers were replaced by outport men from the fishing schooners. The leaders, men "who for years had been (employed) there," were fired and blacklisted.[36] The strike illustrated neatly the difficulties in organizing across the waterfront, and the personal risks involved in strike activity: the competition of outport labour and the threat of dismissal and blacklisting. In a city marked by seasonal unemployment, meagre savings and limited labour demand the loss of a job meant misery and destitution for a blacklisted worker and his family. After an abortive strike by longshoremen in 1902, the *Evening Telegram* commented:

> The man who makes himself conspicuous as a strike leader and who then fails is...a doomed man. He is marked and will get no more work. Men who look for better times at the wharves, offices, fisheries, trains, steamers are not wanted...and are driven off to Canada and the U.S.[37]

[34] *EH*, 31 July 1900.
[35] *Daily News* (St. John's) hereafter *DN*, 1 August 1900.
[36] *EH*, 31 July, 2 August 1900.
[37] *EH*, 17 April 1902. See *EH*, 14 June 1902 concerning the blacklisting of strikers: "The ones with families who were led into this strike have lost...their prospects of the future." In the May 1903 strike

Strike activity on the St. John's docks escalated in 1902; longshoremen struck work on at least seven occasions to demand increased wages. Heightened militancy on the city wharves reflected the sense of grievance widespread among the Newfoundland labouring classes; in 1902 alone, city workers were involved in twenty strikes.[38] Outport labourers also struck to gain concessions. In 1900 over 1,600 miners struck for higher wages at Bell Island, a mining community less than twenty miles from the capital;[39] in 1902 outport sealers, 3,000 men strong, paraded the streets of St. John's, determined to secure a greater return from the annual hunt.[40] The intensification of strikes by city and outport workers alike reflected the convergence of several developments: the easing of the financial crisis of the 1890s, which resulted in widening employment opportunities in the Colony; a steady increase in the rate of inflation; and the dynamic expansion of the Maritimes' economy which created a regional labour market, especially for unskilled workers.[41] After 1900 local newspapers frequently complained of the difficulty in retaining young men in the fisheries because of job opportunities elsewhere.[42] Newfoundland workers who emigrated to the coal and steel works of Cape Breton, many on a seasonal basis, often returned dissatisfied with wages and conditions at home.[43]

Dockworkers in St. John's were well aware of the rates paid longshoremen and wharf labourers in Canada; strikes in port cities, particularly Montreal, Saint John and Halifax, were extensively covered in the local press. The strike by Halifax longshoremen in April 1902 was widely publicised, both because the day rate paid Halifax workers, twenty cents an hour, was well above wages paid locally and because Halifax strikers appealed directly to Newfoundland labourers to "stay away" from the Halifax docks.[44] Amid reports of the Halifax strike, a second

---

by city longshoremen, the strikers demanded the reinstatement of leaders as part of the settlement negotiated with employers. See *EH*, 19 May 1903.

[38]Chisholm, "'Hang Her Down'," 8.

[39]The Bell Island strike, involving 1600 miners in a six-week struggle for increased wages, has not been adequately treated. City newspapers reported that urban labourers collected funds to assist the striking miners and that some of the miners sought employment on the city docks. The press blamed the influence of the Bell Island strike for strikes on the docks: "The spirit of unrest created by the Bell Island trouble, broke out among the labourers on the docks." *EH*, 31 July 1900. For a discussion of Bell Island miners, see Peter Neary, "'Traditional' and 'Modern' Elements in the Social History of Bell Island and Conception Bay" in CHA, *Historical Papers*, 1973, 105-36.

[40]Briton Cooper Busch, "The Newfoundland Sealers' Strike of 1902," *Labour/Le Travail*, 14 (Fall 1984), 73-102. Busch provided an excellent narrative of the strike. However, he treated the strike as an anomaly. Although exceptional in size, the strike of 1902 was within a tradition of collective protest; there were 42 outport strikes recorded in the city press in the years 1890 to 1914, 37 between 1901 and 1914, 16 involving sealers and fishermen (data compiled from newspapers).

[41]On rising prices, see George Cornelius, US Consul at St. John's. "Annual Report 1906," in US Consular *Despatches*, Microfilm 374, Despatch no. 9. On the regional labour market, see Ian McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914," *Acadiensis Reader*, Volume 2 (Fredericton 1985), 21-2.

[42]*EH*, 17 April 1902.

[43]*TR*, 15 March 1902. See Ron Crawley, "'Off to Sydney: Newfoundlanders Emigrate to Industrial Cape Breton 1890-1914," *Acadiensis*, 17 (Spring 1988), 27-52.

[44]*ET*, 18 April 1902.

organizational effort by St. John's longshoremen was noted: "Many of the men who usually work discharging steamers have formed themselves into a committee and a general strike amongst the laborers associated with them is in the process of organization."[45] Again the strike failed; dockworkers were hesitant to unite because of the presence of many needy outport men anxious for employment:

> They decided to await a better opportunity. They say that there are a great many out harbour men around who would not join the strike and who would take their places at the low wages offered.[46]

III

THAT BETTER OPPORTUNITY arose in May 1903. On the 14th, after the commencement of the fishing season, all the longshoremen in the east end of the city struck. The strike was well organized and well-timed; the men had quit work "by a sort of pre-concerted arrangements" during a month when complaints about a shortage of labour were commonplace.[47] The longshoremen demanded twenty cents an hour, the rate conceded striking Halifax longshoremen the previous year. The following day the strike spread to the west end of the city when men discharging the Reid steamers struck work.[48] The dockers remained united for the duration of the strike; waiting cargoes were slowly unloaded by firemen, sailors and office personnel, but only a handful of city labourers accepted work as strikebreakers.[49] The crew of the SS. *Siberian*, a mail steamer, were employed discharging 350 tons of inward cargo, but the men "not being used to the work, could only do it slowly." The vessel was so delayed that it boarded no outward freight, leaving 400 tons of goods behind on the docks.[50]

A meeting of the strikers, an estimated 300 men, was held at the British Hall on 16 May, organized by James Kavanagh, an experienced steamboat labourer.[51] The meeting was chaired by Michael Fleming, a strike leader, later elected as the first secretary of the labourers' union and subsequently appointed their first "walking delegate." The strikers were addressed by Michael Gibbs and William Howley, St. John's lawyers sympathetic to the workingmen's cause[52] and by

[45] *EH*, 16 April 1902.
[46] *ET*, 17 April 1902.
[47] *EH*, 15 May 1903.
[48] *EH*, 15 May 1903.
[49] *EH*, 15 May 1903; *ET*, 16 May 1903.
[50] The crew of the *Siberian* had signed articles to assist in the discharge of the vessel if required. *EH*, 15 May 1903; see also 16 May for departure of *Siberian*. Another vessel in port was the SS. *Regulus*; "there was a complete shutdown, her cargo being coal, a hard one to handle." *EH*, 15 May 1903.
[51] *EH*, 18 May and *DN*, 17 May 1903.
[52] Michael Gibbs (1870-1943) born St. John's, called to bar 1896; elected MHA St. George's 1897; elected mayor of St. John's 1906 as the "working man's friend"; outspoken trade union lawyer; solicitor for LSPU 1903-1943. See Melvin Baker, "Michael Patrick Gibbs," *Newfoundland Quarterly* (Spring 1986), 48. William Howley (1875-1941) born St. John's, called to bar 1898; elected MHA St. George's 1900; Commissioner of Justice 1934-1938. *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, vol.2, 1097.

Kavanagh, whose speech was warmly received: "He believed that the men in the holds of the steamers in St. John's had to work as hard as the men in Montreal and they were worth as much pay. They had worked for starvation wages too long and it was time for them to call halt."[53] The strikers resolved to establish a union "for the purpose of securing to ourselves just and reasonable wages and of protecting ourselves in the continuance of said wages and for other purposes that may be of benefit and protection to us."[54] The union was named the Steamboat Laborers Union of St. John's and 100 men joined that evening, each paying membership dues of 10 cents. The strikers appointed a committee — Kavanagh, Fleming and newly-elected President Courtney, along with Gibbs and Howley — to confer with the employers.

Three days later, union members ratified their first agreement. Wages were fixed at 15 cents an hour for a twelve-hour day (6 am to 6 pm); after 6 pm overtime was paid at 20 cents an hour. Overtime was guaranteed for six hours, or until the entire cargo had been discharged. Time lost by men already hired, because of weather or delay, was renumerated. Strike leaders were reinstated.[55] Although the wages were below those demanded initially by strikers, St. John's dockworkers had made important gains: they had secured a uniform schedule of wage rates from the major merchant houses on the waterfront, and they had established a formal labour organization to consolidate gains. The accomplishments are striking, especially when contrasted with Halifax; despite the concessions won by longshoremen in the 1902 strike, a permanent union organization was not achieved until 1907.[56] Johnny Burke, the "Bard of Prescott Street" wrote a song in celebration of the Steamboat Labourers Union:

Oh, we are the men today, that struck for higher pay
For we are the bone and sinew of this land
For our rights we did uphold and like men
We struck out bold
And determined all to take a manly stand

We are the Steam Boat Labor Union
We got the terms that we did like
For to help the working man we were
Foremost in the van
The Steam Boat Labor Union Strike.[57]

During the years 1900 to 1904 Howley actively supported labour legislation and acted as solicitor for several city unions. By 1905 he had disassociated himself from the labour movement. See *EH*, 21 May 1904 for an expression of his earlier views.

[53] *DN*, 17 May 1903. The reference to wages in Montreal reflected local press coverage of the dock strike in that city. Terms of the Montreal settlement were summarised in *EH*, 15 May 1903.

[54] *DN*, 17 May 1903.

[55] Terms of settlement noted in *EH*, *ET* and *DN*, 18 May 1903.

[56] Catherine Waite, "The Longshoremen of Halifax 1900-1930: their Living and Housing Conditions," MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1977, 138. Waite writes [116] that payment for waiting time was not secured by Halifax dockworkers until 1920.

[57] Quoted by Bill Gillespie, *A Class Act: an Illustrated History of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland*

Initially, the settlement affected only steamboat labourers. Yet it is clear from the newspaper coverage that the union leaders intended from the outset to press for the expansion of the Steamboat Labourers Protective Union to the wharf labourers.[58] By September, wage scales had been negotiated for fish-handlers, barrowmen and packers.[59] Membership increased steadily from 1903 to 1914, when it exceeded 2,600 men, 30 per cent of the male labour force in St. John's.[60] Again, the success of the LSPU was in marked contrast with Halifax, where membership in the Halifax Longshoremen's Association expanded modestly from 500 in 1907 to 840 in 1913, declining to 600 in 1914.[61] In April 1904, the name of the Newfoundland union was changed to the St. John's 'Longshoremen's Protective Union' to reflect the broadening of the membership base, although the daily press commonly referred to it simply as the Labourers Union.[62]

The pattern of strikes after the formation of the LSPU contrasted sharply with strike activity before 1903; strikes were disciplined, well-organized actions which successfully upheld concessions obtained in the settlement. The determination of the LSPU to impose stability on the waterfront through the exclusion of transient labour and the imposition of uniform wages and hours is reflected in Table Three.[63] The largest number of strikes (over 40 per cent) occurred over the employment of non-union labour. Union men refused to work with labourers whose union dues were in arrears; they objected to outport men barrowing and packing fish in the holds of the schooners; and they protested the employment of ship crews in the discharging of vessels.[64] Just over 30 per cent of strikes focused on contract terms: remuneration for time lost after men were hired on; payment of union rates; and the curtailment of overtime. LSPU members struck to protest deductions for time lost because of poor weather, or delays caused by the transfer of vessels from one pier to another; they quit work to protest efforts to undercut union wages or to reduce the wages of older workers.[65]

The most contentious issue was the definition of overtime. Union men insisted that they be given a minimum of six hours work if hired after 6 p.m. Employers resisted, arguing that it was their prerogative to determine closing time. The *Evening Herald* voiced the management viewpoint. "While considerable sympathy

---

and Labrador (St. John's 1986), 32. Johnny Burke, (1851-1930), St. John's actor, singer and poet wrote many ballads immortalizing local events and characters. See *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's 1981) Volume 1, 295.

[58] *TR*, 22 May 1903; *EH*, 19 May 1903.

[59] *ET*, 16 September 1903.

[60] Membership figures quoted in annual report of the LSPU, *ET* 16 May 1914. The potential male labour force in St. John's, aged 15 to 65 was 9858 as calculated from the Newfoundland census in 1911.

[61] Waite, "Longshoremen of Halifax," 140.

[62] *DN*, 13 April 1904.

[63] Contrast the number of strikes to uphold contract clauses in St. John's with the number (3) recorded in Halifax during the years 1902 to 1914. Waite, 176.

[64] *DN*, 31 July 1903; *ET*, 19 October, 16 November 1903; *EH*, 15, 29 April 1904, 6 March 1906; *Evening Chronicle* (St. John's) hereafter *EC*, 24 November 1908.

[65] *EH*, 5 May 1904; 15 February 1906; 17 September 1907; *ET*, 19 November 1910.

had been expressed for the men who struck for better wages as all knew they were deserving, there was no sympathy for those who presume to dictate to their employer how long they shall work."[66] The presumption of the LSPU that it regulate both waterfront manpower and the labour process was typical of the struggle between workers and employers on the docks in the early decades of the 20th century.[67]

TABLE THREE

Strikes by Unionized Dock Workers, 1903-1914

Strikes by Year (38)		Cause of Strike	
1903 :	6	Employment of non-union :	16
1904 :	10	Curtailment of over-time :	6
1905 :	1	Higher wages :	5
1906 :	5	Payment of union rates :	4
1907 :	5	Unreasonable demands :	3
1908 :	2	Sympathy strikes :	3
1909 :	2	Time lost by hired men :	2
1910 :	3	Union recognition :	2
1911 :	2		
1912 :	2		
1913 :	-		
1914 :	-		

The strength of the LSPU on the waterfront lay in its organization. Former strike leader Matthew Fleming was appointed "walking delegate" in September 1903 to monitor the implementation of union rules and to mediate grievances.[68] The union executive annually selected members as guards at the principal firms to enforce contract stipulations; badges were distributed to distinguish union and non-union labour.[69] By the threat of boycott, the LSPU extended its jurisdiction beyond the steamship agencies and the fish exporters with whom it had directly negotiated. The union intimated that it would strike any city premises which shipped fish or freight discharged or stacked by non-unionized labour. An irate G.L. Fearn complained in the *Trade Review*:

> Upon two separate occassions when I was shipping fish by Messrs. Pitts' steamers, it was expedient to cart the fish from the railway station and pile it on Messrs. Pitts' wharf .... To do this piling, I employed labor outside of the Labor Union and, as a result, Messrs. Pitts were warned by the Union that if they allowed me to do this again they would not load the steamers ....[70]

[66] *EH*, 3 June 1903.

[67] John B. Foster, "On the Waterfront: Longshoring in Canada" in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston 1986), 281-308; Babcock, "Saint John Longshoremen."

[68] *ET*, 8 September 1903. On some occasions it is clear that Fleming acted as a hiring foreman. Unfortunately, hiring practices in the pre-war period were not detailed and union jurisdiction over hiring remains unclear.

[69] *ET*, 1 June 1903. Union badges and rule books were given to men upon their initiation into the union.

[70] *TR*, 22 October 1904; see also *ET*, 9 September 1903.

Despite friction within the LSPU over political affiliations, the union presented a solid front at the workplace. In the many strikes described in the press, there were no union men who broke ranks to return to work before a strike settlement. There were no recorded wildcat strikes; only one strike action was not authorized by the LSPU, a brief strike by young dockers over the interpretation of Union rules.[71] Waterfront unionism increased the wages of common labourers in the city, even those outside the LSPU. American consul George Cornelius observed: "Formerly laborers earned but 80 cents to $1.00 per day of 10 hours but now these figures have been increased 30 to 50 per cent ... The betterment has been brought about by a series of 'strikes' ..."[72]

In 1890, the city dockworker interviewed in the *Colonist* had complained bitterly about the seasonal influx of outharbour men onto the St. John's wharves:

> In the fall of the year when the fisheries is over, hundreds of outport men, mostly from Conception and Trinity Bays, flock into St. John's looking for work on the wharves. They are willing to work for less money than eighty cents, aye and even 'take it up' in the shops ... it is not out of meanness that they act so; many of them have starving families at home, for whom they almost starve themselves ....[73]

Tensions existed between city and rural workers, particularly in the competition for employment in the capital, but the LSPU attempted to accommodate outport labourers when possible. Determined to exclude cheap labour from the waterfront,[74] the LSPU extended union membership to outport workers. As early as September 1903 the *Trade Review* observed that "outport men, coming to town to work, are dropping into the Union without difficulty and paying the entrance fee."[75] Outport members were employed at union rates and received their wages in cash, in contrast with the outharbours where labourers were frequently paid in truck.[76]

When labour was scarce on the waterfront, it is possible that the hiring foremen favoured the St. John's hands, thus curtailing the employment once available to the outport labourers on the city wharves.[77] When labour was plentiful, however, outport men and city dockworkers worked side by side. After the close of the seal fishery, men brought from the north shore of Conception Bay to discharge the seals

[71] *EH*, 14 May 1907.

[72] George O. Cornelius, American Consul at St. John's 1901-1906. Annual Report, 25 November 1906, Despatch 34/9 Microfilm 594 in US Consulate, St. John's. Despatches [microfilm series].

[73] *DC*, 22 September 1890.

[74] The LSPU were actively involved in opposing the immigration of the Chinese to Newfoundland in 1906; they petitioned the House of Assembly requesting legislation to prevent the Chinese influx: "Let cheap Chinese labor enter into competition with petitioners and decrease the present rate of wages, then there is nothing left but us to emigrate or live in a state ... intolerable." Quoted by Robert Hong, "'To take action without delay': Newfoundland's Chinese Immigration Act of 1906," Honours dissertation, Memorial University, 1987, 50.

[75] *TR*, 12 September 1903.

[76] *ET*, 9 September 1903; *FA*, 6 May 1911.

[77] For the practice of hiring familiar hands see *ET*, 16 May 1903 and 4 November 1912. There was probably tension between the outport fisherman-farmer turned dockworker and the city labourer whose dock work was his sole source of earnings. See *ET*, 17 April 1917.

from the steamers were initiated into the Labourers Union.[78] Although a St. John's faction controlled the Executive of the LSPU, a large percentage of the membership were fishermen. President McGrath observed in 1912:

... nearly 1000 of the 2300 members on the roll of the Union are fishermen ... many hundreds of fishermen from Trinity and Conception Bays will find employment in this city this year at the rate of wages which the Union has been able to obtain for them.[79]

On occasion the LSPU waived the union dues of fishermen who were handling fish from their own schooners as long as they were paid union rates. The *Advocate* informed its readers in 1911:

The Laborers are busy and the supply of men does not meet the demand. At many premises ... crews of schooners are engaged by the merchants to work on the wharves .... The Labor Union is permitting this ... the crews engaged so are not required to join the Union ... to work temporarily, but we ask that crews so engaged to refuse to work unless they receive the regular wages paid to Laborers ....[80]

The LSPU was unique among longshore unions in Atlantic Canada, in successfully organizing outport fishermen and city workers within a common association and in uniting transient rural labourers and city dockers in a common cause.[81]

IV

LABOURERS WERE THE LARGEST single group of workers in St. John's. Unlike the conventional image of the dockworker as young, transient and unattached, the majority of the city's labourers were married men with dependents.[82] Our *Colonist* reporter in 1890 had been astonished by the low wages of the city dockworkers; how had their families survived on so little? One of the labourers responded in a manner which illustrated the occupational pluralism of the urban worker and the household economy of the city's poor: "... formerly the seal fisheries were good ... this, with nurse-tending by my wife got me through till some of the family were grown up. I have two sons in the States and they send money ... a daughter who lives with us is a tailoress ...."[83] The wives of the dockworkers frequently worked at waged labour, but at tasks unnoticed by the census enumerator: child tending;

[78] *EH*, 30 March 1906. On at least two occasions the LSPU successfully negotiated wage increases for the seal labourers. See *ET*, 4 April 1907; *ET*, 28 March 1910.

[79] *EC*, 24 April 1912. These figures for outport membership appear high. In 1908 when LSPU membership was estimated at 2100, the outport contingent approximated 300. *EC*, 3 October 1908.

[80] *FA*, 26 August 1911.

[81] In Halifax, for example, effective dock unionism was limited to longshoremen discharging and loading steamers; although units of fish handlers were organized, longshoremen and wharf men were not integrated.

[82] Calculated from *McAlpine's Newfoundland Directory: containing an Alphabetical Directory and Street Directory of the City of St. John's and of the Districts of the Island 1904* (Halifax). Directories generally under-counted labourers and domestic servants. See Gareth Shaw, "Nineteenth Century Directories as Sources in Canadian Social History," *Archivaria*, 14 (Summer 1982), 117-8.

[83] *DC*, 19 September 1890.

laundering; knitting nets and twine; sewing or finishing garments as home workers for the city's tailoring and clothing firms.[84] Addressing a delegation of longshoremen in May 1903, politician T.J. Murphy commented on the inability of dockworkers to secure a family wage:

> You earn $3 per week unloading steamers ... but you do not get the work in the winter months. You have a family to support, clothe and school. Under these conditions your wife must go out and work. Your children will grow up without a mother's care; you cannot afford to pay for education; you cannot get clothes sufficiently decent to send them to school.[85]

It was the plight of the dockworkers' children which attracted notice and created unease.

In the fall of 1911, thirty boys employed at Harveys, aged ten to sixteen years, struck for a dollar a day; they had been hired at eight cents an hour to assist in the discharge of 27,000 barrels of flour from the steamships *Bonavista* and *Britannic*. Their demands refused by management, they demonstrated, parading to the King's Wharf with a large banner. The following day the strike collapsed; strikers had been replaced by other youngsters desperate for employment. "There were plenty of boys to be had elsewhere to fill their shoes and the strikers had to go back for the usual eighty cents a day."[86] A delegation of boys was selected, however, to confer with solicitor Gibbs about the establishment of a Juvenile Branch of the LSPU.[87]

Child labour was common on the St. John's waterfront. William Coaker, founder of the Fishermen's Protective Union, recalled leaving school unwillingly as a youngster of eleven in 1881 to work on the south side wharves, tending the cullers and yaffling fish.[88] In 1890 a correspondent to the *Daily Colonist* worried about the vulnerability of juvenile labourers on the docks, some of whom were only ten or twelve years of age. These boys, he noted sympathetically, "were generally the children of very poor parents who cannot afford to send them to school ... because they require the few shillings the boys earn to keep the wolf from the door."[89] Boys were favoured by the merchant firms for specific tasks, for their quickness in conveying light packages and their agility in discharging barrels.[90] They were also employed as cheap labour in backbreaking toil, working alongside

[84]See Nancy Forestell and Jessie Chisholm, "Working-Class Women as Wage Earners in St. John's, Newfoundland 1890-1921" in Peta Tancred-Sheriff, ed., *Feminist Research: Prospect and Retrospect* (Kingston 1988), 140-8.
[85]*ET*, 19 May 1903.
[86]*ET*, 15 November 1911.
[87]*DN* and *EC*, 14 November 1911; *ET*, 14, 15 November 1911.
[88]Speech by William Coaker, quoted in *Proceedings of the House of Assembly* (Government of Newfoundland), 1914, 172 and cited by John Feltham, "The Development of the F.P.U. in Newfoundland (1908-1923)," MA thesis, Memorial University, 1959, 18. Coaker stressed the necessity of free, non-denominational schools and night schools for the labouring classes in Newfoundland.
[89]*DC*, 10 October 1890; see also 18 November 1890.
[90]*EH*, 18 October 1907.

men for sixteen or seventeen hours a day; boys were paid 50 to 80 cents a day during the period 1890-1914 — 33 to 50 per cent of the adult rate.[91]

The strike by child labourers in 1911 was not singular. Perhaps the most famous of strikes by boys on the St. John's wharves was that of juvenile fish handlers in early September 1883, organized and led by Coaker, then thirteen years old. He and his companions struck Job Brothers, demanding 40 cents a day (a ten-cent increase) and parity with wages paid boys at other premises. Although the wharfinger Pa Parsons "got into a rage and ordered every boy off the premises, declaring that he never wanted to see their faces anymore," the boys persisted, posting pickets at all the entrances to Jobs to prevent the hiring of replacements. After two days the wharfinger relented, conceding the ten-cent increase and reinstating all the strikers. "To undertake such a task in those days required courage," a colleague remembered, "for boys to unite in such demands endangered their being boycotted for the rest of the Fall season."[92] Although the risk of dismissal and blacklisting remained constant in the pre-war decades, boys working on city wharves were involved in at least eight strikes; strikes by boys discharging cargoes of flour were most common, but juvenile coal trimmers, fish handlers and winch tenders also struck work.[93] All but one stoppage centered on wage increases; only one was successful — a walkout at Harveys in 1909 for wage parity with the Shea and Pitts premises.[94] Without formal union organization, children were vulnerable workers.

Child labour on the wharves alarmed the LSPU executive. As early as September 1903 boys had expressed an interest in unionization. The *Evening Telegram* noted that "the boys working on the merchants' wharves are forming themselves into a protective union and will likely become a branch of the Steamboat Laborers' Union."[95] The SLU discussed the formation of a Juvenile Branch for several weeks, but apparently abandoned this, perhaps in favour of organizing adult labour across the waterfront.[96] In 1913 the idea revived; the LSPU executive recorded their concerns in the annual report:

[91]For rates paid boys on the wharves, see *ET*, 25 September 1907; *EH*, 9 November 1909; *DN*, 14 November 1911.

[92]There is a wonderfully detailed account of the strike by James M. Carberry in "A Strike of Forty Years Ago," *Evening Advocate* (St. John's), formerly *FA*, 19 December 1923. The story is repeated in Ian McDonald, *"To Each his Own": William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-1925*, ed. J.K. Hiller (St. John's 1987), 15.

[93]*ET*, 9 June 1893; *EH*, 25 September 1907; *ET*, 25 September 1907; *EH* and *ET*, 17-18 October; *EH*, 9-10 November 1909; *EJ*, 14-15 November 1911; *ET*, 27 November.

[94]The strike by boys discharging coal was for "more favorable conditions;" the strikers stated that their wages were satisfactory. *ET*, 27 November 1911. The outcome of four strikes is known; for the successful strike, see *EH*, 17-18 October 1911.

[95]*ET*, 15 September 1903.

[96]The discussion continued throughout September; see *ET*, 16, 23 September 1903. No reason was given for shelving consideration of juvenile labour.

> The necessity for organizing a Juvenile Branch of the Union has ...become very urgent for the purpose of preventing the exploitation of child labour in this city. One of the most pitiful conditions noticed by your officers was that a large number of boys under the age of 14 years are employed on the same steamships and on the mercantile premises, working upwards of 15 hours a day, some of them engaged in the most arduous tasks.[97]

A week later, an organizational meeting of boys employed on the wharves and at manual labour in the city was convened; its goals were to ensure minimum standards governing wages and working conditions for youths, and to press for legislation prohibiting child labour. Seventy-five members were enrolled at the initial meeting; 30 per cent were unable to read or write.[98] A schedule was submitted to employers stipulating minimum age (fourteen years), maximum hours (ten-hour day), and wage rates (ten cents per hour discharging cargo; nine cents per hour handling fish).[99] On 4 June 1913 the first executive of the Juvenile Branch of the LSPU was elected; by then membership exceeded ninety.[100] In January 1914 the LSPU opened a night school for its juvenile members, several union men acting as assistant teachers. Although night schools for working children existed throughout the period, generally under church auspices, the LSPU was the first city union to organize and finance such an institution.[101]

In St. John's the LSPU successfully intervened to secure minimum protection for children employed on the wharves. Although regretting the necessity of child labour, the union recognised that many city families depended on the income of its working boys; its goal was to "ensure for boys ... at work ... a decent living wage and to obviate labour of a character beyond their physical powers ...."[102] Few Canadian unions organized juvenile workers; an exception was the Provincial Workers Association (PWA) in Nova Scotia, which established separate juvenile lodges for coal pit boys.[103] Indeed, Robert MacIntosh's and Ian McKay's richly detailed accounts of child labour in the Nova Scotian coal mines offer useful

[97] *EH*, 23 May 1913. See also *ET*, 30 May 1913 for a letter by James McGrath describing a visit to various mercantile premises. He noted the number of boys employed discharging steamers, "some of these boys had only just turned 10 years."

[98] *Ibid.*, 29 May 1913. Twelve boys were refused membership because they were under 14 years of age.

[99] *ET*, 31 May 1913.

[100] *ET*, 5 June 1913. Although the Juvenile Branch was subordinate to the parent organization, it met independently and conducted its own affairs.

[101] *ET*, 14 January, 6 February 1914. The average nightly attendance was eighty; the night school also conducted a class for adult members unable to read or write. See *LSPU Minute Books*, 12 January 1914.

[102] *ET*, 28 May 1913.

[103] Ian McKay notes in his "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914," *Acadiensis* (Autumn 1983), 220, that city unions did little to organize juvenile labour in Saint John or Halifax. In his article, "The Realm of Uncertainty: the Experience of Work in the Cumberland Coal Mines, 1873-1927," *Acadiensis* (Autumn, 1986), 26-33, McKay details the work experience and strikes by coal pit boys. Robert MacIntosh differs from McKay in emphasizing the tensions between juvenile and adult mine workers; see his "The Boys in the Nova Scotian Mines 1873 to 1923" *Acadiensis* (Spring 1987) 35-50, especially pages 42-6. Unfortunately, our sources say little about the implications of dock labour for youthful wharf labourers themselves.

analogies; like the pit boys, St. John's juvenile dock workers were both exploited and enfranchised by their work, developing patterns of resistance and collective action usually associated only with adult workers. Their work "gave these juvenile workers a fighting strength unique among the thousands of children who were swept up by the industrial revolution."[104]

V

ALTHOUGH THE LSPU concentrated on the organization of dock workers, it included labourers employed elsewhere in St. John's. It is difficult to estimate the number of common labourers organized by the LSPU, as no membership lists for the pre-war decades survived.[105] It was only when unionized labourers struck that LSPU organization attracted public notice and comment. In 1908, for example, twelve men hired to repair the King's Wharf quit work; members of the Carpenters' Union and LSPU respectively, they struck to protest the employment of three non-union labourers. Although the men in question agreed to join the LSPU, "one of the foremen employed on the work intervened and refused to permit them to join the organization."[106] When the strikers refused to resume work with the non-unionized labourers, they were replaced. The foreman's actions caused considerable controversy, as repairs to the public wharf was a government contract. The LSPU passed resolutions condemning the "action of the Government in permitting the work to be done with non-union labor,"[107] and several sympathizers wrote angry letters to the newspapers, arguing that unionized labour and union rates be stipulated in government projects. "A Union Man" commented bitterly:

> Working men to-day the world over must recognise that the protection and remuneration they receive is due to organization, and no man or body of men must be permitted to turn back the hands on the dial of a fair living wage and the right to organize ... the most curious feature [in Newfoundland] ... is that whenever the Government has control and the taxes of the workmen are utilized in defraying the cost, the scab or the non-union workman is invariably employed....[108]

However, the campaign for a fair wage clause in government contracts and for the employment of unionized labour on public projects was unsuccessful.

On 13 May 1910 unionized labourers hired at the union rate (fifteen cents an hour) to clean sealing steamers complained to LSPU president James McGrath that the Reid Company foreman had taken on non-union labour and had arbitrarily cut wages to twelve cents. When McGrath visited the Dry Dock to investigate, he was

[104]McKay, "Realm of Uncertainty," 26.

[105]There are lists in the back of the LSPU minute books but these are undated and fragmentary, encompassing less than ten per cent of union members. Although total membership figures are noted in the Annual Reports of the LSPU, no breakdowns are provided, presumably because members shifted tasks as seasonal demands and labour requirements fluctuated.

[106]*EC*, 1 September 1908; see also, 22 August 1908; *EH*, 21 August 1908; *ET*, 3 September.

[107]Resolutions adopted by the LSPU; quoted in *EC*, 3 September 1908.

[108]"A Union Man," *EC*, 1 September 1908.

ordered off the property by a Reid manager: "He told me to leave dock premises or he would have me arrested. He also said you can take your union men with you."[109] McGrath then pulled the union men, 60 labourers in all, from the sealing steamers, *Beothic* and *Diana*; the Reid Company retaliated by hiring a schooner's crew to discharge the SS *Bonaventure*.[110]

The impasse became critical on 16 May 1910 when the LSPU executive convened an emergency meeting and the union members voted unanimously to "make the strike general as far as the Reid Newfoundland Co. is concerned i.e. no Union man is to perform any work for the Co. whatsoever, if any material comes over the line to be transhipped, Union men will not be allowed to handle it."[111] The Reid Newfoundland Company was a major player in the Newfoundland economy, reportedly "the biggest paymaster in the Island, bigger than the Government itself."[112] However, the LSPU was obviously reluctant to call a general strike across the waterfront; the LSPU minutes laconically noted "the dock business was settled and any member wish to go to work on the dock could go (sic)."[113] Lacking strike funds, the LSPU was most effective in quick ad-hoc strikes against individual companies and most vulnerable in a concerted general strike. The Reid Newfoundland Company remained the only major firm on the waterfront outside the LSPU sphere. The Newfoundland experience had counterparts in 19th-century America.[114]

One group of urban labourers organized by the LSPU had no connection with the St. John's waterfront. These were the sanitary workers, municipal employees who carted away the garbage and refuse and swept the city streets. In May 1904 the sanitary employees joined the LSPU.[115] Seemingly their situation contrasted

[109]Letter to editor, *ET*, 16 May 1910. For varying accounts of the dispute, see *ET*, 10 May; *EC*, 14, 17 May; *EH*, 14, 17 May 1910.

[110]*ET*, 16 May 1910.

[111]Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives, *LSPU Minute Book* (Volume 1), 16 May 1910; *EH*, 17 May 1910. See also *LSPU, Minute Book*, Special Meeting, 9 September 1910.

[112]P.T. McGrath, *Newfoundland in 1911* (London 1911), 24 cited in Peter McInnis, "Newfoundland Labour and World War I, the Emergence of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers' Association," MA thesis, Memorial University, 1987, 24. Awarded the lucrative Newfoundland Railroad contract in 1898 (the infamous "Reid Deal"), the Reid Newfoundland Company secured control of the island's coastal steamship and telegraph system and the right to purchase the publicly owned Dry Dock. By 1914 Reids were dominant in the transportation and heavy industry sectors of the local economy. See J.K. Hiller, "The Railway and Local Politics in Newfoundland, 1870-1911" in J.K. Hiller and Peter Neary (eds.), *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation*, (Toronto 1980), 123-147; J.W. McGrath, "R.G. Reid and the Newfoundland Railway," unpublished paper, Newfoundland Historical Society. St. John's, 8 December 1971.

[113]*LSPU Minute Book*, 27 December 1910.

[114]David Montgomery, in describing capitalist power on the US waterfront, focused on the steamship lines and the railroad companies which operated many of the state coastal vessels. In New Orleans and New York, the railroads smashed the transport unions. Steamship companies, in contrast, were much less interested in holding down the hourly wages of longshoremen than they were in insuring the quick discharge and dispatch of their steamships. See Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, 103. For a Canadian equivalent, see Conley, "Class Conflict," 517.

[115]*ET*, 26 May 1904.

favourably with casual waterfront labourers, as sanitary men were permanent employees paid weekly; many of the city's 30-man sanitary staff in 1910 had worked for council 20 or 30 years.[116] In 1890 the wages of the municipal carmen and street sweepers had been increased to $1.00 per day, a rate higher than dock labour.[117] By 1906, however, their wages lagged behind union schedules.[118] Sanitary workers had other complaints as well: the exhausting and unhealthy nature of their employment; the rigid discipline exercised by supervisory personnel; the deductions from weekly pay packets for job-related illness; the flagrant favouritism displayed by foremen.

The sanitary employees began work at midnight, the teamsters and their assistants collecting and depositing the night soil. When this task was finished, usually at 3 am, the workers returned home or slept on the floors of the sanitary stables until daylight. They then resumed work, gathering the ashes and household garbage and sweeping the streets until noon; during the winter months, where sweeping was impossible, they drained the cesspools. On Sundays the men were allowed to quit work at 3 am to rest for morning church services.[119] In 1910 the LSPU petitioned City Council to allow sanitary employees ten minutes grace at midnight for "whenever the men are a few minutes late others are immediately sent out in their place."[120] The men were subjected to strict discipline when on the job. They were forbidden the use of tobacco in any form and they were "warned against speaking on the street to any other person than the bosses."[121] During outbreaks of infectious diseases, the sanitary workers removed the garbage and the night soil from the afflicted households; in January 1911 a sanitary employee died of typhoid and his son was reported gravely ill.[122] The LSPU complained that the wages of the sanitary employees were withheld when they were sick even when they "were injured or contracted infectious diseases while doing duty."[123] In 1910, Patrick English, a 31-year veteran of the city's sanitary services, wrote a bitter letter to the *Telegram*:

[116]Letter by Patrick English, a sanitary employee for 31 years, in *ET*, 12 May 1910. See also *ET* 23 April 1907.

[117]*DC*, 19 September 1890. Wages of street-sweepers were increased from $5.60 to $6 per week. Carmen's (teamsters') rates were raised from $6.50 to $7.00; "this will give them $1 per day, the carmen working 7 days a week."

[118]*DN*, 11 August 1906.

[119]The description of the sanitary men's daily routine was taken from letters in the *ET* and *DN* on 23 May 1912. In 1899 the *ET* claimed that sanitary employees are "at work sixteen hours out of the twenty-four," 18 April 1899. See also *DN*, 27 May 1912.

[120]*EC*, 17 December 1910.

[121]These regulations were adopted in 1899. The penalties for the use of tobacco were 50-cent fine for first offense (one-half day's pay); one dollar fine for second offense (one day's pay) and dismissal for the third offense. The penalty for conversing with the public was one week's suspension.

[122]*ET*, 9 January 1911.

[123]*ET*, 1 February 1908.

In the sanitary service there are other men who have spend 31 years in work similar to mine. When they are sick their wages are stopped even when they get a certificate from the doctor ... I ought in my years to be retired with full pay and this would only be a just recognition of my past services.[124]

Feelings were not eased by the arbitrary practices of sanitary supervisors. In 1907 wages were raised for "men who only went to work during the past week (novices at the work) ... while several of the most reliable and trustworthy are snubbed."[125] It was the erratic enforcement of regulations by supervisors that provoked a major strike by sanitary employees in 1908, an embarrassing labour dispute for the city's mayor, Michael Gibbs, who was also solicitor for the LSPU. A sanitary employee had been dismissed for removing garbage from private property "without orders." The *Telegram* noted that "when a Sanitary man performs such a service without orders from the Supervisor he is in the wrong, whereas if he performs such with orders he is in the right."[126] The other sanitary workers struck in sympathy with the dismissed man and they were replaced by non-union workers. After several meetings between Municipal Council and the LSPU executive, the city reinstated the strikers and ordered an investigation into the grievances of the fired sanitary employee; the man was later rehired.[127]

The interventions of the LSPU on behalf of boy labourers and municipal employees were significant. Descriptions of labourers' unionism at work, as historian David Montgomery has observed, "offer fleeting glimpses of the remedies that laborers advanced for their own problems. All of them ... created some framework of stability ... and encouraged concerted action and programmatic thinking."[128] Like the labourers' unions Montgomery describes, the LSPU sought not only to raise wages, but also to moderate the grinding pace of work and to reduce the arbitrary powers of foremen and supervisors. In the case of child workers and sanitary employees, perhaps the most poignant examples of the brutalization of waged labour, the LSPU reasserted their claims to redress, to the self-respect and dignity denied them within a class-based society.

Conclusion

It is only by the establishment of an absolute monopoly of the Labor supply of a particular kind that a Union can hope to raise wages and to ameliorate the conditions under which its members work and live.[129]

STEAMSHIP STEVEDORING created a cohesive group of dockworkers who spear-

[124]*ET*, 12 May 1910. Patrick English was a spokesman for the union in the sanitary department. See *EC*, 2 September 1911.
[125]*ET*, 23 April 1907.
[126]The regulation allowed supervisors to discriminate among householders. *ET*, 29 June 1908. "There is a discrimination exercised ... the rule is radically wrong and is prolific of trouble."
[127]The sanitary employees' strike received wide coverage. See *DN*, 29-30 June, 3 July; *EC*, 27-30 June, 1-7 July; *EH*, 27, 29-30 June, 1, 2, 7, 8, 11 July 1908.
[128]Montgomery, *Fall*, 96.
[129]Anonymous, "Labor Organizations in Newfoundland," *Christmas Echo*, 2 (1917), 16.

headed the unionizing drives on the waterfront in the late 19th century. Dock unions imposed a uniform schedule of wages and hours, excluded transient and non-union labour and attempted to spread available work among union members. While the ascendancy of the steam vessel allowed a degree of autonomy to steamboat labourers it also intensified the pace of work on the docks, heightened the irregular and casual nature of port employment, and deliberately created a surplus of labour, variables which impeded unionization. In Maritime Canada, the ambiguities inherent in maritime steam technology were complicated by the persistence of traditional wharf labour associated with the fish trade and merchant capital. In Halifax, argued Ian McKay, the casual labour system and the diffuse nature of the port created social fragmentation: "Labourers ... built unions that failed either to change the system or to achieve a secure status on the waterfront."[130]

The pattern of unionization on the St. John's docks is in striking contrast to Halifax, the Maritime port it most resembled. The LSPU was successful, precisely because it was able to establish that "absolute monopoly of the Labor supply," to integrate longshoremen and fish handlers, and to accommodate casual and transient labour. The LSPU was unique among longshore unions in Atlantic Canada in successfully organizing outport fishermen and city workers within a common association and in uniting casual labourers and permanent employees in a common cause. The success of the LSPU indicates that there were more possibilities for class solidarity within merchant capital than initially suspected.

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship in researching the history of the working-class community in St. John's, 1890-1914.

[130]Ian McKay, "Class Struggle and Merchant Capital," 35.