

## What Kind of Unionism: Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers in the SWOC Years, 1936-1942

Ron Crawley

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### Article abstract

In late 1936 steel worker activists in Sydney launched a new organizing drive at the plant under the auspices of the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). This effort drew the support of steel workers in a way that previous organizing attempts had not. However, the militant and self-reliant traditions of the steel workers collided with the cautious strategies and bureaucratic practices of the appointed SWOC leadership in the United States and Canada. As steel workers at Sydney showed great solidarity in their struggle with DOSCO, they also resisted what they saw as undemocratic and highly accommodationist practices by the union's national and international leadership. The struggles within the union embraced the issues of Canadian autonomy and nationalism as well as rank-and-file union control and the democratic rights of union members. It amounted to a struggle over what type of unionism was to be established within the Canadian steel industry.

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# What Kind of Unionism: Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers in the SWOC Years, 1936-1942

Ron Crawley

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

THERE HAS BEEN an impressive amount of historical investigation of class conflict in industrial Cape Breton. Most of the attention has focused on the seemingly irrepressible coal miners and the dramatic struggles which they waged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Understandably, the Sydney steel workers have received less attention, with most research focusing on key historical moments in the period before the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) such as the 1904 and 1923 steel strikes.<sup>2</sup> There has been relatively little published historical work on steel workers in the post-1935, CIO era.<sup>3</sup> This paper contributes to filling

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revision of Chapter IV in the author's PhD thesis, "Conflict Within the Union: Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers, 1936-1972," Carleton University, 1995.

<sup>2</sup>See Paul MacEwan, *Miners and Steelworkers: Labour in Cape Breton* (Toronto 1976); David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1925," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979; Don MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920's," in D. MacGillivray and B. Tennyson, eds., *Cape Breton Historical Essays* (Sydney, NS 1980); Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto 1988); Ron Crawley, "Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry, 1899-1904," in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton's History, 1713-1990* (Fredericton 1990).

<sup>3</sup>One of the few published pieces is Craig Heron and Robert Storey's, "Work and Struggle in the Canadian Steel Industry, 1900-1950," in C. Heron and R. Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston 1986), 210-44. Also see the chapter of Michael Earle's PhD thesis which deals with the establishment of the steel workers' union in the context of the achievements of the Cape Breton coal miners. Michael Earle, "Radi-

this void by examining the rise and growth of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) in Canada until its metamorphosis into the United Steel Workers of America (USWA). It focuses on the Sydney local which remained the strongest and most militant within SWOC. Intra-union conflict as well as struggles between the steel workers and the steel corporation are examined. This is done as a way of revealing the union-building process which is characterized by internal tensions and conflict as well as worker solidarity against external threats.

It is tempting to portray intra-union conflict within SWOC as primarily between conservative union bureaucrats (the bureaucracy) and a militant rank and file. Each were certainly evident within SWOC and there were ongoing struggles between SWOC leaders and rank-and-file militants. However, this dichotomy does not take into account the diversity of ideologies, practices, and policies among both bureaucrats and rank-and-file members. Nor does it differentiate between the levels of union leadership and their relationship with segments of the union membership.<sup>4</sup> It does not acknowledge the complexity of such organizations and, in particular, how union members debate constantly about what constitutes their interests and how best they can be protected and advanced.

However, to ignore the role of rank-and-file militancy and the problems it produced for many of SWOC's highest officials is also a mistake. It is therefore problematic to argue, as does Phillip Nyden, that SWOC officials not only maintained an adversarial approach to management and encouraged a high degree of rank-and-file participation in the union, but that "the grassroots worker movement and union were synonymous" and that one could not distinguish between a "rank-and-file reform movement" and a more conservative union leadership."<sup>5</sup> It was not until the late 1940s when relations between the USWA and the steel companies were stable, he argues, that the union's leadership began to play "a social control role" with regard to the rank and file.<sup>6</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein offers a slightly more critical view of SWOC's leading officials by arguing that they recognized that militancy was sometimes necessary, but they "mistrusted such sentiments when

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calism in Decline: Labour and Politics in Industrial Cape Breton, 1930-1950," PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1990.

<sup>4</sup>See Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto 1995), 3-42, for a discussion of various theoretical approaches to union bureaucracy dealt with in the historical and social science literature. In particular, see pages 33-4 in which Leier draws on the work of Richard Hyman and Michael Bakunin to argue that bureaucracy is not a useful explanatory concept in understanding the relations between union bureaucrats and the rank and file. Union officials operate at all levels of the union and cannot be distinguished from the rank and file on the basis of ideology or policy position. Instead, Leier argues that bureaucrats and rank-and-file members can be differentiated on the basis of the power they wield.

<sup>5</sup>Phillip W. Nyden, *Steelworkers Rank and File: The Political Economy of a Union Reform Movement* (New York 1984), 17, 23.

<sup>6</sup>Nyden, *Steelworkers*, 25.

they shaped union activity after negotiation of a binding collective-bargaining agreement."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, according to Lichtenstein, the close monitoring of, and intervention in, local union affairs was a standard practice within SWOC and designed to contain "irresponsible" actions as well as corruption.<sup>8</sup> Lloyd Ulman also supports a more critical view of the SWOC leadership, pointing out that it resisted the pressure from rank-and-file members to have union elections for positions above the local level and to hold regular conventions.<sup>9</sup> As the historical evidence presented in this paper shows, there was also resistance from high-level SWOC leadership to inter-local rank-and-file councils and meetings that would promote and maintain the horizontal links between rank-and-file members. Instead, the SWOC leadership wanted to maintain tight control of the organization by purging the union leadership above the local level of any dissidents and emphasizing the hierarchical relationship between themselves and the locals. The emphasis on local-national relations at the expense of inter-local relations undermined the radicalism and militancy among SWOC members.

Leading SWOC officials also were concerned with impressing upon steel companies and governments that they and their organization represented "responsible" unionism. This was at odds with the much more militant stance toward the company that was advocated by many activists within the SWOC. Of course, conservative union leaders were not without their support among the rank and file and were able to wield considerable power in an organization that had no formal democratic structures beyond the local level. SWOC officials attempted to contain the militant and radical tendencies within the union by removing from staff positions those who advocated a more militant and democratic union among steel workers. Specifically, communists holding staff positions were targeted since they were often leaders of the most militant workers as well as an embarrassment to a union leadership that was seeking legitimacy from employers and government. Furthermore, communists and other radicals in staff positions could potentially organize opposition to conservative union leaders and their policies on an inter-local basis. Eliminating radicals from the upper levels of the bureaucracy better insured that opposition to conservative leaders would be contained and isolated within specific locals.

Despite the conflicts that were to develop between local activists and high-level union officials, a high degree of solidarity existed among local activists of different ideological and political orientations. This solidarity was somewhat strained by the national and international leadership's strategy of purging radical elements from the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, but in the interest of maintaining unity and focusing on the employer, many local activists moderated

<sup>7</sup>Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge, MA 1982), 21.

<sup>8</sup>Lichtenstein, *Labor's War*, 21.

<sup>9</sup>Lloyd Ulman, *The Government of the Steelworkers' Union* (New York 1962), 8.

their demands for union reform. The purging of communist staff members did not end the influence of local radicals and communists, but it did severely limit their ability to affect change within the larger union. The persistent call for union reform and the need by the dominant leadership to contain and isolate oppositionists at the local level are important in understanding the timing of the transition from SWOC to the USWA, with the latter's adoption of a form of representative democracy that included elected leaders above the local level.

The SWOC experience suggests that while union structures and their bureaucracies are not separate from, or imposed on, the union rank and file, their particular form is not the unconscious and spontaneous expression of the union membership. Union bureaucracies and structures must be understood within a wider historical and socio-economic context that includes class conflict, but they can be more fully understood when they are considered also as a product and legacy of intra-union conflict that occurs within this context. Intra-union conflict revolves around competing visions of unionism and the selection of strategies and policies that best equip the union and its members to deal effectively with the obstacles that confront them. The resolution of major conflicts within SWOC was an integral part of establishing its particular structure and bringing about the formation of the United Steel Workers of America.

### *Traditions of Militancy and Radicalism Among Sydney Steel Workers*

Between the turn of the century and 1936 there had been several attempts by Sydney steel workers to organize an effective union. These attempts were part of a larger struggle by the Cape Breton working class to free themselves from the arbitrary rule of capital. The leading force in this effort was the coal miners who, along with the steel workers, launched numerous job actions against the company that owned the coal and steel industries. The most important of these actions were the Sydney steel strikes of 1904 and 1923 and the Cape Breton coal strikes of 1909, 1917, 1922, 1924, and 1925, all of which involved the armed intervention of the state.<sup>10</sup> The strikes of the 1920s were at best only partially successful and were followed by a retrenchment of working-class militancy which lasted throughout the late 1920s and into the early 1930s. The renewal of organizing activity was led mainly by steel workers connected to the social-democratic Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) or the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) who saw their struggle as part of a larger working-class movement designed to transform Canadian society.<sup>11</sup> The

<sup>10</sup>See David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners"; Don MacGillivray, "Military Aid to the Civil Power"; Ron Crawley, "Class Conflict"; Craig Heron, *Working in Steel*; and Michael Earle, "Radicalism in Decline."

<sup>11</sup>These influences were felt most in the coal mining communities. For analyses of the influence of radical politics on the working class movement of Cape Breton see Michael Earle, "The Coal Miners and Their 'Red' Union: The Amalgamated Mine Workers of Nova Scotia, 1932-1936," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 99-137; John Manley, "Preaching

more radical among them were inspired by the apparent successes of the Bolshevik-led revolution in the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

Other evidence of radical working-class politics among the steel workers was to be found in the pages of the *Steelworker and Miner* which not only regularly criticized the companies and governments, but called on steel workers and miners to take militant action. It was Marxist in its orientation and until 1944 carried on its masthead the slogan, "Workers of the World Unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains; you have a world to gain." Its editors proclaimed it to be fighting for freedom "from Capitalist Exploitation" and called it the "official Organ of the Class-Conscious Workers of Sydney." It claimed to be "the only Workers' paper east of Toronto" and to possess the largest weekly circulation east of Montréal with a readership of 30,000. Its editor, M.A MacKenzie, had been a Communist Party member for a short time in the early 1930s and afterward remained sympathetic to the Soviet Union and generally supportive of the Communist Party of Canada despite some tensions.<sup>13</sup> Other leading left-wing intellectuals in the region, such as J.C. Mortimer and Roscoe Fillmore, also wrote regularly for the paper and it also carried letters from steel workers and miners. Its willingness to criticize and even fiercely attack CCF politicians and trade union leaders from a left perspective made it unique.<sup>14</sup>

Prior to SWOC's formation in 1936, an independent union had been started at Sydney. It was begun in defiance of the company-sponsored employees' representation plan which some steel workers had participated in since the end of the 1923 strike. Although the new independent union achieved some success, it was not able to organize and mobilize the majority of workers at the plant.<sup>15</sup> When the Committee for Industrial Organizations, later the Congress of Industrial Organizations, began to organize mass production industries such as steel, union activists at

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the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-35," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 65-114; and David Frank, "Working Class Politics: The Election of J.B. McLachlan, 1916-1935," in *The Island*.

<sup>12</sup>This influence was evident at a "mass meeting" of Sydney steel workers held in the early 1930s "for the purpose of giving the steel workers' delegate to the Soviet union a sendoff and formulating a list of questions to be answered by the delegate on his return, and also giving an explanation of the reasons for sending a delegation to the Soviet Union at the present time." A leaflet advertising the meeting urged the steel workers to "Come and Hear Rousing Speeches and Inspiring Music!" the former to be supplied by, among others, the militant ex-miner and communist, J.B. McLachlan. See University College of Cape Breton (Sydney, NS), Beaton Institute, MG 19, 7, leaflet 291, nd (circa 1935).

<sup>13</sup>George MacEachern, Interview, 29 April 1991. MacEachern was a steel worker activist during the 1930s and 1940s and was also a well-known member of the CPC. (All the interviews were conducted by the author.)

<sup>14</sup>The *Steelworker and Miner*, or *Steelworker* as it was later called, was published weekly in Sydney between 1933 and 1954. It is housed in the National Archives of Canada (NAC).

<sup>15</sup>David Frank and Don MacGillivray, eds., *George MacEachern: An Autobiography* (Sydney, NS 1987).

the Sydney plant sought affiliation with the organization. On 13 December 1936, Sydney's Lodge 1064 became an affiliate local of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee which was based in Pittsburgh.<sup>16</sup> The executive of lodge 1064 soon approached the members of the Dominion Steel Company (DOSCO) council and convinced them to join the union and in effect bring the company-sponsored council to an end.<sup>17</sup> As with many SWOC locals in the United States, SWOC steel workers at Sydney had essentially occupied and subverted the plant council.<sup>18</sup>

DOSCO soon responded to the union by voluntarily granting modest wage increases. However, this only attracted further support for the union which grew to over 3,000 members within a matter of months. All the union work in the area was "done by local, unpaid workers in their spare time," a feat that made activists very proud.<sup>19</sup> The impression given by Irving Abella that Silby Barrett, a long-time official of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in Cape Breton was responsible for these results, ignores the initiative and organizing efforts taken by rank-and-file steel workers.<sup>20</sup> So impressive were the efforts of the Sydney local and the promise it held for the entire Canadian steel industry that the international SWOC leadership decided that Canada, then considered a part of the Buffalo sub-district, was to be made a separate district.<sup>21</sup>

Once organized, the steel workers set about to build a union based on militancy, rank-and-file participation, and solidarity with other workers. In 1937, they cooperated with the coal miners of Nova Scotia to win the first provincial trade union act in Canada. Under its provisions a referendum on the issue of a dues "check-off" for Sydney steel workers was held and won by local 1064. However, DOSCO was determined to prevent effective unionization, and it arbitrarily refused to continue the check-off, a move which the union protested as a violation of the newly won legislation.<sup>22</sup> The dues check-off was considered to be extremely important in achieving financial stability for the union since a voluntary payment

<sup>16</sup>Frank Smith, *Brief History of Local 1064 United Steel Workers of America and its Achievements* (Sydney 1985), 11. According to Freeman, Stelco's local 1005 became the first SWOC local in Canada when it was founded 21 June 1936. See Bill Freeman, *1005: Political Life in a Union Local* (Toronto 1982), 29.

<sup>17</sup>Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Lodge 1064, A.A. of I.S. & T.W. of N.A. to the General Works Committee of the Dosco Employees Representation Plan, 13 February 1937.

<sup>18</sup>*Steelworker and Miner* (Sydney), 8 May 1937.

<sup>19</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, John Johnstone to David MacDonald, 20 May 1937; *Cape Breton Post* (Sydney), 2 September 1963.

<sup>20</sup>Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1973) 55.

<sup>21</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, M.T. Montgomery to John Johnson, 4 September 1937. Barrett was appointed to direct the efforts of the CIO in Canada and became the first de facto Canadian Director of SWOC.

<sup>22</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Lodge 1064 to Angus L. MacDonald, 2 July 1937.

of dues by underpaid steel workers would bring dues from only a portion of the workers.<sup>23</sup>

In the face of the company's refusal to recognize the union, the workers decided to take job action on a department-wide basis. In June 1937, the dock workers at the plant carried out a successful "stand-up strike" over the issue of seniority.<sup>24</sup> This was followed by a strike among bar-mill workers that was initially over "a misunderstanding in negotiations for an adjustment of wages," but soon became a dispute about dues check-off and recognition of the union by the employer.<sup>25</sup> The strike appeared to be welcomed by the local executive who also supported the right of the bar-mill departmental committee to accompany the union executive to a meeting with management, despite the company's objections. Nevertheless, J.W. Gray, assistant general manager of the plant, insisted that the strike did not have the authorization of the union, by which he undoubtedly meant the national and international leadership.<sup>26</sup>

The dues check-off was granted shortly after the bar-mill strike, but it did not undermine the militancy of the workers and the local leadership as feared by some within the left-wing community.<sup>27</sup> When the company later ignored seniority and overlooked union men in filling vacancies within the bar-mill, the workers struck again. The company still refused to address the concerns of the strikers and so the rod-mill workers struck in support of them.<sup>28</sup> Government representatives intervened to request that the workers end the strike as a precondition to negotiating the issue, but SWOC 1064 Corresponding Secretary George MacEachern responded that "it would be impossible for men with union principle" to accept such preconditions.<sup>29</sup> From the sidelines the editor of the *Steelworker and Miner* voiced support for the strikers and reminded them that they were "blazing a trail — the trail of working-class solidarity."<sup>30</sup>

The strike finally ended when Silby Barrett, Canadian director of SWOC, intervened to pressure the local executive to recommend a return to work pending an investigation of the matter. This the executive did, but the workers insisted on

<sup>23</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Lodge 1064 to D. MacDonald, 1 June 1937. Union pins as well as a password were issued to union members who were in good standing. See Financial Secretary of Local 1064 to David MacDonald, 14 June 1937.

<sup>24</sup>*Steelworker and Miner* (Sydney), 5 June 1937.

<sup>25</sup>NAC, Department of Labour, Strike File, RG 27, Vol. 388, File 168.

<sup>26</sup>Finally, a settlement was reached when the union executive and the mill committee met the premier and minister of mines.

<sup>27</sup>This was a fear expressed by the editor of the *Steelworker and Miner* who congratulated the union, but warned them "to keep their eyes open for new tracks to sabotage the union" and in particular to be aware of the talk of "cooperation" which is "the lion talking co-operation to the lamb." See *Steelworker and Miner*, 17 July 1937.

<sup>28</sup>*Steelworker and Miner*, 9 October 1937.

<sup>29</sup>NAC, Department of Labour, Strike File, RG 27, Vol. 392, File 276.

<sup>30</sup>*Steelworker and Miner*, 18 September, 1937.



a vote to decide the issue, the result being an eight to one ratio in favour of ending the strike.<sup>31</sup> This was apparently the first such intervention in a local 1064 strike by a national or international SWOC representative and its effect was to undermine rank-and-file militancy and to end the strike without a clear resolution of the issue. The resulting dissatisfaction with the intervention marked the beginning of an oppositional movement within the union which would oppose the practices and policies of the national and international leadership on a range of issues.

Other job actions occurred which forced DOSCO to negotiate various "departmental" issues. A strike by open hearth workers occurred when a foreman tried to dismiss a worker unjustly and coke ovens department workers also struck over the reduction of the number of men at the ovens.<sup>32</sup> Virtually the entire work force was in a state of ferment, according to Frank Murphy, an open hearth department worker and union activist. As evidence of this, he described the elaborate signalling system the steel workers had devised to spread the word of strike. Key activists in each department would communicate that strike action had commenced by simply picking up the departmental telephone and stating to the worker in another department, "the bird has flown." This was the cue for workers in the next department to strike if possible.<sup>33</sup> The local union executive continued to support job actions initiated by the rank and file as long as the company remained intransigent. When dock workers refused to work Sundays during the summer of 1938, local 1064 President Carl Neville reminded all steel workers that "scabbing" would be dealt with "in the most effective way possible by the union."<sup>34</sup> However, the local union executive was willing to intervene to end a work stoppage if it appeared that management was finally willing to bargain seriously. Such action was taken by local union officials when galvanizers in the wire and nail mill struck over the issue of a wage cut. The workers ended their strike, but the intervention by the executive quickly brought criticism from some union militants.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this departmental activity, the company still refused to bargain on wages and other important plant-wide issues. One of the tactics used by DOSCO officials was to "red-bait" the more radical members of the local leadership. For example, DOSCO superintendent Kelley pointed out in a meeting of DOSCO and union representatives that Corresponding Secretary George MacEachern was recently elected a member of the executive of the Communist Party of Canada. To

<sup>31</sup>*Steelworker and Miner*, 9 October 1937.

<sup>32</sup>*Steelworker and Miner*, 18 September 1937; PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, SWOC Local 1064 Union Bulletin, 18, 24 September 1937.

<sup>33</sup>Frank Murphy, Interview, 15 April 1993. An amusing incident connected with one of these job actions occurred when a supervisor discovered the code and threatened that someone would be fired "if that bird flies once more."

<sup>34</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Carl Neville to all Local 1064 Members, 16 June 1938.

<sup>35</sup>*Union News*, 25 June 1938; *Steelworker and Miner*, 11, 25 June 1938.

this MacEachern replied, "I am very proud that I was elected to that position in recognition of the work I have done for the party during the past number of years."<sup>36</sup> The local executive circulated to the union membership minutes of the meeting where the exchange occurred, suggesting that there was a sizable base of radical support and that the membership was not highly susceptible to red-baiting tactics by company officials.<sup>37</sup> These early strikes and other steel worker actions demonstrate that there was not only a high degree of militancy among rank-and-file steel workers at Sydney, but that militant action was often taken independent of any sanctioning by local, national, or international union officials. Indeed, such action probably would not have been taken very often if the decision had been left to the national or international leadership.

Internal union relations at the local level were quite fluid and based on a high degree of input from the membership, including workplace votes to decide whether or not a job action should continue. The existence within the union and the larger community of a relatively small but active left-wing element, which included communists, independent radicals, and left-wing social democrats, promoted a militant and democratic unionism. The local leadership reminded the union members of their essential role within the union through the local's *Union News* and regular meetings.<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on democracy and the participation of the rank and file was promoted in the slogan, "Every Member a Union Builder" and the executive stressed that "a union is not a machine, into which can be placed dues and out of which automatically, comes improved benefits. Policies and actions can only be decided collectively by the membership."<sup>39</sup> Whereas many previous union-building attempts at Sydney had attracted mainly skilled Anglo-Saxon steel workers, the SWOC effort clearly appealed to a large cross-section of workers in the non-Anglo-Saxon community, including black workers.<sup>40</sup>

The class consciousness of local union activists countered the tendency towards parochialism or narrow self-interest since they saw their movement as much larger than either the local or the entire SWOC. For example, a resolution passed by the local and sent to the international headquarters called for the publication of a periodical paper "that will present and protect ... the interests and

<sup>36</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Union Executive to SWOC 1064 Members, 11 December 1937.

<sup>37</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Union Executive to SWOC 1064 Members, 11 December 1937.

<sup>38</sup>They seemed to rely very little on the rather bland and uninspiring Canadian edition of USWA's *Steel Labor* to promote militancy and democracy. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 6 April 1938. (The minutes are housed at the local union office in Sydney, NS.)

<sup>39</sup>*Union News*, 15 April 1938.

<sup>40</sup>Of course, there was racism within the union. When Dowling Street was nominated to the coke ovens grievance committee and a fellow worker objected to him serving as such on the basis of his "colour," the majority at a union meeting chose to ignore the racism rather than censure it. See SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 23 February 1938.

needs of all classes that toil for their existence."<sup>41</sup> Also, during the 1937 "little steel" strike in the United States, collections were taken up at the plant and many Sydney workers contributed one hour's pay to the strikers.<sup>42</sup> The alliance of communist, social democratic, and independent radicals allowed the local union to reach out for support from a variety of progressive groups with various political orientations<sup>43</sup>

Another important feature of the union local in this period was that its influence was widely felt in the community since it provided tangible support to other workers. For instance, the Unemployed and Part-time Workers' Union was organized and promoted by local 1064.<sup>44</sup> Local 1064 also supported workers in the community who went on strike, as it did by calling for a boycott of the *Post-Record* when the paper's employees struck.<sup>45</sup> When striking clerks and truck drivers at a local store approached the union for help, the latter intervened with organizational support and put enough pressure on the owner to resolve the strike in the workers' favour. The union's influence was such that virtually all locally-based employers took seriously its advice and its warnings. For example, when Foreman Waye was fired from his job at the Atlantic Engineering Works because he was a union activist, a committee from the local 1064 executive met with the management who then reinstated Waye.<sup>46</sup> Its civic role also extended beyond support for other working-class organizations. At one union meeting, some members criticized the union for being "lax in looking after the welfare of working-class children in this city."<sup>47</sup> The local also had considerable influence on civic elections as election candidates solicited the support of the union.<sup>48</sup> The union felt free to intervene in

<sup>41</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Local 1064 Resolution, 17 January 1939.

<sup>42</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, MacDonald to SWOC Lodges, 26 June 1937. Again in early 1938, the local contributed \$100 and organized collections at the Sydney plant in support of striking Ohio steel workers. See SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 26 January 1938.

<sup>43</sup>When the *Clarion*, publication of the Communist Party of Canada, offered the local a full page of coverage each month, the union accepted the offer. Also, when the Workers' Educational League, which was composed of left-wing intellectuals, approached the union about offering education on labour and unions, they were welcomed. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 26 January and 9 February 1938.

<sup>44</sup>*Union News*, 15 April 1938; *Steelworker and Miner*, 26 February 1938.

<sup>45</sup>*Steelworker and Miner*, 12 April 1940.

<sup>46</sup>*Union News*, 23 April 1938.

<sup>47</sup>The local decided to contribute to a fund for a "swimming resort" for children at a local beach. *Union News*, 18 June 1938.

<sup>48</sup>In 1940 it endorsed George B. Slaven for re-election as mayor. See *Steelworker*, 6 January 1940. Councillor Seymour Hines also appealed for union support by stating that he had always "taken the stand for the class of which I belong namely the working class and if elected in January I shall take the same stand." PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Seymour Hines to Sydney Lodge 1064, 21 December 1937.

all types of situations on behalf of its members.<sup>49</sup> A physical symbol of the union's growing presence in the community was the meeting hall in the centrally-located district of Ashby that had been purchased to accommodate larger meetings of the union membership.<sup>50</sup>

The local was independent of any political party, although most of its executive members were supporters of either the CCF or the CPC. Because of this, the union would publicize meetings of communists as well as social democrats and it strongly defended the right of free political expression for all its members, including communists.<sup>51</sup> Such independent political action was very much the result of the communists' "United Front" strategy which called for cooperation with the social democrats and the mainstream of the labour movement in order to build alliances against fascism. The united front was under pressure from social democrats within the local who called for the union to affiliate with the CCF.<sup>52</sup> It was also criticized by some radicals associated with the *Steelworker* who felt that there was too much compromise by militants within the local.<sup>53</sup>

The united front strategy prevailed despite political tensions within the union. Union activists of any political stripe usually respected the right of members to choose a political affiliation even if they disagreed with the politics.<sup>54</sup> It also allowed for union donations to be given to either the CCF or to the Communist Party's paper.<sup>55</sup> In the case of the CCF, official union delegates even attended

<sup>49</sup>One such intervention occurred when a union member and his family were being evicted and a visit to the mayor by a union committee resulted in them being allowed to remain in their home. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 31 August 1938.

<sup>50</sup>*Union News*, 18 June 1938.

<sup>51</sup>*Steelworker*, 23 March 1940.

<sup>52</sup>Such a call came when the UMWA convention affiliated with the CCF, but the communists and other militants in the local insisted that they wanted independent political action by the union. They proposed non-partisan political committees within the local, which resulted in the local's participation in a newly found Cape Breton "Permanent Joint Council for Political Action." SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 14 December 1938; 8, 15, February and 1 March 1939.

<sup>53</sup>On one occasion the editor of the radical paper criticized the union for doing most of its advertising in the *Post-Record*, which he referred to as "the DOSCO organ." He facetiously asked whether this was part of the united front strategy. See *Steelworker*, 11 March 1939. The *Steelworker* had its supporters among independent militants who welcomed the inclusion of union news and commentary in the paper. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 15 May 1940.

<sup>54</sup>The communists showed themselves to be especially receptive to the united front policy. For instance, when David Lewis and Angus MacInnis were to speak to the local on behalf of the CCF, a member of the committee formed to organize the event included well known communist steelworker George MacEachern. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 5 October 1938.

<sup>55</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 10, 17 May 1939 and 6 March 1940.

conventions, but this sometimes created conflict within the local.<sup>56</sup> It appears that the only action that could not be taken without threatening the united front was direct interference in the union's affairs by either political party.<sup>57</sup>

### *Nationalism and Autonomy Versus International Control*

The preoccupation of SWOC's leadership with obtaining the recognition and acceptance of employers encouraged a highly bureaucratic way of union-building and a very accommodationist approach to relations with the steel companies. It affected the union's organizing strategy in Canada and in particular the alliances it sought.<sup>58</sup> The obsession with employer recognition also ensured that union publicity material from the international headquarters portrayed SWOC as "a truly responsible union, with a record for observance of contracts unsurpassed in the history of the American labor movement." SWOC President Philip Murray made it clear that the USWA was a pragmatic organization dedicated to unionism based on "a signed contract as something sacred — a pact to be observed; an agreement which is your bond of good faith."<sup>59</sup>

Not surprisingly, the pursuit of a first contract on such a basis conflicted with the approach of militant and radical unionists, as evidenced in the first contract negotiations at Sydney. Negotiations were taken over by the Canadian director of SWOC and "Senator Sneed" of the international headquarters after DOSCO refused to deal with local union representatives who immediately criticized the Canadian director for meeting with DOSCO officials to discuss a contract when the local executive had no prior knowledge of it.<sup>60</sup> The executive was also angered by the contract that was proposed by the SWOC officials as "a starting point and ... a basis for further negotiations." However, after being discussed "clause by clause" at a meeting of 1000 steel workers it was voted on and rejected. The Canadian director was reportedly told by the steel workers, "You've sold us!"<sup>61</sup> A major point of

<sup>56</sup>For example, when George MacEachern was appointed a delegate to the CCF convention, a union member objected that he was attending the meeting as a member of the Communist Party. In response, MacEachern stated that he was going as a member of the union and that he "had never let Party interest interfere with instructions from the union." SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 24 May 1939.

<sup>57</sup>Michael Earle argues that the maintenance of the united front strategy was an extremely important factor in the success of SWOC. See Earle, "Radicalism in Decline."

<sup>58</sup>SWOC's Canadian Director, Silby Barrett, apparently solicited testimonials in support of the union from priests in Nova Scotia as well as from provincial Premier Angus L. MacDonald, with whom he was said to have an "excellent relationship." See NAC, MG 28, I 268, Acting Secretary, National Office to Silby Barrett, n.d. (circa 1937).

<sup>59</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Acting Secretary, National Office to Silby Barrett, n.d. (circa 1937).

<sup>60</sup>*Union News*, 18 June 1938; *Union News*, 28 May 1938; SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 25 May, 1 June 1938.

<sup>61</sup>*Union News*, 23 July 1938; University College of Cape Breton, Beaton Institute, MG 19, 13, Radio Address by Norman MacKenzie, circa January 1940. *Steelworker and Miner*, 23 July 1938.

contention was the power that the contract provided the company at the workplace. In particular, paragraph three, section eight of the contract reportedly stated that, "Any employee who refuses to carry out the instructions of his superintendent, or representative, or refuses to carry out work assigned him ... may be summarily dismissed from the company's service and the union agrees not to take any action."<sup>62</sup> One local activist stated that the contract would mean "that the company could do about as they pleased under the contract."<sup>63</sup>

The international leadership further antagonized the Sydney steel workers by not consulting them on the appointment of union staff. At a 1939 SWOC conference in Amherst, Nova Scotia, national and international union officials committed themselves to hiring a full-time organizer for Nova Scotia and promised the Sydney delegates that the Nova Scotia locals would be consulted on who should be hired. But when Foreman Waye was appointed to the position without consulting the locals, the local 1064 executive voiced its objection and local 1064 President Carl Neville submitted his resignation in protest, stating that he would resume the post when "the rank and file had a vote on who would be our provincial representative."<sup>64</sup> The dissatisfaction with the leadership's decision was also conveyed directly to International President Phillip Murray by acting local President Norman MacKenzie:

We understand that we have Canadian autonomy. To us autonomy means self-government. Self-government presupposes the democratic system of choosing by ballot. Are we being denied that right? Have the steel workers in Nova Scotia fallen so low that they can not be entrusted with the responsibility of choosing their organizer or representative whichever it happens to be?

We wish to say that the workers organized this lodge, the workers maintain it and the workers are going to have a say in the running of it.<sup>65</sup>

It was these developments that encouraged the founding of the Canadian Steel Workers' Union at Sydney and a call for a complete break with the American-based union. The principal proponent of the new organization was steel worker Doane Curtis, who attacked the SWOC by recalling the problems Sydney steel workers had

<sup>62</sup>*Steelworker and Miner*, 30 July 1938.

<sup>63</sup>Another problem was that the contract provided for no increase in wages. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 13, 20, 27 July 1938; *Steelworker*, 30 July, 6, 13 August 1938. Steel workers were understandably angered when it was later mistakenly reported in the pages of *Steel Labor* that the contract was accepted by the membership. See PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Vincent Sweeny to Silby Barrett, 28 September 1938; Barrett to Sweeny, 31 December 1938.

<sup>64</sup>The resignation was rejected by a vote of 39 to 35, but Neville still refused to take his seat as President. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 29 March, 5, 12 April 1939.

<sup>65</sup>PANS, Misc. U, USWA Local 1064, Reel 2, Local 1064 President to Philip Murray, 31 March 1939.

with the American-based Association of Amalgamated Iron and Tin Workers, which had attempted to represent them in the period just prior to the 1923 strike. He argued that the SWOC was doing quite poorly in the rest of Canada and was using Sydney steel workers, who were the only dues-paying local in the country.<sup>66</sup> Curtis and other members of the new union organization proposed that the SWOC local apply for affiliation to the All Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL), but a vote on the resolution was not permitted by the local SWOC leadership. The latter argued that an international organization was needed to fight international capital and that the international union was investing much more money in Ontario than Sydney was sending south of the border. It was also argued by some local activists that the international union was needed to fight fascism, an argument undoubtedly made by the Communist Party members in the union.<sup>67</sup>

The challenge from the independent union was brief, but its publication, *The Flyswatter*, claimed that it was enough of a threat that SWOC issued a publication called the *Ladle* against it.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, in light of the widespread dissatisfaction with some of the high-level SWOC leadership, the local SWOC leadership was fairly tolerant of the local advocates of the independent union.<sup>69</sup> However, they were less tolerant of A.R. Mosher, President of the ACCL, who they called a "union splitter," for promoting the independent union.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the SWOC local passed a resolution expelling Doane Curtis from the union and denying "voice and vote" for one year to other activists in the independent union.<sup>71</sup> Clearly, the prestige of the CIO and the promise it held for workers throughout North America were important

<sup>66</sup>*Post-Record* (Sydney), 15 May 1939. Indeed, evidence in support of this view was provided by a SWOC report on organization which noted that, "while the Maritime section of the organization was holding its own and making some progress, the central Canada situation had rapidly deteriorated." See, NAC, MG 28, I 268, SWOC Wage and Policy Conference Proceedings, Montréal, 19-20 April 1941. Curtis claimed that the Sydney steel workers had already paid over \$70,000 in dues during the first 22 months since the check-off was instituted. He also pointed out that the two recent department-wide strikes at Sydney received no financial assistance from the international headquarters; one strike was supported through a general collection among the steel workers and the other funded out of the local union treasury. *Post-Record* (Sydney) 15 May 1939.

<sup>67</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 27 July, 3 August 1938.

<sup>68</sup>University College of Cape Breton, Beaton Institute, Doane Curtis Papers, MG 19, 1, Box 2.

<sup>69</sup>At first, they attempted through debate and discussion to dissuade the activists from continuing their efforts. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 27 April 1938.

<sup>70</sup>*Union News*, 30 April 1938. In a letter to the editor of the *Steelworker*, Mosher countered that the Sydney steel workers possessed "a deeprooted and justifiable objection to membership in a foreign-controlled organization to which they have to pay 75 per cent of the dues collected and from which they receive no benefits financially or otherwise." *The Steelworker*, 24 March 1939.

<sup>71</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 26 April 1939.

in maintaining the allegiance of Sydney steel workers to SWOC.<sup>72</sup> As for the disproportionately large financial contribution being made to SWOC by Sydney and Trenton steel workers, this was motivated by union principle as well as a realization that the health of the Sydney local depended on the eventual organization of other key sectors within the entire Canadian industry. Also, the leading role played by Sydney and Trenton in the SWOC was thankfully acknowledged by the membership in Ontario, who saw that "the example of the Nova Scotia brothers in carrying aloft the banner of SWOC in Canada has been at one and the same time an inspiration and example to the workers in Ontario."<sup>73</sup> Undoubtedly, many Sydney steel activists took this leadership role very seriously.

### *The Leadership Response to Militancy and Radicalism*

The rejection of the nationalist challenge and the reaffirmation of the CIO did not resolve tensions between the local and the international leadership. When DOSCO again refused to negotiate with the local union leadership in 1940, the workers in the coke ovens department decided to strike for "industrial democracy" and against the "family compact" tactics in hiring and promotion.<sup>74</sup> Many other workers wanted to use "blitzkrieg" tactics, which would involve an immediate strike of all workers including maintenance men who would prevent damage to the furnaces.<sup>75</sup> Instead, the local union executive called for a strike vote among the entire membership, which resulted in all but 297 of the 3200 steel workers voting in favour of strike action. Local President Norman Mackenzie informed DOSCO officials that the plant would be struck on 21 March but that maintenance workers would be provided by the union as long as there was no attempt by the company to produce steel.<sup>76</sup> However, as the strike was about to begin, the executive announced that the strike was postponed pending results from a board of conciliation which was requested by both DOSCO and SWOC's Canadian director.<sup>77</sup>

When the Canadian director made it clear that the strike would not be supported by the union's international headquarters, the local executive reluctantly agreed to conciliation. Some members of the local subsequently called for the Canadian director's resignation, but the motion was not accepted when it was

<sup>72</sup>The collapse of the rival organization came when the ACCL made peace with the CIO and withdrew support from the independent union. University College of Cape Breton, Beaton Institute, Doane Curtis Papers, MG 19, 1, Box 3, 20-2.

<sup>73</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, SWOC, Proceedings and Resolutions of National Policy Meetings, Amherst, Nova Scotia, 4-5 May 1939; *Union News*, 2 July 1938.

<sup>74</sup>*Union Bulletin*, 10 February 1940.

<sup>75</sup>*Union Bulletin*, 5 February 1940.

<sup>76</sup>University College of Cape Breton, Beaton Institute, MG 29, 7, d2f2, "Strike Bulletin No. 1," 19 March 1940; *Steelworker*, 25 March 1940.

<sup>77</sup>*Steelworker*, 23, 30 March 1940. Trenton workers had also voted overwhelming to strike and their case was also put before the conciliation board. See *Steelworker*, 11 May 1940.



pointed out that International Secretary-Treasurer David MacDonald had also played a role in "restraining the lodge from direct action."<sup>78</sup> The international office then appointed American Philip Clowes to assist the local with the conciliation talks. He attempted to assure the workers that the Conciliation Board was a good one and that the workers would be able to get "a reasonable agreement." However, when the Board voted unanimously in favour of DOSCO, Clowes advised the local that "you will get no more out of the company even if you were to come to strike."<sup>79</sup> The local executive reluctantly persuaded the workers to accept a contract based on the conciliation report.<sup>80</sup>

Union members continued to lash out at the Canadian director for his role in subverting the strike. His defence was that he followed the policy of SWOC headquarters which "is against local strikes."<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, some local activists pressed for the removal of Barrett and in response to this dissatisfaction the international leadership stated that measures would be taken to correct problems in the Canadian section of SWOC, based on a complete investigation of the situation by Philip Clowes.<sup>82</sup> However, from the perspective of the international leadership, the problem was not the performance of the Canadian director, but rather the fact that some paid officials of the union in Ontario were communists with considerable influence among the membership. The hiring of Charles Millard as a CIO staff person in Ontario and as a *de facto* assistant to the Canadian director of SWOC had as a primary purpose the counteracting of communist influence within the CIO, and SWOC in particular. The goal of Millard and the SWOC international leadership was the removal of communists and their sympathizers from key positions within the union.<sup>83</sup> The adoption of this anti-communist position was undoubtedly facilitated

<sup>78</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 20 March, 3 April 1940. Local 1064 President Norman Mackenzie later stated that the strike was called off because the international office "would not sanction it, advising and insisting on conciliation." *Post-Record* (Sydney), 1 January 1942. This intervention by international union officials was severely criticized by a *Steelworker* editorial which stated that many labour leaders "are trying to keep the workers quiet at all costs, to smother just complaints, to silence just demands, to make degrading compromises with the bosses and the government to drive back the rising tide of discontent." *Steelworker*, 6 July 1940.

<sup>79</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 17 April, 3 July 1940.

<sup>80</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 10, 24 July 1940. It was ratified by a vote of 950 to 457, which represented a very small voter turn-out. See *Post-Record* (Sydney), 1 January 1941. The dissatisfaction of the local membership was demonstrated when the local passed a resolution protesting against a statement in SWOC's Canadian edition of *Steel Labour*, which claimed that the settlement was a victory for steel workers. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 29 May 1940.

<sup>81</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 17, 24 April 1940.

<sup>82</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 29 May 1940.

<sup>83</sup>Millard's anti-communist credentials were already well established and recognized within the union movement. As a negotiator with Local 222 of the UAW he was in the forefront of

by the Soviet-Nazi Pact and the communists' passive opposition to the war in the 1939 to 1941 period.

One of the immediate results of Clowes' work on behalf of SWOC's international headquarters was the dismissal of communist Dick Steele as the head of organizing in Ontario. His dismissal was immediately protested by a conference of Toronto SWOC lodges, but the Sydney local decided not to act on the issue until they received Clowes' report and an explanation from President Murray.<sup>84</sup> However, the view of many local 1064 activists was that Steele's *de facto* replacement, Charles Millard, was someone "whose record in the Canadian Labour movement is not so good."<sup>85</sup> This lack of respect for Millard and Barrett translated into sympathy for what was called the "rank-and-file movement" headed by Steele and various militants within SWOC's Ontario locals. The local union endorsed this "movement," according to local 1064 president MacKenzie, because, "it is our conviction that the workers who are members of the S.W.O.C. in Canada must decide their own policies and elect their own officers."<sup>86</sup>

Communists within the Sydney local, such as George MacEachern, urged the local to give further support to the rank-and-file movement in Ontario "in their fight for democracy in the Canadian set up."<sup>87</sup> Others in the local clearly sympathized with this view, but there were social-democratic members who were very restrained in their support of the Ontario oppositionists. Their affiliation to the CCF and their ideological opposition to communism accounted for this position, and according to George MacEachern, it limited the support which others such as himself could give the Ontario oppositionists.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, there is no evidence that the communist affiliation of the leading oppositionists in the Ontario section of SWOC was ever raised as an issue in membership meetings at Sydney.

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opposing the left-wing within the union and its call for greater rank-and-file representation within the union. Because of this activity, an alliance of communists, CCFers, Canadian nationalists, and militant trade unionists had organized his defeat in an election for regional director of the UAW. See Charlotte Yates, *From Plant to Politics: The Autoworkers Union in Post-War Canada* (Philadelphia 1993), 26-9. Also Irving Abella, *Nationalism*, 55-7. According to SWOC activist Al Campbell, Millard's strongly religious and anti-communist views were well known by many SWOC activists before he became involved in the union. (Al Campbell, Interview, 25 March 1991) Another example was in his attitude to SWOC local 1005 activist and communist Charles McClure, whom Millard saw as guilty of "irresponsible leadership" because of his repeated calls for support of causes such as "Spanish Democracy." See NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to MacDonald, 20 July 1940.

<sup>84</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 19 June, 3 July 1940.

<sup>85</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 7 August 1940.

<sup>86</sup>*Post-Record* (Sydney) 1 January 1941.

<sup>87</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 7, 28 August 1940.

<sup>88</sup>George MacEachern, Interview, 29 April 1991.

The oppositionists in Ontario did not attempt to break with SWOC and instead tried to build a movement within it to challenge the existing leadership in the Canadian section. This approach included an appeal to the union's president to intervene on their behalf. However, Clowes, Millard, and Barrett had Murray's full support. Indeed, Millard dismissed Harry Hunter and Harry Hamburg, two other communists working for SWOC in Ontario, with Murray's full knowledge.<sup>89</sup> The "Ontario Executive," as the opposition leaders came to be known, attempted to build support within SWOC by passing a resolution that "the Sydney local be asked to call immediately a Canadian Steel Workers Convention to formulate policy for Canadian steel workers ... and that our per capita be turned over to this executive for organizational purposes." This resolution was sent to the President of SWOC along with a letter which stated, "We in Canada have our own peculiar labour tradition and our own peculiar problems, and we are not inclined to be dictated to." They also appealed to President Murray to recognize the Ontario Executive as defending the true interests of SWOC and Canadian steel workers, but the SWOC president responded that the opposition's actions were "a flagrant violation of our international regulations" and that opposition was legitimate, "but, only if it comes as a constitutional expression."<sup>90</sup> Ironically, the constitution gave the leadership the legitimacy and power to dismiss the radicals on staff and it could only be changed at an international convention of the union where Canadian delegates would make up only a very small proportion of the delegates.

The suggestion that the Sydney local play the role of mediator in the dispute indicates that there was substantial support in the local for the Ontario opposition. When Forman Waye, the SWOC staff representative in Sydney complained of the incessant "criticism of Barrett, Millard and the leaders," George MacEachern, a supporter of the Ontario opposition, replied that, "by their actions they deserve it," and that, "we ask for democracy and we have a dictatorship running the S.W.O.C."<sup>91</sup> One of the instruments of this dictatorship, according to some activists in the local, was the international headquarters' special liaison officer and investigator, Philip Clowes.<sup>92</sup> Four locals in the Toronto area severely criticized Clowes, who they charged "has in the most autocratic fashion given Canadian steel workers to

<sup>89</sup> NAC, MG 28, I 268, Murray to Millard, 5 September 1940. Millard justified Hamburg's dismissal simply on the grounds that "it has been found necessary to make certain changes in the personnel of the SWOC." See also NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to Harry Hamburg, 17 September 1940.

<sup>90</sup> NAC, MG 28, I 268, Ward to Murray, 8 October 1940; Murray to Millard & Clowes, 15 October 1940; Millard to Ward, 21 October 1940.

<sup>91</sup> SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 25 September 1940.

<sup>92</sup> According to MacEachern, Clowes was little better than a thug whose tactics included the physical beating of Harry Hamburg and the purchase and use of liquor as a way of softening up the opposition (George MacEachern, Interview, 27 November 1990). The charge of offering bribes of rum to delegates and using "American gangster tactics" was denied by Clowes. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 25 September, 2 October 1940.

understand that they have no voice in the making of policy for Canada."<sup>93</sup> Another local 1064 activist, George MacNeil, assessed Clowes' role in more benign, but still uncomplimentary terms:

While he was here he put us straight on a lot of things and at times we put him straight. When he came back from Toronto and Ottawa he seemed to have queer ideas about these boards and top leadership looking after the workers. We did not agree on this, and we told him so.<sup>94</sup>

From the national leadership's perspective, Clowes preformed his role very well and Millard suggested to Murray that Clowes periodically be sent to work in the Canadian region as needed.<sup>95</sup> Millard's close association with Clowes and his dismissal of key oppositionists only intensified the opposition to him within the Sydney local. At local 1064 meetings his record with SWOC was scrutinized and was said to show that he was "collaborating with the government and boss without any regard for the wishes of the rank and file."<sup>96</sup> Millard was also opposed because he represented the ascendancy of the CCF within the Canadian section of the union. He used his power in the union to have it contribute very substantially to the CCF, even against the wishes of many of the members.<sup>97</sup> The SWOC leadership deflected these criticisms by suggesting that most of the Sydney oppositionists were "reds" or under their influence. This reputation was promoted by other anti-communist labour leaders.<sup>98</sup> Clearly, the CCF leadership and national and international union leaders were already united in their opposition to rank-and-file militancy and "irresponsible" unionists.<sup>99</sup> Their primary concern was to oppose the participation of communists and other radicals in the union movement. At Sydney, they pro-

<sup>93</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, J. Smith to Barrett, 6 July 1940.

<sup>94</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 2 October 1940.

<sup>95</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to Murray, 20 September 1940.

<sup>96</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 30 October 1940.

<sup>97</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to MacDonald 17 October 1942. Millard privately informed SWOC Financial Secretary MacDonald in Pittsburgh that while not all locals had affiliated with the CCF, they would eventually do so, and that in the meantime the per capita affiliation dues of two cents per month per member "for our entire Canadian membership" should be sent to the CCF. If other locals do not affiliate, he argued, their per capita could be considered as a subscription. This was done and apparently monthly cheques were sent from the international office to the CCF via the Canadian union headquarters in Toronto. See NAC, MG 28, I 268, MacDonald to Millard, 27 November 1942; MacDonald to Millard, 19 January 1943.

<sup>98</sup>For instance, the table at which Sydney delegates sat during a 1940 CCL conference was called "red row." See SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 2 October 1940.

<sup>99</sup>It was not only in the steel union that they actively opposed militancy. Within the UMWA they also worked against it by undermining the 1941 slow-down strike of Cape Breton coal miners. See Michael Earle, "'Down with Hitler and Silby Barrett': The Cape Breton Coal Miners' Slowdown Strike of 1941," *Acadiensis*, 28, 1 (Autumn 1988), 56-90.

ceeded to minimize their influence by winning the support of moderate elements within the union.

### *The Sydney Local Divided*

Despite the dislike of Millard's approach by some local 1064 activists and their empathy for the Ontario opposition, a reply to the Ontario opposition's request that the Sydney local participate in a SWOC conference organized by them was deferred until Clowes' report was complete.<sup>100</sup> A factor in this decision was that Millard had written to the Sydney local stating that local 1005 at Hamilton's STELCO had voted to stay loyal to the SWOC leadership.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, a key figure in dissuading some Sydney activists from lending support to the Ontario oppositionists was SWOC's Nova Scotia representative, Forman Waye. According to Millard, Waye was keeping the Sydney local informed "of the true situation."<sup>102</sup> A measure of the disagreement within the local was that even a visit from Harry Hunter on behalf of the Ontario "rank and file movement" could not bring about a decision to support the oppositionists fully.<sup>103</sup> Oppositionists within the Sydney local finally did manage to organize a union meeting to discuss whether the local should support the call for "a rank and file conference of representatives of SWOC locals including those who have repudiated the Millard-Barrett leadership."<sup>104</sup> Since a positive vote on the question would have greatly strengthened the position of the Ontario oppositionists and jeopardized the ability of the SWOC leadership to contain the opposition, Millard attended the meeting. He shrewdly began his remarks with fraternal greetings on behalf of the Algoma and STELCO locals as well as SWOC President Philip Murray and then defended the firings of Steele and the other staff in the name of steel worker unity.<sup>105</sup> Later in the meeting Millard adopted a more aggressive stance. He read a letter from International Secretary-Treasurer MacDonald giving him the authority to take any measures necessary to deal with the Ontario oppositionists. Finally, Millard announced that a proper constitutional

<sup>100</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 9, 23 October 1940.

<sup>101</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 30 October 1940.

<sup>102</sup>*Steelworker*, 25 January 1941. Waye also informed Millard of criticisms of the national and international leadership such as when charges of "gangsterism" were made against Clowes, an action for which Waye was called "a stooge" by local 1064 activist George MacEachern. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 2 October 1940.

<sup>103</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 8 January 1941.

<sup>104</sup>*Steelworker*, 25 January 1941.

<sup>105</sup>Millard stated that the Algoma local had refused to join SWOC as long as the communists remained on staff. Also, according to Millard, Clowes had met with government officials and been told that they would not cooperate with communists on the staff. When Steele admitted to being a communist, "Clowes dismissed him." Hunter and Hamburg were then fired by Millard himself when they stated that they did not agree with the present policy of SWOC. See SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 22 January 1941.

convention with procedures for electing officers would be held in 1942 and he appeared to make concessions to the Ontario oppositionists by stating that a Canadian policy conference would soon be held and that, "the Ontario Executive should be there if they become reinstated."<sup>106</sup>

Because Millard's intervention satisfied the demand for a policy conference and appeared to allow for participation in it by the Ontario oppositionists, it had the effect of undermining some of the opposition to his leadership. Sydney steel workers were also reminded by less radical activists that although rank-and-file councils had not yet been established, they had been approved by SWOC.<sup>107</sup> In light of the support for this moderate position, an insistence on a stronger show of support for the "Ontario Executive" by radical oppositionists at Sydney could have split the union and jeopardized the opportunity to organize the steel industry.<sup>108</sup> Millard cheerfully wrote MacDonald that the "former offensive has now become a defensive" and that "Waye reports that Sydney is greatly improved."<sup>109</sup> He also happily observed that the oppositionists in Ontario "are being driven to a closer and more apparent association with communist influences."<sup>110</sup> Millard expressed his admiration to International Secretary-Treasurer MacDonald "for the very constructive manner in which you and Chairman Murray dealt with our Canadian situation" and assured him that "all our staff were not only impressed but have gained a new sense of organizational responsibility, as well as a much greater degree of loyalty as a result."<sup>111</sup>

The oppositionists within the Sydney local still planned to push for greater democracy and more militant action at SWOC's next national policy conference. The president of local 1064 stated that developments were still at "a stage where a drastic change is necessary in the national policy of S.W.O.C in order to justify our continuance of it." The choices, he insisted, were to either:

string along with the appointed leaders of S.W.O.C. hoping that we may exert enough pressure to change their policy or to follow the lead of the Ontario executive. But I will draw the line

<sup>106</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 22 January 1941.

<sup>107</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 22 January 1941.

<sup>108</sup>George MacEachern, Interview, 2 December 1991.

<sup>109</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 168, Barrett to Millard, 19 February 1941; Millard to MacDonald, 21 February 1941.

<sup>110</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to Clowes, 13 February 1941. However, it appears that at least two of the locals supporting the "dual movement" had been already placed "under administration" and others were being investigated by the Pittsburgh office. See also Millard to MacDonald, 17 December 1940; Padgett to Millard, 11 January 1941.

<sup>111</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to MacDonald, 7, 19 February 1941. Millard was referring to the letter that was sent to all members of SWOC in Canada by Secretary-Treasurer MacDonald notifying them that Millard, Barrett, and other staff were the only legitimate representatives of SWOC in Canada. See also MacDonald to all SWOC members, 10 February 1941.

on following this present policy of appeasement and compromise that is shearing the workers of their democratic rights and opening the way for fascism in Canada.<sup>112</sup>

When the call for the SWOC conference finally occurred, the Sydney opposition was dismayed and angered to learn that the Ontario oppositionists had not received an invitation to attend the conference. Some within the Sydney local felt that without the participation of oppositionists in Ontario the conference was incapable of formulating a "policy that expresses the opinion of the organized steel workers of Canada" and that the arrangement did not "indicate a willingness on the part of the National Office to play ball with the rank and file workers." Despite these restrictions, it was decided after much debate that the local should be represented at the conference and its case presented.<sup>113</sup>

Upon their return from the conference, the Sydney delegates reported at a "mass meeting" of local 1064 that the conference had "a great effect on the national leadership." The Sydney delegates reported that they had immediately questioned the make-up of delegates at the conference, which had numbered only between 35 and 40. When this objection was ruled out of order the Sydney delegate on the credentials committee brought in a minority report concerning the exclusion of some Ontario delegates.<sup>114</sup> The Sydney delegates were successful at having the conference allow a representative of the "Ontario Executive" an opportunity to present its case. Harry Hunter spoke on its behalf, but he announced that the "Ontario Executive" would recommend to the opposition locals that they ask for reinstatement in SWOC.<sup>115</sup> While most of the delegates to the conference were apparently satisfied that the direction of SWOC was changing "from collaboration to one of direct action," the dismissed staff representatives were not rehired.<sup>116</sup> The international and national leadership had affirmed their right to hire and fire union staff at its discretion and any remaining oppositionists on the staff were made to feel very unwelcome while new staff were carefully screened.<sup>117</sup> Millard confi-

<sup>112</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 19 February 1941.

<sup>113</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 9 April 1941.

<sup>114</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 27 April 1941. The Sydney delegates also called for the election of all union officials, but this was ruled out of order by International Secretary-Treasurer MacDonald, who reminded them that a new constitutional convention planned for 1942 would decide on these issues.

<sup>115</sup>SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 27 April 1941. Remarkably, the recorded proceedings of the SWOC conference made no direct reference to the stand taken by the Sydney delegates and stood in sharp contrast to their report on the conference. See NAC, MG 28, I 268, SWOC Wage and Policy Conference Proceedings, Montréal, 19-20 April 1941.

<sup>116</sup>An indication of this was their success in pressuring Millard to resign from the Labour Supply Board. SWOC, Local 1064 Minutes, 27 April 1941.

<sup>117</sup>For example, when Laurent Lecavalier, a Montréal staff worker, sent Millard his letter of resignation because "a rank-and-file policy" was not being followed by the leadership of the union, Millard dismissed his criticisms since he was "associating himself with known

dently put an ultimatum before other potential dissenters holding a staff position by paraphrasing President Philip Murray's remarks to the effect that: "Any staff member who felt he could not give wholehearted allegiance to the SWOC, its officers and policies, should, for his own sake and the good of the organization, immediately resign."<sup>118</sup> So extensive was the rooting out of communists and radicals above the local level that even the union's solicitor in Canada, J. L. Cohen, was dismissed since, according to Millard, he had "definitely aligned himself with the left-wingers and I have taken the position that we can't afford to be identified with the solicitor of that group."<sup>119</sup>

The purging of militants and radicals from staff positions effectively undermined the resistance to the leadership since such people could have provided information to local oppositionists and even coordinated their efforts. Hence, the overall opposition within the SWOC was contained and fragmented at the local level. The occasional conferences which oppositionists attended provided the only opportunity for the coordination of opposition at an inter-local level, but these made no difference in terms of changing power relations within the union, since there was no established structure and network where oppositionists from various locals could regularly meet and strategize.<sup>120</sup> Al Campbell, who was an early SWOC activist, commented that the left opposition often "won the debates" in conference sessions and occasionally won the vote, but these had little impact on Millard and the other SWOC leaders who could usually obtain the delegate votes needed to defeat opposition resolutions.<sup>121</sup>

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disruptors and fellow travellers." He replaced him with R.J. Lamoureux, who Millard reported "is a member of the Roman Catholic Church." See NAC, MG 28, I 268, Lecavalier to Millard, 17 June 1941; Millard to MacDonald, 30 June 1941.

<sup>118</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to all SWOC Staff and Central Committee, 17 December 1941. It is remarkable that in spite of President Murray's role in this purging, he still enjoyed widespread admiration and support among Canadian steel workers, including radicals and militants. For example, a *Steelworker* editorial praised Murray's "sane and wholesome" approach to organizing as opposed to the selfish and political ambitions of John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers. See *Steelworker*, 1 August 1942.

<sup>119</sup>NAC, MG 28, I 268, Millard to MacDonald, 12 September 1942.

<sup>120</sup>For example, a meeting of SWOC delegates to the 1941 CCL convention at Toronto actually discussed at length the necessity of removing the SWOC leadership. They passed a motion of censure against Silby Barrett and Millard by a vote of sixty-four to nineteen for the unsatisfactory way in which the Peck Rolling Mills strike was being handled. NAC, MG 28, I 268, Report of SWOC delegates to CCL Convention, 7 September 1941.

<sup>121</sup>Al Campbell, Interview, 25 March 1991. For example, an oppositionist resolution stating the need for SWOC staff to be placed in steel producing communities and be acceptable to steel workers in those communities was easily defeated. See NAC, MG 28, I 268, Proceedings, SWOC Conference of Basic Steel, Ottawa, 3-5 December 1941. Also, the implementation of resolutions calling for the establishment of area councils was ignored by the leadership.



### *Conclusion*

SWOC oppositionists were unsuccessful in resisting what they considered to be the unnecessarily bureaucratic and excessively accommodationist approach of the union's top leadership.<sup>122</sup> This approach, which was advocated under the rubric of "responsible" unionism, conflicted with the more militant and democratic practices of the local membership at Sydney and led to intense conflicts between the two. Despite this conflict, Sydney steel workers had been able to establish a SWOC local that had won the dues check-off and a first, albeit unsatisfactory, contract from the company. As impressive as these achievements were, the workers had not won full recognition from DOSCO, which still refused to bargain seriously on the most pressing issues. Many Sydney steel workers understood that in order to win and maintain substantial gains, militant action by workers in the Canadian basic steel industry would have to be undertaken. However, as they prepared to face their most important challenges, they did so with a national and international leadership which had purged itself of staff representatives who would actively encourage a militant and aggressive approach to fighting the company.

With the purging of oppositionists among the staff, oppositional forces within the Sydney local were more isolated than before from those in other locals. They were deprived of potential organizers of inter-local opposition who could coordinate the effort to change the policy and direction of the Canadian section of SWOC. The tensions among various activists within SWOC also helped the leadership to contain the opposition and thereby limit its impact on national and international union policy. Furthermore, the need for unity in the face of the strong resistance from the employer also promoted an accommodation by the most radical elements in the local. Finally, existing left-wing political parties were increasingly unable or unwilling to play a coordinating role for oppositionists. The purging of communists from the SWOC staff meant that the Communist Party of Canada was now more limited in its ability to act as a coordinator or organizer of the dispersed opposition within SWOC. The CCF, meanwhile, had no interest in supporting rank-and-file opposition within the unions and was in fact dominated by unionists who used the union to build and finance the party. Nonetheless, communists and independent radicals in the local continued to lead other steel workers in challenging both the national and international leadership and DOSCO.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup>This differed considerably from that of the UAW where communists and other left-wing unionists had succeeded in not only ousting Millard, but also in establishing a "District Council" which consisted of rank-and-file delegates and met six times a year. The UAW Director and staff had voice but no vote at council meetings and the council itself was financed independently of the union administration through per capita membership payments. See Yates, *From Plant to Politics*, 31.

<sup>123</sup>As Abella points out, by 1942 MacKenzie and MacEachern were no longer working at the Sydney steel plant. See Abella, *Nationalism*, 64. A new generation of oppositionists were, however, about to take over. See Ron Crawley, "Conflict within the Union."

The oppositionists' challenge to the established union leadership was undermined by the union structure which had been imposed by SWOC and CIO leaders in 1936. All union positions in SWOC above the local level had been filled by appointment rather than election, prompting one analyst to assert that "the steel workers centralized in haste and became legitimate at leisure."<sup>124</sup> With the formation of the USWA in 1942, regular elections for the top union positions were finally planned for 1945, almost ten years after the formation of SWOC. However, staff positions continued to be filled through appointment by the union's leading officials. The international convention became the supreme policy-making body, with the implementation of its decisions and the day-to-day activities overseen by the international executive in Pittsburgh and the various district directors who, according to Ulman, continued to adhere to the philosophy and practice of centralized government.<sup>125</sup> In Canada, the annual National Wage and Policy Conference became the highest policy making body, but it could not decide on constitutional matters and it could not override any decision by the international convention. Significantly, the wage and policy meetings were referred to as conferences and not conventions.<sup>126</sup>

Thus the top-down bureaucratic structure of the SWOC/USWA was built, maintained, and defended by some union forces while others criticized and attacked this same structure and the policies that buttressed it. The former clearly had their way. Having purged communists from leadership positions above the local level, having contained the opposition within the locals and having set up a formally democratic structure, SWOC's union leadership turned its full attention to winning concessions from the employers and government. They were determined to do so, however, within the confines of what they considered to be "responsible" unionism, rather than to rely principally on the militancy of the steel workers.

<sup>124</sup>Ulman, *The Government of the Steelworkers' Union*, 3.

<sup>125</sup>A feature which did not escape the criticism of the rank and file in the United States. Ulman, *The Government of the Steelworkers' Union*, 23, 27-8.

<sup>126</sup>See NAC, MG 28, I 268, Proceedings of the National Wage and Policy Conferences. Each local in Canada was allowed one representative at the national conference for the first 500 members or less, plus another representative for each additional 500 members or portion thereof. On average there were fewer than two members for each local attending the national conferences. The Canadian jurisdiction was divided into two districts: District 5 which included the Maritimes and Québec, and District 6 which encompassed the whole of Ontario. These districts each had an elected director but held no regular meetings of representatives from the locals.

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