

Handout # 7a The Big Strike Background Readings

As you read these articles, remember that you are trying to learn all the social forces that come together when people try to assert their rights or their power. Consider what forces can divide people who are in struggle together, and what can help them unite.

Article #1

King Coal: BC's Coal Heritage

King Coal: the Vancouver Island Strike

The expression "king coal" was derived from coal's great importance throughout the industrial age. Coal was the power source for steamships and locomotives when these modes of transportation carried almost all people and freight over long distances. The black fuel heated furnaces and ran electric generators that kept buildings and communities warm and well lighted. Coke, produced from coal, burned hot enough to liquefy ores used in the manufacture of countless metal objects. Coal was thus essential to the economic well-being of industrial society.

The importance of the black fuel became clear when coal production was interrupted. Labour shortages and coal mine workers' strikes could lead to extreme measures being taken to keep the supply of the black fuel moving. Conversely, dramatic reductions in coal markets could threaten the very existence of coal mining communities and connecting transportation routes. By depending so much on coal, industrial consumers and coal mining families were very vulnerable to changes in the supply and demand for this resource.

British Columbia was a central stage for this drama characterized by conditions that were constantly changing. Here were extensive coal reserves and markets for the black fuel. The Elk Valley, Vancouver Island and Yale District coalfields were developed to the greatest extent in BC prior to the 1950's. Collieries in this province sold huge amounts of coal and coke to numerous railways and smelters in southern BC. Coal was king and BC was one of its greatest domains.

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<http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/205/301/ic/cdc/kingcoal/10/intro.html>

Article #2

Vancouver Island Coal Strike

Vancouver Island Coal Strike began on 16 Sept 1912 when miners at Cumberland declared a "holiday" to protest the firing of Oscar Mottishaw. Canadian Collieries, recent purchaser of the Dunsmuir Mines, locked them out and hired Chinese and recruits from Britain and the U.S. as strikebreakers. The issues were safety (gas explosions had killed hundreds) and union recognition. Other Island employers, Western Fuel and Pacific Coast Collieries, had followed the pattern set by Robert and James [DUNSMUIR](#) in vigorously resisting any union, especially those from the US. By spring 1913, 3500 miners from Nanaimo, Extension, S Wellington and Ladysmith were off work, the United Mine Workers of America providing leadership and strike pay.

That summer, a fourth company, the Vancouver and Nanaimo Coal Co, settled with its employees, but not before rioting had broken out in all the coal towns. Peace was restored when the BC government sent in 1000 militiamen, but many strikers spent the second winter in jail. Withdrawal of strike pay in the summer of 1914 and the beginning of WWI ended the confrontation. By then the mines were running at almost pre-strike capacity using newly hired labour.

Union recognition did not come until 1938, 6 weeks after the largest mine on the Island had shut down forever

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<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/vancouver-island-coal-strike>

Article #3: From a workers perspective



[Labour Heritage Centre](#)

LEST THEY FORGET

In 1997, citizens of Cumberland, Vancouver Island, brought back the Bean Supper: commemorating a walkout, 85 years earlier, over the firing of a safety committee reporting explosive gas. It's a tragic paradox: mines that deliver the best coal produce the deadliest gas. Cumberland's mines produced superb coal; they killed, on long-term average, a man a month.

In the 1912 strike, as a negotiating tactic, the owners evicted strikers from company housing, just as winter was on its way, forcing families to live in tents on the beach. As a compassionate gesture, and to prevent disease and starvation on "Striker's Beach," the provincial government sent a trainload of dried navy beans. Big Strike Beans kept them alive over the long winter. These and similar events remind Cumberland of its roots, and how tough it can get.

Bean Supper and the Big Strike

On May 1, 1997, the [Cumberland and District Historical Society](#) celebrated their inaugural annual event, the Bean Supper—hearkening back to the Big Strike of 1912, an important moment in British Columbia's history. During this strike, coal miners and their families were turned out of company housing, migrating to local beaches where they set up tents. Seeing the destitute and starving condition of the miners, the government sent boxcars of dried navy beans for them to eat; either as an act of 'compassion' or as a way to deflate some of the rising tensions.

Cumberland

Cumberland was originally called "Union" after the 1870 founding of the town by the Union Coal Company. When coal was discovered the following year, and company owner Robert Dunsmuir brought miners from Cumberland, England to work the deposits, the town changed names. Before long, the nationality and ethnicity of miners grew quite diverse, quickly swelling the town's population to 3,000 people.

There were 8 coalmines in Cumberland alone, some with as high an output as 2,540 tonnes a day. Mining—and miners—quickly became an important part of the town's economy. Yet, despite the essential contribution the miners were making, very little of the returns actually reached their pockets, as the wealth generated was accumulated by the owners—notably the Dunsmuir family—rather than the workers.

Robert Dunsmuir

Robert Dunsmuir, originally from Scotland, had moved to Fort Rupert in 1849 to work in the mines. Shortly after he arrived a strike broke out in protest against the dismal working conditions and the Hudson's Bay Company's practice of 'indentured servitude' where a worker would have to work for a number of years in exchange for passage to the area. They were provided with the barest of essentials under this agreement, and had very little control over their lives.

Viewing the scene as it lay before him, Dunsmuir decided to cross the picket line and work, which earned him a place of respect with those more well-placed within the company. He rapidly began to move up through the ranks, and in 1870 the company helped him acquire his own mines. This move attracted others hoping to cash in on the resources of the area and Dunsmuir received investment money. Lieutenant Wadham Neston Diggle was one such investor, and soon enough Dunsmuir, Diggle and Co. emerged as the leader of Vancouver Island's coal mining industry.

Although the mines made Dunsmuir quite wealthy, an agreement with the federal government, where he was contracted to complete a relatively small portion of the trans-national railway being built. In exchange, Dunsmuir was given a stretch of land that accounted for nearly 20% of the Island (2, 100, 000 acres) and \$750, 000 (using the Consumer Price Index, that amount is now equal to \$16,600,000.00). With these monies and assets in addition to money from his mines—where he was regarded as ruthless and unconcerned about the conditions of the workers—Dunsmuir became the richest person in the province.

While those working in his mines lived in squalid conditions and struggled daily in unsafe and unsanitary conditions, Dunsmuir, in the last years of his life, began construction on [Craigdarroch Castle](#). Although he died before it was complete, the castle, his wealth, and his ventures eventually passed into the hands of his son and son-in-law.

Visitors to Victoria are able to explore the castle, as it is now a historic site. Walking through the grand rooms, it is hard not to be impressed by its stature. It is equally as hard to not reflect on how different Dunsmuir's life was from the struggling existence of his employees.

Working in the mines

While each mine was unique, workers faced common health and safety threats. Rapid flooding was a problem as water that was trapped in the rocks was released through mining activity—the mine could fill in minutes, trapping and drowning workers. In addition to flooding, the frequent cave-ins and falling rocks had the potential to injure numbers of workers. However, it was the explosions that were the biggest concern. The underground tunnels miners worked were filled with natural gases caused by centuries of decomposition and pressure, the process that transforms plant matter into coal. The deeper they went into these spaces, the more gas they released, all-to-frequently triggering massive explosions.

Examples of early Vancouver Island coal mining disasters:

- April 17, 1879: Eleven killed in Wellington explosion
- January 24, 1881: Sixty-five killed in Wellington explosion
- July 1, 1884: Twenty-three killed in Wellington explosion
- May 3, 1887: One hundred forty-eight killed in Nanaimo explosion
- 1888: Seventy-seven killed in Wellington explosion
- February 15, 1901: Fifty-five buried in Cumberland
- September 30, 1901: Seventeen killed in Extension fire
- 1909: Twenty-five killed in an explosion
- May 1915: Twenty-six killed Reserve mine
- 1918: Sixteen killed when a cage dropped over 500 feet

In addition to the dangers of mine explosions, miners were likely succumb to lung disease of some form that left them gasping for air, accompanied by coughing up of black phlegm.

- Chronic bronchitis
- asthma
- Black Lung disease/coal worker's pneumoconiosis (CWP): a chronic occupational lung disease from long-term inhalation of coal mine dust

Unfortunately, these preventable accidents and illnesses did not end in the 20th century and miners continue to face incredible risks at their site of employment, particularly on the global scale. Events like Cumberland's Bean Supper serve as reminders of the importance of mining in the community's history while providing the opportunity to reflect on the current dangers faced by those who work underground.

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Student Notes Section:

Summarize the causes, events, and outcome of The Big Strike