

Newfoundland Sealing Strikes, 1830-1914

Shannon Ryan

The increase in world demand for oil after about 1780 led directly to the formal designation of Newfoundland as a colony. The granting of colonial status legitimized the settlement of migratory cod fishermen who hunted seals for their fat each March and April. Sealing subsequently exercised a profound influence on all developments in the colony. The English migratory fishery collapsed as fishermen settled on the island and founded institutions similar to those elsewhere in British North America. Two labour movements took root prior to 1914: one was land-based, urban and confined to the commerce and industry of St. John's, while the other was fishery-based, rural and restricted to the bays. The role of collective action by sealers in the growth of these two movements is the subject of this essay.

Strikes in Harbour Grace and Carbonear in 1832

The first reported strike in the seal fishery in 1832 proved highly significant. The dispute began with the posting of notices on 5 January in Harbour Grace and Carbonear announcing a meeting for the 9th to which fishermen and shoremen were invited.¹ The conclave, which took place on Saddle Hill (between the two towns), was convened to pressure merchants to substitute cash for "in kind" (or truck) payments. The 1000-3000 men present agreed not to go to the ice unless this demand was met. When the merchants failed to agree, a new gathering was called for 9 February. This time sealing masters were invited to bring copies of their agreements so they could be made public.² While many complied, some shipowners missed the significance of these activities. One of the most important merchants in Harbour Grace, Thomas Ridley, was among this group. Before dawn on 18 February a large body of men armed with saws, axes and guns boarded Ridley's vessel *Perseverance* and, forcing the officers sleeping below to stay put, caused considerable damage.³ Local magistrates appealed to the governor for assistance; although constables were sent from St. John's they accomplished little. The men continued to march in solidarity from wharf to wharf, exhorting their fellows to stay ashore and threatening the few who seemed willing to sail on any terms. The men appear to have been successful in their demands for cash payments, for by 14 March peace had been restored and the fleet had sailed.

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This strike, as Linda Little has shown, was significant in that the men acted collectively and without regard to religious differences.⁴ Moreover, it took place in the context of a growing and prospering industry, a constant reminder that labour was valuable. Although the debate of truck versus cash payments seems to have died out at this time, sealers could not always expect to be paid in cash because sealing earnings were still often applied to accumulated debts.

Strikes in St John's in the 1840s

The next major issue concerned berth charges. Men had always paid for their berths, with charges varying from port to port: the highest were in St. John's and the lowest in the smallest outports. By 1842 batsmen in the capital were paying more than £4 per berth and facing a possible increase. That winter a protest demanding a reduction occurred. On 16 February the sympathetic *Patriot* reported that a "public meeting" on "a subject of great importance" was to be convened. The paper urged that "those engaged in the Seal Fishery should endeavour to have the question settled in such a way as that no obstacles should lie in the way of the prosecution of the voyage." It also noted that "the men appear determined to have some abatement, and we think that abatement could be made without the slightest injury to the Trade."⁵

A few days later the men held a meeting and a parade. The newspaper most hostile to labour — the *Public Ledger* — reported that "a mob, variously estimated at from 500 to 1000 men" had marched "with drums beating and colours flying" to the sealing vessels "for the purpose of compelling the men to abandon the engagements they have entered into, and of coercing them into a combination to reduce the prices severally charged to them as 'berth-money.'" Although "by the use of threats, and by personal violence" the mob "intimidated" many sealers "into a temporary compliance with their arbitrary mandates," several of its leaders were "apprehended, and securely lodged in gaol, where they will most probably undergo two or three months imprisonment." The *Public Ledger* comforted itself by predicting that "the examples which are about to be made of those who have been already apprehended will have the effect of deterring others from pursuing so ruinous a course."⁶

The *Public Ledger's* hopes were to be dashed, however, since it seems that the St. John's men were able to hold berth charges down and perhaps even to have them reduced. On 2 March the *Patriot* reported that the sealers had "made a simultaneous strike, and assembling peaceably on the Barrens, they drew up a scale of prices, by which they all agreed cheerfully to abide." An agreement of several vessel owners to abide by this scale, and a sense that "the generality of the Trade will comply with the petition of the people," calmed "the unwonted excitement to which the subject had given rise, and the business of the season is again proceeding with some activity." The paper concluded with the observation that "the interests of the ship-owners and the...sealers are perfectly reciprocal, and matters of this nature should be mutually discussed and decided, without the untoward array of stubbornness on one side met by determination on the other."⁷

In 1842 Newfoundland was entering a new political era: Roman Catholic "Liberals" had just had the political power they had come so close to winning slip through their fingers when the British abolished the two-chamber system of representative government and installed a one-chamber amalgamated assembly. The Bishop and the Roman Catholic leadership were concerned about keeping their rank and file support; the fact that a majority of the sealers in the St. John's area were Catholics probably explains the haste with which two prominent Catholic shipowners threw their support behind them. Similarly, this would also help to explain John Nugent's impassioned plea on their behalf (see below). This does not mean that sealers lacked genuine support: the *Patriot* story demonstrates they had a good deal, although the paper had a political agenda as well. What it means is that this was a particularly sensitive period and that working-class (Irish) support had to be retained throughout the coming political hiatus.

In his 1878 book Philip Tocque quoted extensively from a speech given by a leading Catholic, John Nugent, who observed the 1842 strike and estimated the number of men involved at between 1000 and 2000. According to Nugent the sealers met to protest merchants' efforts to raise berth money to £3 10s for batsmen and £1 for bow or chief gunners, who had always gone free. Tocque claimed that the demonstration successfully kept berth money at £2 for batsmen and £1 10s for after gunners, while bow gunners went free as before. Nugent's strong comments on the seal fishery were made sometime after this episode and concluded with a plea for a fairer deal for sealers:

Upon the return of the sealing vessel, one half of the proceeds of the industry of the men is handed over to the merchant, in remuneration for the capital he had advanced in the first instance. The other half is divided amongst the men, whose toil and daring procured it; but then, the merchant's half is given perfectly clear and unencumbered of all charges, of every deduction — the poor man's half is clipped and curtailed — he is, first, obliged to pay hospital dues; and, further, besides giving the merchant a full and undiminished half of the entire voyage, he is still further taxed by the merchant, to whom he is obliged to pay a sum of money, not only for the very materials used in its prosecution, but actually, a further sum for the privilege of being allowed to hazard his life to ensure a fortune for the merchant, and both of these latter charges combined are here both technically denominated 'BERTH MONEY.'

Tocque also declared the strike a success, although "some of the parties committed a trifling breach of the peace and were imprisoned...for a short time." There is evidence to suggest that Captain Henry Supple (see below) was involved in leading the strike. Writing in 1916 James Murphy, a local historian, quotes an elderly man, David King, as having claimed fourteen years earlier that:

It was organized by Henry Supple, a man of superior education, but a fisherman like myself, with whom I worked for some years. The object of the strike was to secure a reduction in the berth money. Prior to that, batsmen going to the ice paid 20 shillings for their berths, after gunners 10 shillings, and bow gunners went free. The rates were gradually raised to 60, 50 and 40 shillings [£3, £2 10s and £2] and then the men struck. They assembled at the head of King's Road, and with Bradley the fiddler, a piper and a drummer, marched through the town, visiting all the wharves, and searching the ships for those not in sympathy with them; each man had to fly for their lives [sic]. The strikers were masters of the situation, and the merchants reduced the rates to 20, 10 and 5 shillings. The town was small then and the merchants made a big showing. Besides rum was plentiful in those times, and it was not wise for the merchants to hold out too long.¹⁰

The St. John's strike of 1842 was not nearly as violent as that in Harbour Grace and Carbonear ten years earlier and it seems to have been powerfully organized, smoothly run and the first clearly successful attack against berth charges.

Ralph Hattenhauer, James Murphy, H.M. Mosdell and Bill Gillespie all point to 1843 as a significant turning point in the sealers' fight for concessions.¹¹ Despite a lack of clear evidence, this point seems to be substantiated by the *Patriot*, which reported on 15 February that an "Important Meeting of Sealers" had recently appointed "a Committee of active men, practically well acquainted with the business of the sealing voyage...to draw up a series of Resolutions, expressive of the Sealers' hardships and of their determination no longer to submit to them." Ten resolutions dealing with sealers' rights were subsequently adopted unanimously.¹²

Clearly the St. John's men, having forced a reduction in berth charges the previous year, were now attempting to eliminate them altogether. They also wanted to be paid and fed while preparing vessels for the hunt, especially prior to 25 February. In other words, they accepted that they had to work on the vessels after 25 February as part of their obligation to the shipowners but that earlier employment should be dealt with separately. It is possible that merchants were abusing the custom of sealers preparing the vessels for the voyage by requiring them to do an unreasonable amount of repair and maintenance. Moreover, merchants who supplied the vessels often engaged in finding buyers for the pelts — and it seems that often they were the buyers. This meant prices could be set artificially low to allow merchants to increase their profits. Furthermore, men were often required to go on second trips without proper provisioning; this meant they were probably dependent on bread and tea for much of the time. There was a definite concern about the quantity and quality of food, a complaint that had not arisen before and — which is probably connected to the fact that larger vessels were being employed and it was becoming increasingly difficult for me to continue the practice of cooking seal meat in order to supplement the ships' supplies of food. In addition, it must have been irritating

to the crew to find that its share of the voyage was being charged for the cost of replacement guns. Finally, for the sake of justice and fairness it was felt that men who were injured while getting the vessel ready for the ice, and were thus unable to make the trip, should receive their share of the seals procured.

On 21 February 1843 a meeting of merchants and schooner owners was held at the "spacious Hall of Mr. Kielty" to discuss the situation. They were discussing berth charges when the hall was invaded by a "vast number of Sealers" who called on Henry Supple to read the previously-passed resolutions; when he finished an overwhelming number of sealers expressed their support. The sealers then left. But there are no indications that they received any concessions, unless the reduction in berth money agreed in 1842 did not come into effect until the next year. This seems most unlikely because the men were asking for the elimination of berth money, which suggests they had already received their reduction. There is an inconsistency here in David King's recall, unless Supple were involved in the 1842 strike as well, because King points out that the sealers received the reductions in berth charges they were demanding and yet this seems to have taken place the previous year. What stands out in contemporary reports is the sophisticated and professional manner in which the meetings were held and the demands presented.

It seems that further protests and negotiations took place in 1844 as well. In 1845, when negotiating with Brigus shipowners Captain Supple mentioned a sealing agreement reached "last year" (1844) at Kielty's Long Room in St. John's. But most contemporary reports suggest that 1842 was the key year for concessions. Regardless, the collective action was more significant than the specific year in which it occurred.

Strikes in Harbour Main and Brigus in 1845

Another major labour dispute occurred in 1845, once again triggered by berth charges. Growing anger over these fees was probably related to the fact that vessels had become much larger; the sharing of expenses no longer held any meaning for men whose living and working conditions were declining, at least in part because of the sheer size of crews. Henry Supple again played a prominent role in the protest. It seems he was asked by sealers from the "south shore" of Conception Bay — between Brigus and Harbour Main — to assist with their protest. A detailed account of this sojourn appeared in the press.¹³

The resolutions passed in Harbour Main were similar to those agreed to in St. John's in 1843 and asked only for a tiny bit more. For example, sealers demanded to be paid for any work on vessels prior to 1 March instead of 25 February as in St. John's. Although there were no major advances, the event was still a considerable breakthrough for sealers in the Brigus and (presumably) Harbour Main areas. The agreement on a ten shilling berth fee was a definite improvement over that reached in St. John's in 1842, when forty shillings per batsman was accepted. There is an implication, however, that a new compromise was reached in 1844 which probably reduced the sum charged in St. John's. Nevertheless, the offer of twenty shillings which was rejected at the above meeting seems to have been less than that in effect in the capital. The Brigus and Harbour

Main sealers thus appear to have been on the cutting edge of getting concessions on this important issue. No doubt the 1832 strike in Harbour Grace and Carbonear, when the sealers resorted to violence, set a precedent which continued to make an impression on the shipowners of Conception Bay. Finally, the cooperation between Catholic and Anglican sealers was as significant a feature of this strike as in 1832.

Not everyone, however, applauded the new accords. One newspaper disparaged the actions taken:

A very large number of Sealing Vessels were seen in the ice from the Block House on Thursday and it is not at all unlikely that these are the very vessels which were protracted in proceeding on their voyage, owing to the improper interference, in the Bay, of a stormy "peteral" [sic] — a Liberty Boy, who has lately been "beating up" in order to coerce the "suppliers" respecting the berth money etc., — we trust that the seal hunters will not suffer through the arbitrary conduct of the would-be Patriot, to whom we allude and who we hear, has made a very good thing of his agitation.¹⁴

Even if both merchants and sealers were content with their negotiated agreement, there clearly were observers with less sanguine views.

Labour after Mid-Century

The year 1845 was pivotal in that it was the last time sealers withheld their labour in the context of an expanding industry. Furthermore, the major strikes of 1832, 1842 and 1845 occurred in the spring seal fishery monopolized by St. John's and Conception Bay. Yet there was one more disruption within this framework in 1853, when "a number of men at Carbonear...resorted to brutal violence and intimidation" over free berths.¹⁵ Apparently the issue prompted some Carbonear men to try to organize a strike. Their lack of success — ensured in part by the intervention of the constabulary — prompted one newspaper to comment that "it is remarkable indeed that in the whole affray about which such hubbub is made, there was no such thing as rioting; no injury worth naming as such inflicted even by the most turbulent; no stone-throwing, window-breaking or any violence of the sort."¹⁶ Nonetheless, when the courts attempted to deal with this lawlessness in the autumn, some riotous conduct ensued in Harbour Grace near the court house. Although some windows were broken, many observers thought that the media over-reacted by making it appear that a serious riot had occurred and worried that the negative publicity would discourage investment.¹⁷ This brings out clearly the problem of dealing with business-labour conflicts at a turning point in the history of sealing. At its height in the 1850s, there was competition among the mercantile establishments of St. John's, Harbour Grace, Carbonear and Brigus. Negative publicity regarding the security of investments would not help any town's cause.

The last half of the nineteenth century was a period of labour peace, as well as a sad commentary on the state of the industry. With the exception of the occasional "manus" (refusal to work), sealers accepted that berths were difficult to acquire and behaved accordingly. Moreover, the politically aware and volatile class of ice hunters from St. John's and Conception Bay was decimated by the downturn of the 1860s and the depression that stretched from the early 1880s until 1900. The collective experiences of these sealers had been acquired between the late 1820s and the mid-1850s. The seal fishery, politics and religion, sometimes in tandem and sometimes at cross purposes, had taught them the effectiveness of collective action.¹⁸ By the latter part of the century political, religious and business leaders had, intentionally or inadvertently, succeeded in creating such religious antagonisms between the denominations (especially Catholics and Anglicans) that common economic interests were obscured. In addition, as the century progressed greater numbers of men from the northern bays travelled to St. John's to participate in the spring seal fishery. These were confirmed individualists from small communities, often populated only by their own families. Frequently Methodists or Low Church Anglicans, they distrusted collective action. All these factors resulted in a decline of labour protests among sealers.

St. John's Strike of 1902

In 1902 there was a final major strike. On the morning of 8 March, the men of SS *Ranger* left their vessel. Led by Albert Mercer of Bay Roberts, they were disturbed by rumours that the price for fat was to be reduced to \$2.40 per hundredweight (cwt.) from \$3.25 in 1901.¹⁹ The men marched along Water Street in St. John's and were soon joined by crews from other steamers until a crowd of about 3000 was moving towards Government House where the leaders — Mercer, Robert Hall from Halls Town (near Clarke's Beach, Conception Bay), and Simeon Calloway from Pool's Island, Bonavista Bay — demanded to see the governor, Sir Cavendish Boyle. When the meeting was arranged, Boyle suggested that the men appoint a committee to meet with representatives of the steamer owners. This was agreed and Edgar Kean, Jacob Bishop and N. Waterman were named to join the other three.

The sealers then asked A. B. Morine, a prominent lawyer and politician, to assist them, and the meetings with representatives of the steamer owners began. The sealers' demands were more extensive than at first articulated. The men wanted to share one-half of the seal pelts, as in the days of sail, instead of merely one-third, which had become the norm. They also demanded that fat prices be increased to \$5.00 per cwt. (fat had been worth over \$6.00 in the early 1880s); objected to the \$3.00 per man coaling fee deducted from all sealers' shares; complained about the thirty-three percent surcharge on necessities bought on credit from steamer owners (these items would probably include a knife, steel and pan, which made up the sealer's "crop"); asked to live on board the steamers for the several days they were in St. John's waiting to be signed on; and requested that they be fed after they signed on, which was usually a day or two before sailing. The owners had

no problem with sealers living and eating on board the steamers before the voyage — in some cases this was allowed by informal arrangement — but argued that the coaling fee was justified because "in the days of the sailing vessels the crews outfitted the vessels, trimmed the punts, made and bent the sails...Now the crews of steamers have nothing to do, the ships are coaled, cleaned and ready for them." Moreover, they contended that the crop charge was necessary to offset the number of times men and vessels returned empty and crops had to be written off, and that "men were not obliged to take crops, and owners would be better pleased if they did not. The fact of the men coming long distances and being under expenses, could be obviated by dispensing with them and getting men nearer St. John's." The owners also complained that they could not give the men half the pelts and continue to operate and that they could not afford to increase fat prices to \$5.00 per cwt. because "the price of oil was never known to be so low as today, and skins were practically valueless."²⁰

The men responded that the \$3.00 charge was not imposed in the days of sail and that there had been a charge for berths "until the famous strike started by one Peter [sic] Supple against these charges, led to their removal." Furthermore, the men pointed out that sealers had received half the voyage in the early days of steam and that this had been reduced to a third; that second trips had been prohibited by the government, further reducing earnings; that the men would coal the steamers if given a chance; that there were not enough experienced sealers near St. John's to replace those from the northern bays; and that the price of fat in St. John's was set by the oil plant owners (who engaged in sealing as well) and not by world markets.

Negotiations dragged on throughout Saturday afternoon with nothing resolved, and the situation remained tense but calm during Sunday. But after midnight the men began to leave their vessels with their bags and boxes. A crisis was beginning to develop. The captains had orders to sail at 4:00 a.m. but found their vessels severely undermanned because in many cases firemen had left with the sealers. Some vessels were unable to raise anchor, while others used engineers to fuel the fires. Only *Aurora*, *Terra Nova*, *Iceland* and *Kite* managed to steam into the harbour and anchor. Still, there were no further concessions from the owners — not even when the men agreed to accept \$4.00 per cwt. for fat — and many men began to walk to the railway station, only to find railway employees preventing all but the handful with tickets from boarding trains. Conditions were ameliorated somewhat when working-class homeowners kindly took in some of the sealers for the night.²¹

On Tuesday, when the owners guaranteed a price of \$3.25 per cwt., some sealers began to waver while others became more adamant that all would stand together. A party of strikers boarded *Virginia Lake*, *Neptune* and *Diana*, expelling the few men on board. Meanwhile, Captain Arthur Jackman boarded *Terra Nova* without incident, although his officers were repulsed; Jackman prepared to leave harbour and announced his intention to recruit a crew in Cape Broyle and elsewhere on the coast. At the same time Captain Samuel Blandford in *Neptune* began to contemplate leaving as well, probably because he and Jackman were old rivals (Jackman was considered the "commodore," having

commanded steamers since 1871, while Blandford, who took charge of his first steamer in 1874, was leading in total number of pelts taken). In any event, when it became known that *Neptune* was leaving the wharf about 300 strikers "tried to hold the ship but Capt. Sam put on full steam" and sailed for Bonavista Bay to sign on a new crew.²²

Meanwhile, the government was becoming concerned about the 3000 unhappy and angry men roaming St. John's with only a handful of police to restrain them. The steamer owners were advised to compromise. By mid-afternoon on Tuesday, 11 March, the men were offered \$3.50 per cwt. and the elimination of the coaling fee; in addition, the crop (for those who needed one) would become a standard \$9.00 advance, for which \$12.00 would be charged.

According to a newspaper account, by that afternoon the strikers had begun to lose public sympathy. Moreover, "merchants feared for their property...and shopkeepers scented a riot and talked ominously of the night that was to come."²³ The same paper reported that by 3:00 p.m. only the extremists were holding out and that "the sensible ones realized that they had done very well, and town folks remonstrated with them against being too grasping...[and told them] very plainly that they should be satisfied with what they had won." With dissension escalating among the sealers and a lack of public support, the police began to clear the entrances to the wharves and to escort those who wanted to go aboard. The "extremists" managed to clear the sealers from *Diana* and when "word was passed that the *Vanguard* was crewing...away rushed the 'extremists,' on the double, to Grieve's, to clear her out also. But here they were checkmated, for the police held the gate." Under police escort *Vanguard's* men boarded and soon "intelligent onlookers saw that the back of the strike was broken."²⁴ By 6:00 p.m. the majority had accepted the compromise and soon all were in the process of boarding their vessels. *Terra Nova* and *Neptune* both returned and took on their crews, and the strike ended.

The walkout was an act of desperation under trying circumstances caused by low returns rather than the act of a group whose labour was in great demand. The records show average sealers' shares, beginning in 1895 when they averaged about \$29.00 per man; during the next seven years average shares were as follows: \$20.00, \$11.00, \$29.00, \$33.00, \$43.00, \$33.00, and \$34.00. Many men (there are no statistics available on the numbers) bought supplies in advance at highly inflated prices from company stores; they were required to have this sum plus mark-up deducted from their shares. For example, the *Evening Telegram* drew attention to the situation in 1891, when it published two lists of prices: one termed "regular" and the other the inflated price charged sealers on credit before the voyage. Sealskin boots were priced at \$4.80 and \$7.60, respectively; drawers at \$0.60 and \$1.33; and a shirt at \$0.50 and \$0.80.²⁵ In 1898, boots cost \$2.00 and \$3.50; pants \$1.65 and \$3.00; and drawers \$1.10 and \$1.80.²⁶ This left little money to be brought home for four to six weeks of hard and dangerous work.

The 1902 strike was unique in several ways. First, it was a strike largely by migrant workers who came to St. John's every spring to participate in the seal fishery. The situation differed considerably from the Harbour Grace and Carbonear strikes in 1832 when the men were in their hometowns with food, shelter and moral support at hand. The

same situation prevailed in St. John's in 1842 and 1843 and in Harbour Main and Brigus in 1845. But the 1902 strikers were isolated and, although it was reported that working-class people provided some with lodgings, for the most part the men were forced to rest and sleep on their bags and boxes in the streets. By Tuesday it seems apparent that St. John's citizens wanted the sealers on their ships and away to the ice. The livelihood of seal skinners, coopers, dock workers and oil plant workers depended on this industry, as did the incomes of shop clerks and tavern owners. The sealers thus could not retain the necessary public support, a fact which no doubt added to their growing antipathy towards St. John's. In addition, this was a strike dominated by rural family-fishermen — the independent boat owners. Conception Bay and St. John's, urban settings at the time of their strikes, were noted for their participation in the Labrador cod fishery, where bigger proportions of hired fishermen lived, or at least raised their families. There the environment was conducive to the development of unions and to successful strikes.

Yet there can be no doubt that the strikes of the 1840s influenced the job action of 1902, even if the men got Henry Supple's first name wrong (few would have heard it anyway because he was always known as Captain or Mr. Supple). It was probably no accident that the man reported to have started the strike was from Bay Roberts, a formerly prosperous port between Harbour Grace and Brigus, where memories of earlier strikes would have lingered. Another of the earliest leaders was Robert Hall, whose hometown was near Brigus. The oral traditions about the successful strikes of the 1830s and 1840s — only fifty to seventy years earlier — would still have been alive on the steamers in 1902.²⁷ Finally, the strike of 1902 was the conduit which transferred the experience of collective action, acquired in Conception Bay and St. John's in the 1830s and 1840s, to the northern bays, where it created a receptive environment some years later for William Coaker in building his Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU).

The 1902 strike made a lasting impression on St. John's steamer owners. The price for fat improved and they were much less intransigent in their dealings with sealers and their reaction to public criticism. In 1905 the principal steamer owners in St. John's negotiated a new agreement which harmonized all previous accords. They decided that all pacts between companies and sealers would be as similar as possible and agreed to reduce the number of sealers hired to about seventy-five percent of the number allowed by 1898 legislation to enable those hired to make larger shares. The crop was to remain at \$9.00 (for sealers who wanted to avail of the service), but the men would have to repay \$12.00 to compensate for those who could not repay anything due to a failed voyage. Because it was recognized that men were sometimes at a loss for a place to stay and eat before the steamers left for the ice, owners decided to announce in advance the date on which each steamer would sign its crew — the men would be expected to arrive in St. John's in time for this event and not before. Given that most travelled by train, and since it was taken for granted that all had "tickets" to the ice before they left home, this was not too much to expect. For their part, owners were satisfied to allow the men to board immediately after signing on and to supply them with food. There would be no coaling charge, berths would be free, one share would be divided among the firemen and one

among the officers as a bonus (with these exceptions the crew would continue to share one-third of the voyage). Captains would receive four percent of the gross value of the voyage. Crews could be brought to St. John's or be picked up in the outports. Owners were ambivalent on this point; on the one hand they feared what 3000 or 4000 disgruntled men could do under effective leadership, but on the other the merchants, bar owners, tradesmen and others wanted the business sealers brought. Where feasible owners agreed to supply medics for larger vessels. They concluded by agreeing that no steamer would sail before 8 a.m. on 13 March, in order to give time for the whitecoats to reach their prime weight of fifty-five to sixty pounds (twenty-five to twenty-seven kilograms). This agreement was signed by E.R. Bowring; A. Harvey and Co.; Job Bros.; Baine, Johnston and Co.; James Baird; and H.D. Reid. The only representative absent, John Browning, had previously given his assent.²⁸ There is no doubt the strike of 1902 gave owners reason to draw up an agreement so that they could not be split and dealt with individually by organized sealers.

Labour after 1902

Following 1902 the idea of a strike arose on several occasions but it did not get far. The price for fat rose to \$4.00 per cwt. in 1904 and remained there in 1905. In 1906 a rumour spread that it would be reduced to \$3.75; at this news the crews of *Bloodhound* and *Vanguard*, then unloading in Harbour Grace, telegraphed the crew of *Diana*, in St. John's, that they were holding out for \$4.00 and asking for support.²⁹ When they were assured the price would not be decreased, the matter was dropped.

In 1907 the crew of *Grand Lake* refused to unload a cargo of fat until the price was settled. Three master watches went to Harvey and Company's office and asked Mr. Harvey to settle the price. He replied that this was impossible but that it would not be less than in 1906, and that if there were any increase the men of *Grand Lake* would receive it as well. That effectively put an end to the issue.³⁰

In January 1911 sealers were ready to strike for half the seal pelts. Steamer owners, however, were reported willing to leave their ships tied up should this occur, and nothing more was heard in this connection.³¹ That same year the crew of *Beothic* threatened to sell their share of the pelts for less than \$5.00 per cwt. — they were being offered \$4.50 — but the men did not press the issue.³² In 1913 the crew of *Stephano* refused to unload a cargo of pelts until they received \$4.75 for their share instead of the \$4.50 offered. Work was halted for several hours, but when Bowring Brothers refused the request, unloading resumed.³³ The idea of strikes on individual steamers continued well into the twentieth century, but this was reminiscent of the "manus" (see below) rather than the great strikes of the era 1832-1902.

Seal Skinners

One body of men whose work was a direct part of the seal fishery was the seal skinners. Their union, founded in 1854 or 1855 because of dissatisfaction with rates of pay for skinners, was the second to be established in Newfoundland.³⁴ These men, who cut the fat from the skins, worked for only a few weeks each spring and during the remainder of the year were engaged in other employment, primarily as butchers. While it is possible that the union operated in both Harbour Grace and St. John's because considerable processing was carried out in the former as well as the latter, by the early 1900s it was confined to St. John's. The seal skinners operated a strict apprenticeship system requiring every trainee to spend at least five years as an apprentice.

Skinning attracted new technology in a way cooperage and shipwrighting did not, and in 1900 Bowring Brothers introduced a skinning machine. This provoked a strike, but when the machine was unable to do the work effectively the company gave in to union demands and dismantled it.³⁵ Similarly, Job's decided to experiment with a machine in 1901 to skin pelts brought in from the outports, leaving the steamer cargoes to be skinned by locals. The machine became disabled and skinners were offered the work of finishing the remaining pelts. They refused unless Job's would agree to dismantle the machine and not set it up again. Job's refused and the machine was repaired.³⁶ It was not until after the Great War, however, that machinery finally replaced all the seal skinners.

Manuses

In addition to the strike, which was used only rarely, sealers frequently resorted to the "manus," or refusal to work.³⁷ There were a number of instances when crews declined to continue sealing, usually because the men wanted to quit an unprofitable and long voyage to return home to prepare for the summer cod fishery. Without giving it a name a local newspaper decried this practice in 1848, the earliest reference thus far found:

In the first place, we would deprecate not only those habits — indolence and inactivity, but the determined stand which, it is notorious, crews are in the habit of making whenever there has been, according to their own peculiarly accommodating views, no chance of falling in with the seals and that in opposition with their skippers to whose better and more experienced judgement they should certainly give way. Is it not a notorious fact too that many a schooner master have [sic] been obliged thro' fear and intimidation, to bear up and abandon the voyage at a time when the brightest prospects for making at least a saving trip, presented themselves? Ay and so long as the stand is tolerated we may expect repetitions of similar conduct.³⁸

Occasional reports of manusing continued throughout the period. In 1862 Captain Lewis of the schooner *Mary* brought eleven of his crew to court for such behaviour; three were sentenced to twenty-eight days imprisonment and the remainder to fourteen.³⁹ The year 1862 seems to have had more than its share of manuses, probably because of unproductive voyages. The *Times*, no supporter of labour, noted its frequency and called upon the legislature to take action.⁴⁰ But on 3 May the paper corrected itself, admitting that legislation already permitted those convicted to be imprisoned for up to one month. It should be noted that many captains precipitated the manus by staying out too long; consequently, few cases were brought to court.

Manusing seems to have been unique to Newfoundland. It was the nineteenth century equivalent of the modern sit-down strike and differed from a mutiny in that there was no attempt to commandeer the vessel. The men often piled their gaffs and tow ropes on deck and refused to pursue seals, although they would allow others to do so and would agree to work the sails to take a vessel back to port. In some instances sealers would manus and then threaten their shipmates with injury to stop them from sealing.

The last significant manuses in this period occurred in 1914 when some steamers attempted to continue the hunt after news of the *Newfoundland* disaster had circulated, and indeed after some of the crews had been involved in the recovery of the dead and dying. As Cassie Brown points out, the men on *Diana*, *Eagle*, *Stephano* and *Bloodhound* manused.⁴¹ In fact, the crew of the latter refused even to move coal to the firemen and allowed the steamer to drift south with the ice until they were assured they would return to port. Needless to say, despite threats from Captain Abram Kean, in command of *Stephano*, and others, those who manused were not prosecuted.

Societies and Unions

To provide a context for industrial action in the seal fishery it is necessary to look briefly at unionism in Newfoundland in general during the nineteenth century. The first "society" of tradesmen, the Mechanics Society, was founded in 1827 under the leadership of a cooper. This organization represented a variety of trades and charged an entrance fee of eight shillings and monthly dues of one shilling. The resulting fund provided sickness insurance and death benefits to members.⁴² By the 1840s the various trades were beginning to assert their independence and in the 1850s shipwrights and seal skimmers began to take on the role of unions, with objectives that went beyond benefit societies. In the 1890s the number of unions increased dramatically and by 1902 there were at least twenty in St. John's.⁴³ Unions were also more active: between 1890 and 1899 there were at least forty-nine strikes. These were craft unions; it was not until 1903 that the longshoremen of St. John's banded together and founded the Steamboat Labourers' Union (which became the Longshoremen's Protective Union in 1904).⁴⁴ This union was the first of the industrial unions with a large membership of unskilled labourers. But well before they became organized, the longshoremen were known to take frequent industrial actions. In 1902 alone, longshoremen went on strike on seven occasions. It is curious, but

understandable, that neither the craft unions nor the longshoremen offered support to the sealers in 1902, since these rough-clad, weather-burned men from the northern outports were viewed by the St. John's working class as lower caste workers engaged in a bloody, messy and unsightly task which may have been essential but was not a trade upon which most urbanités cared to dwell.

Research into the origins of Newfoundland unionism is not sufficiently advanced to understand fully the vicissitudes of its development during the nineteenth century. But it is reasonable to conclude that sealers were on the leading edge. Instead of following the lead of early societies and concentrating on general benefits, sealers looked for higher pay and improved working conditions. Surely, their successes in the 1830s and 1840s were not lost on those who later formed craft unions and the longshoremen's union.

Fishermen's Protective Union

One must also examine briefly the FPU in the context of sealing. In the fall of 1908, William Coaker, a farmer living on an island in Dildo Run, close to Herring Neck in Notre Dame Bay, called a public meeting to launch the Fishermen's Protective Union.⁴⁵ Coaker had been born in St. John's and employed at Twillingate as the agent for a St. John's firm which went bankrupt in 1894-1895. Instead of returning to St. John's, Coaker became a farmer and began to read and think about the problems of outport fishermen and how their situation might be improved. He decided that there were three main problems: the truck system and its implications; illiteracy and a general lack of education; and a lack of political representation. Therefore his basic reform plan was three-fold, calling for the development of co-operatives; improved education and communication through a newspaper; and sponsorship of local political representatives. He began to implement these by speaking to fishermen in small outports and soon organized local and district councils. The movement expanded rapidly and, as Sid Noel has written, it "became more than an union; it became a crusade."⁴⁶

The FPU was somewhat slow to take up the cause of the sealers.⁴⁷ It was not until the third annual convention at Greenspond in 1911 that a committee was appointed to report on what steps should be taken to "improve the conditions of the men who engage in the seal-fishery."⁴⁸ Recommendations adopted, stressed that the union should concentrate on improvements to food, accommodation and medical aid, but sealers were mentioned in only one of the twenty-three planks in the organization's 1911 platform.⁴⁹ Coaker wasted no time in negotiating with the steamer owners and in 1912 reported that most had lived up to their commitments.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, although Coaker was satisfied with these promises, they were not binding on the steamer owners.

Coaker made other efforts on the sealers' behalf. He began the practice of holding a public meeting and addressing the sealers in St. John's each spring before they went to the ice. In fact, A. B. Morine, continuing his interest in sealers, also addressed them in March 1913. In February 1914, Coaker, now a member of the House of Assembly, introduced a Sealing Bill, which passed unanimously but was later amended in the

Legislative Council. Its main provisions, as it finally passed in March 1914, were to mandate wooden sheathing to reduce condensation in steel ships; to require portable iron-frame berths; to provide some protection from draughts in the sleeping quarters; to force owners to heat sleeping areas with steam pipes; to require a room for the ill and disabled and, where practicable, a doctor; and to prohibit the use of rifles. There were also regulations concerning food but, as the evidence presented to the inquiry into the 1914 disasters showed, these were largely ignored by shipowners; most meals continued to consist of tea, hard bread and butter.⁵¹ Strangely, the FPU did not attempt to increase the men's share of the voyage to one-half, which had long been desired by the sealers, nor did it attempt to fight for a higher price for pelts, which remained at \$4.50 from 1908 until rising to \$4.75 in 1914. Equally surprising, the union did not challenge the combine of three oil plants which set the price for fat. Instead, it concentrated on food, comfort, safety and the prohibition of the panning of pelts, although income had always been more important to the men. While it is obvious that the FPU was concerned about the lot of sealers, this issue was not a priority, indicating the extent to which sealing had declined in importance. Coaker understandably concentrated his efforts on the industry whose basic resource was considered inexhaustible — the cod fishery. The saltfish trade and all that accompanied it occupied most of his attention.

Nonetheless, the readiness with which fishermen from Trinity, Bonavista and Notre Dame Bays accepted the views of William Coaker and his FPU indicate that the experience of 1902 had shown them the power of collective action. The men who had briefly experienced its power and who had also seen their efforts largely defeated by the business and even the unionized working class of St. John's were the same ones who responded to Coaker. As John Feltham has argued, the 1902 strike and the nature of the seal fishery in bringing together "hundreds of men from numerous settlements...helps to explain the speed with which the F.P.U. movement spread."⁵² Thus, the 1902 strike must be viewed as a significant factor in the establishment of the new union and its political wing, the Unionist Party.

Conclusion

The seal fishery created a temporary environment conducive to the identification of workers with collective action. Hundreds and thousands of men in the same occupation received the same share, regardless of effort (for the most part). This was different than in the old migratory fishery carried out by temporarily employed servants, thousands of miles from their homes in England, with an eye to obtaining passage to New England. The seal fishery was also different from the family-based inshore cod fishery or the planter-led Labrador cod fishery, which were prosecuted from thousands of isolated fishing stations along the coast. It was poetic justice that an industry fuelled by the demands of the Industrial Revolution should become the breeding ground for modern industrial action among Newfoundland fishermen.

There is no doubt that fishermen in the annual spring seal hunt were the first Newfoundlanders to become aware of group strength; their early successes quickly established their power in Harbour Grace, Carbonear, Brigus and St. John's, the main centres of the expanding seal fishery. As the industry grew so too did the demand for labour and hence the power of collective action. But the decline of sealing, beginning in the 1860s and becoming very serious in the 1880s, combined with the end of the sailing ship era practically destroyed the big outports. This forced those fishermen who did not emigrate to travel to St. John's to compete with thousands of other economically-deprived men for the shrinking number of sealing berths. This was not a situation that encouraged collective action.

The 1902 strike demonstrated briefly the power of sealers, but by now they were acting out of desperation, were poorly-led, and were migrant workers in an often unfriendly town. Their brief success did little to improve their situation. Nevertheless, the experiences of the northern sealers in St. John's before, during and after 1902, made it easier for Coaker to organize them. In fact, the growing alienation of sealers towards St. John's may have been a more important factor than the experience of the strike; the closer sealers lived to St. John's the less likely they were to support Coaker's union.

Newfoundland's two labour movements thus owe a great deal to the spring seal fishery. The shore-based unions, as they existed in St. John's in 1914, could find their roots in the successful strikes of the 1830s and 1840s. The populist, sea-oriented FPU could do likewise, but in addition these individuals could look back on the more recent experience of 1902, when disadvantaged men made a desperate attempt to improve their situation. Although their behaviour brought little improvement, it demonstrated anew what collective action could do and reinforced the growing feeling that St. John's had little left in common with the outports. The antipathy between rural and urban Newfoundland, and between labour at sea and ashore, was largely absent during the nineteenth century. In 1902 it became obvious that the interests of each conflicted with the other, although it is equally clear that both were legitimate heirs of the ice hunters of the previous century.

NOTES

* Shannon Ryan is Professor of History at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Active in Newfoundland maritime and oral history, he is the author of *Fish Out of Water: A History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1814-1914*. His book on the Newfoundland seal fishery — *The Ice Hunters* — is scheduled for publication by Breakwater Books in the fall of 1994.

1. Most of the following has been summarized from the thorough thesis by Linda Little, "Plebeian Collective Action in Harbour Grace and Carbonear, 1830-1840 (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial

University of Newfoundland, 1984). Strangely, this event is ignored by D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland* (London, 1895); Levi Chafe, *Chafe's Sealing Book* (reprint, St. John's, 1989); and James Murphy, *The Old Sealing Days* (1916; reprint, St. John's, 1971). See also Bill Gillespie, *A Class Act: An Illustrated History of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's, 1986).

2. The following masters were requested to appear: Robert Hunt, George Joyce, Nicholas Moran, Richard Manshale, James Forward, John

Bransfield, Richard Bransfield, Felix McCarthy, William Pye, Richard Cole, Richard Hopkins, Francis Ash, Henry Taylor, Edward Dwyer, John Penny, William H. Taylor, John Lynch, Patrick Gordon, Daniel Leacy, James Henly, William Moores, William G. Taylor, Nathaniel Taylor, George Penny, John Peady, Henry Ash, John Power, John Taylor, Edward Taylor, Edward Barrett, Francis Taylor, William Davis, Charles Penny, Joseph Taylor, William Howell, Francis Howell, Thomas Finn, James Pierce, Edward Bemister, John Howell, William Udell, Charles McCarthy, James Gillett, John Long, William Penny, Richard Ash, John Snook, Terence Kennedy, Patt Scanlon, Samuel Taylor, Joseph Taylor, John Soaper, Richard Clarke, Matthew Murphy, Edward Guiney, William Brown, Dan Scanlon, William Oates, Thomas Oates, David Oates, John Nichole, Nicholas Nichole, James Roach, Thomas Pike, Jeremiah Broderick, William Thistle, William Penny, James Howell, John Luther, Francis Pike, Edward Pike, Charles McCarthy, Joseph Taylor, William Yetmen, Thomas Butt and Rich Taylor. At least twenty-two of these seventy-seven men were listed as the owners of the vessels they commanded. In three more cases the masters were listed as co-owners. See GN2/2, Harbour Grace magistrates to Crowdy, 18 February 1832 (enclosure); Little, "Plebeian Collective Action," 158.

3. Gillespie, *A Class Act*, 13-14, writes that "the perpetrators of the act were members of an organization called 'The Fishermen of Carbonear and Harbour Grace.' The organization was not a union. Rather it was a fleeting coalition of workers who united to settle a single grievance." The source for the title of this organization is not indicated although Gillespie credits Little as the source of much of this discussion. Little refers to "the fishermen of Carbonear and Harbour Grace" without quotation marks (p. 154), and the notices that were posted by these fishermen during the incidents discussed and which Little includes in her Appendices were signed variously: "a Labourer" (p. 241); "the Carbonear Men" (p. 245); and "the Carbonear and Harbour Grace Men" (p. 246).

4. The religious antagonisms which were to plague this area were still in the future and cooperation along class lines and across religious divides was unusual.
5. *Newfoundland Patriot*, 16 February 1842.
6. *Public Ledger*, 25 February 1842.
7. *Newfoundland Patriot*, 2 March 1842.
8. Philip Tocque, *Newfoundland: As It Was, and As It is in 1877* (Toronto, 1878), 304-307.
9. *Ibid.*, 307.
10. Murphy, *Old Sealing Days*, 9. The fact that Murphy quotes King as stating that this was the "first sealers' strike" suggests that it was the first in St. John's (1842). If this were true it would help to explain why Supple was called upon in 1845 by the people of Conception Bay.
11. Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS), R. Hattenhauer, "A Brief Labour History of Newfoundland" (Unpublished mss., 1970), 99; Murphy, *Old Sealing Days*, 9; H.M. Mosdell, *When Was That?* (1923; reprint, St. John's, 1974), 116; Gillespie, *A Class Act*, 15. Mosdell gives a list of strikes as follows: 1838, 1842 and 1843; and at Brigus in 1845 and 1902. He omits 1832 and says of 1838 that the charges of berth money of sixty shillings for batsmen, fifty shillings for after gunners and forty shillings for bow gunners were reduced to twenty, ten and five shillings, respectively, because of this strike. He mistakenly reports that the agreement of 1902 provided \$3.20 per hundredweight (cwt.) for fat, which would have been less than the men received in 1901; the agreement in fact provided \$3.50 per cwt. Hattenhauer lists the sealing strikes as follows: 1832, 1842, 1849 and 1902; he does not mention 1845 and credits Capt. Supple with leading the 1842 strike (pp. 98-100).
12. *Newfoundland Patriot*, 15 February 1843.
13. *Ibid.*, 19 March 1845.

14. *Times*, 15 March 1845.
15. *Ibid.*, 12 March 1853.
16. *Newfoundlander*, 17 March 1853.
17. *Newfoundland Express*, 12 and 15 March 1853.
18. For further information on the political and religious struggles in St. John's and Conception Bay from the beginning of the 1830s see Prowse, *History*; Gertrude Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland, 1832-64* (Toronto, 1966); John P. Greene, "The Influence of Religion in the Politics of Newfoundland, 1850-1861" (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1970); Leslie Harris, "The First Nine Years of Representative Government in Newfoundland" (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1959); Edward C. Moulton, "The Political History of Newfoundland 1861-1869" (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1960); W.D. MacWhirter, "A Political History of Newfoundland, 1865-1874" (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1963); and Elizabeth A. Wells, "The Struggle for Responsible Government in Newfoundland, 1846-1855" (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1966).
19. See Briton Cooper Busch, "The Newfoundland Sealers' Strike of 1902," *Labour/Le Travail*, No. 14 (Fall 1984), 73-101, for an excellent discussion of this strike. See also the detailed accounts in the *Evening Herald*, 10, 11 and 12 March 1902.
20. *Evening Herald*, 10 March 1902.
21. *Ibid.*, 11 March 1902.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 12 March 1902.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Evening Telegram*, 5 May 1891.
26. *Ibid.*, 19 April 1898.
27. During the 1980s the present writer was informed by elderly retired sealers Andrew Short and Edward Russell, both of Riverhead, Harbour Grace, that the 1902 strikers were determined to pull the *Neptune* out of the harbour and onto Water Street. Although this seems improbable it illustrates the persistence of oral custom, particularly considering that only a handful of traditional sealers were alive to pass on such things in the 1980s.
28. *Evening Herald*, 8 February 1905.
29. *Evening Telegram*, 31 March 1906.
30. *Ibid.*, 30 March 1907.
31. *Ibid.*, 31 January 1911.
32. *Ibid.*, 10 and 11 April 1911.
33. *Ibid.*, 31 March 1913.
34. Hattenhauer, "Labour History," 93, claims 1854 or 1855. James J. Fogarty, son of one of the founders of the union says 1855; see James J. Fogarty, "The Seal-Skinners' Union," in J.R. Smallwood (ed.), *The Book of Newfoundland* (6 vols., St John's, 1937-1975), II, 100. For information on other unions in trades associated with the seal fishery, such as the shipwrights' and the coopers' unions, see Hattenhauer, "Labour History," and Gillespie, *A Class Act*.
35. *Evening Herald*, 16 April 1900.
36. *Ibid.*, 21 May 1901.
37. See H.F. Shortis, "Sealing in the Old Days," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, I, No. 4 (March 1902), 9-10: "The most reliable authorities in the old days place its origins to a row between some Irish youngsters, led by one Mickey McManus and the captain of a pink-stem schooner of about one hundred years ago, and hence the word has come down to posterity, as the word boycott is now, and will be in use for years to come." This seems rather improbable but not even the authoritative

Dictionary of Newfoundland English has been able to suggest anything better. In discussions it has been suggested by Professors William Kirwin and the late George Story, two of the editors, that the term is derived from "menace" (i.e., to threaten).

38. *Times*, 22 March 1848.
39. *Royal Gazette*, 29 April 1862.
40. *Times*, 30 April 1862.
41. Cassie Brown, *Death on the Ice* (Toronto, 1972), 249-251.
42. Gillespie, *A Class Act*, 16-19.
43. *Ibid.*, 21-22; Hattenhauer, "Labour History," 113-150.
44. Gillespie, *A Class Act*, 32-33.
45. The three best sources for information about Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union are J.R. Smallwood, *Coaker of Newfoundland* (London, 1927); John Feltham, "The Development of the F.P.U. in Newfoundland, 1908-1923" (Unpublished MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1959); and Ian D.H. McDonald, "*To Each His Own: William Coaker and the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland Politics, 1908-1925*" (St. John's, 1987) edited by J.K. Hiller.
46. S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1971), 88.
47. Most of the following information has been taken from W.F. Coaker (comp.), *Twenty Years of the Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland, from 1909-1929* (St. John's, 1930).
48. *Ibid.*, 31.
49. *Ibid.*, 29-43.
50. *Ibid.*, 44-63. The fourth annual convention of the FPU was held in Bonavista in December 1912.
51. MUN, CNS, "In the Matter of Enquiry into Disasters at Seal Fishery of 1914: Evidence taken before the Commission, November 30th-January 13th, 1915," unpublished manuscript.
52. Feltham, "The Development of the F.P.U.," 13-15.