

Deindustrialization on the Periphery:
An Oral History of Sydney Steel, 1945-2001

Lachlan MacKinnon

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By: Lachlan MacKinnon

Entitled: Deindustrialization on the Periphery: An Oral History of Sydney Steel, 1945-2001

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Dr. Daniel Salée Chair

Dr. Craig Heron External Examiner

Dr. Cynthia Hammond External to Program

Dr. Barbara Lorezkowski Examiner

Dr. Ronald Rudin Examiner

Dr. Steven High Thesis Supervisor

Approved by

Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Dean of Faculty

Abstract

Deindustrialization on the Periphery: An Oral History of Sydney Steel, 1945-2001

Lachlan MacKinnon, Ph.D

Concordia University, 2016

This thesis is an historical examination of the multi-layered processes of deindustrialization in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The history of a steel plant formerly located in the centre of the city is used as a case study through which the mechanisms of deindustrialization are fully explored. In 1967, the provincial government of Nova Scotia nationalized the Sydney Works. This marks a significant divergence from previous studies of deindustrialization, which have traditionally focused on the wave of industrial closures in the North American heartland during the 1970s and 1980s. Framed by oral history accounts of former steelworkers, this dissertation reveals the combined impact of Canadian regionalism, political economy, and working-class cultures of resistance on local experiences of industrial decline. This represents a synthesis between the econo-political historiography of deindustrialization favoured in the 1980s and the cultural/representational approaches of the 1990s and 2000s.

The title, “Deindustrialization on the Periphery,” speaks to the specific national and regional contexts that frame the decline of Sydney Steel. The *longue durée* of economic change on the rural resource frontier has been understudied. In Cape Breton, the devastation wrought by the end of industry has roots that stretch back to the early 20th century. Tracing these through the use of Harold Innis’ “staples trap,” my thesis reveals how deindustrialization stretches from decades before closure to the years after a mine, mill, or factory are shuttered for the last time. Workers and other residents in Sydney continue to face the bodily aftermath of workplace injury, occupational, and environmental illness long after the structures of the plant have been demolished. But so, too, have experiences of working at the mill and living in the neighbourhoods that surrounded its gates created particular forms of culture, solidarity, and identity. My research is more than a eulogy for a defunct steel town. It seeks to expose the tensions between different forms of memory and experience, and to examine how the industrial past remains inextricably connected to the “post-industrial” present.

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Dedication

For Jim McCarron.

Whose life, work, and memory inform these pages and influence those who remain.

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List of Acronyms

ACOA – Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency
Besco – British Empire Steel Corporation
BOF – Basic Oxygen Furnace
CCB – College of Cape Breton
CCF – Co-operative Commonwealth Federation
CCL – Canadian Congress of Labour
CIO – Congress of Industrial Organizations
CN – Canadian National Railways
CSU – Canadian Seamen’s Union
CUPE – Canadian Union of Public Employees
CWS – Co-operative Wage Study
Devco – Cape Breton Development Corporation
Disco – Dominion Iron and Steel Company
Dofasco – Dominion Foundries and Steel Company
Dosco – Dominion Steel and Coal Company
DREE – Department of Regional Economic Expansion
ECB – Enterprise Cape Breton
ECBC – Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation
GATT – General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
IEL – Industrial Estates Limited
JAG – Joint Action Group for environmental clean up of the Muggah Creek Watershed
MOU – Memorandum of Understanding
NAM – North American Metals
NDP – New Democratic Party
OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAH - Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons
PC – Progressive Conservative
PCB - Polychlorinated biphenyls
Scotia – Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company

Sidbec - Sidérugie du Québec
Stelco – Steel Company of Canada
SWOC – Steel Workers Organizing Committee
Sysco – Sydney Steel Corporation
TAG – Technology Advisory Group
UAW – United Auto Workers
UCCB – University College of Cape Breton
USWA – United Steelworkers of America
WCB – Workers’ Compensation Board of Nova Scotia

Introduction

Situating Sydney Steel

This dissertation traces the political, economic, cultural, environmental, and bodily processes of deindustrialization in Sydney, Nova Scotia. The city's steel mill, founded in 1899, was at the economic and spatial centre of the community. The circumstances surrounding the mill's closure in 2000 and the corresponding end of the Cape Breton coal industry continue to impact the island's residents. Economic repercussions are often the most visible. As of 2014, one-third of Cape Breton children live in poverty.¹ The unemployment rate fluctuates between 14 and 20 percent. Drug abuse is rife, and has claimed the lives of dozens of young people in Sydney and the surrounding towns. This became such a problem that a recent documentary by the National Film Board of Canada dubbed the former coal town of Glace Bay "Cottonland" for its rates of prescription Oxycontin abuse.² This thesis, however, should not be read as a eulogy for another industrial town facing decline and disparity. Rather, it contributes to the study of deindustrialization by revealing the different scales at which this process take effect, and the ways in which working-class residents have responded to its many pressures. It examines deindustrialization "on the periphery;" the rural resource frontier experiences these processes in ways that differ significantly from the commonly understood experiences of "post-industrial" cities such as Detroit or Youngstown.

Completed at a moment of great political upheaval, this study explains the multi-faceted sense of alienation that emerges from deindustrialization in working-class neighbourhoods and cities around the world. As a result of these processes, politics have grown increasingly polarized. Anti-establishment politicians on the left and the right have started to appeal directly to the sense of abandonment wrought by fluctuations of the global market and more than 30 years of *laissez faire* doctrine. The popularity of Jeremy Corbyn in the U.K. and Bernie Sanders in the United States indicate that the solutions

¹ "One third of Cape Breton children living in poverty: report," *Cape Breton Post*, November 24, 2014.

² "*Cottonland*," directed by Nancy Ackerman (National Film Board of Canada, 2006), DVD.

offered by so-called ‘Third Way’ politics are quickly becoming untenable and unpopular. Margaret Thatcher’s mantra, “there is no alternative,” is finally being exposed as a falsehood. Contrastingly, right-wing nationalism is re-emerging through an alternative appeal to working-class frustrations. Donald Trump, the Republican nominee running for President of the United States, castigates free-trade agreements using rhetoric that is not dissimilar from the slogans marshalled by anti-offshoring protesters during the 1980s. His promise to “Make America Great Again” is an appeal to an imagined past, albeit one that sometimes resounds strongly with those who have been victimized by deindustrialization.

Focused, as it is, on the relationships and experiences engendered through the operation, decline, and closure of the Sydney steel mill, my research owes a philosophical debt to response within labour history to the postmodern and post-structural critiques of the 1980s and 1990s. As early as 1994, Ira Katznelson called for a renewed focus on the institutional and political histories most often associated with the so-called “old labour history.”³ While liberal scholars such as John Commons in the United States or Canadian Marxist historians such as Stanley Ryerson have traditionally utilized a state/institutional focus to explore issues surrounding the labour movement and national politics, their materialist analysis has – to a degree – fallen out of fashion.⁴ This dissertation, responding to Katznelson’s prescriptions, brings materialist institutional analysis into conversation with the experiential and contingent aspects of class, identity, and place that are made visible through oral history and collective memory.

Judith Stein’s 1998 *Running Steel, Running America* is an example of this type of history within the United States. Stein traces the turn from industrial to financial capital during the 1970s and 1980s and discusses U.S. policies on trade and heavy industry.

³ Ira Katznelson, “The Bourgeois Dimension: A Provocation about Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labour History,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 46 (1994): 7-32.

⁴ Leon Fink, “Intellectuals versus ‘Workers’: Academic Requirements and the Creation of Labour History,” in *In Search of the Working Class: Essays in American Labor History and Political Culture*, ed. Leon Fink (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 210; Gregory S. Kealey, “Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson: Canadian Revolutionary Intellectual – Part 1,” *Studies in Political Economy* 9 (1982): 7-36; Bryan Palmer, *Marxism and Historical Practice: Interventions and Appreciations, Volume 2* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 47.

While this broad focus is sustained, she grounds her analysis within the experiences of both black and white steelworkers in Birmingham, Alabama. The connections between “the local” and “the global” are fully visible as the intersections between the state, market fluctuations, and working-class experiences are revealed.⁵ While Stein describes a near-hegemonic antipathy towards the nationalization of steel mills by American policymakers, this position differs from the circumstances in Sydney where public ownership was pursued. The provincial nationalization of the Sydney Works is fertile ground for an analysis of the differences in state response to deindustrialization in Canada and the United States.⁶

Deindustrialization cannot be fully understood without recognizing its human costs. Steven High argues that oral history provides an opportunity for historians to understand how people define themselves. “What words do *they* use to describe their experiences? Whom do *they* identify with and against?”⁷ Their accounts reveal how notions of class, place, and identity co-mingle and shift in response to deindustrialization. Interviews conducted in Sydney between 2012 and 2016 uncover the need for a holistic understanding of these processes, and give those involved an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences in the *longue-durée*. In these narratives, mechanisms of decline are rooted in the decades prior to the final closure of a mill, factory, or mine and their impacts extend long after the end of the last shift. For some, these impacts will last a lifetime.

Documenting Deindustrialization: Scholarly Treatments Since the 1980s

⁵ Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

⁶ Throughout this thesis, ‘nationalization’ is used to describe the decision by the provincial government of Nova Scotia to purchase and operate the mill as of January 1, 1968. This term is perhaps ill-fitting, as it refers in this instance to the actions of provincial – not federal – agents, but it is commonly understood in reference to either form of state action. The Canadian Encyclopedia does not distinguish between provincial and federal usages of the term. See, “Nationalization,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia online*. <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/nationalization/>.

⁷ Steven High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 20.

Scholarship on deindustrialization in North America and Western Europe began with an economic framework informed by social justice. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison published *The Deindustrialization of America* in 1982 as an eloquent and intensely researched activist screed. This work was an analysis of unfolding crisis, but also came to exist as a powerful condemnation of a global capitalism that prompted off-shoring, the marginalization of the American blue-collar workforce, and an open attack on working-class institutions. The authors' are clear in their denunciation of the "runaway shop," occurring alongside the movement of capital and production from an area with higher wages and benefits to an area of lower wages and benefits.⁸ These early accounts treat deindustrialization as a breakdown of the *Pax Americana* – the postwar compact between capital and labour. Bluestone and Harrison offer public ownership of industrial firms as a possible solution to the material impact of a crisis that they perceived as having emerged from the political and economic conditions of the 1970s.

While Bluestone and Harrison's work has proved prescient in many ways, historians and sociologists have since problematized their analysis. Scholars have started to consider deindustrialization not as an era, but as a constituent part of the capitalist reliance upon market forces. Christopher Johnson challenges the notion that this must refer to *modern* industry, arguing that the same factors that characterize decline in the 20th century American auto industry might also profitably apply to "Flemish woollens in the early fourteenth, diverse North-Italian industries in the mid-seventeenth, Dutch papermaking in the later eighteenth, or the dual (pre-machine/post-machine) decline of lower Languedoc [France] in the later eighteenth and then mid-nineteenth centuries."⁹

⁸ Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); This movement of capital has also been expertly traced in Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labour* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁹ Christopher Johnson, "Deindustrialization and Globalization," *International Review of Social History* 47 (November 2002): 9; Christopher Johnson, *The Life and Death of Industrial Languedoc, 1700-1920: The Politics of Deindustrialization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

“Capitalism is never stationary,” writes High, “constantly creating the new and incessantly destroying the old, its path is not predetermined.”¹⁰ Deindustrialization is a characteristic part of capitalist development and underdevelopment. The indeterminacy of this process is expressed in my dissertation; deindustrialization must be understood as a relationship between those who are affected and the affecting forces of the market, politics, institutional actors, and ecology. These relationships are by no means unalterable or inevitable. The provincial takeover of the Sydney Works in 1967 – a response to a closure announcement by its private owners - reveals an alternative trajectory to the common experience of many post-industrial American cities. The politics of this decision, its relation to Maritime regionalism within Canada, and its decades-long impact on Sydney steelworkers and other residents of Cape Breton Island are foundational to my research.

My understanding of deindustrialization-as-process is also informed by the arguments of economic geographers Roger Hayter and Trevor Barnes. Employing a renewed Innisian framework of political economy in Canada, these scholars gesture towards the “staples trap” to provide an explanation for boom and bust cycles in the British Columbia forestry industry since the 1970s. Conflict between centralized authority and decentralized rural resource economies creates a feedback loop that helps to promote periodic economic crises. The trap culminates with an unwillingness to diversify among external stakeholders, such as multinational corporations, and the continued necessity of large-scale fixed investment. The state plays a key role in these processes. While institutional actors often go unconsidered in neoclassical theory, Innis positions the state as a prime mover in rural economies – either through the provision of start-up capital or by subsidizing other costs.¹¹ Recognizing the impact of the provincial and federal state is likewise vital for understanding the processes of deindustrialization in Sydney, both in the period prior to public ownership and in the decades after.

¹⁰ Steven High, “Introduction,” *Urban History Review* 35, 2 (Spring 2007): 2.

¹¹ Roger Hayter and Trevor Barnes, “Innis’ Staples Theory, Exports, and Recession: British Columbia, 1981-1986,” *Economic Geography* 66 (1990): 156-73; Roger Hayter, Trevor T. Barnes and Michael Bradshaw, “Relocating Resource Peripheries to the Core of Economic Geography’s Theorizing: Rationale and Agenda,” *Area* 35, 1 (2003): 15-23.

Framed within this secondary literature, my work expands upon industrial history in the Maritimes to reveal the full scope of capitalist investment and disinvestment in the regional steel industry throughout the 20th century. This approach wedds local experiences with the spatial processes of capital mobility that continue to impact working-class communities regionally, nationally, and internationally. Historians of the region have long focused on underdevelopment within the context of national industrialization. As T.W. Acheson argues, the shift from Atlantic trade to a national economy between 1880 and 1910 resulted in the centralization of economic and political power in Montreal and Toronto.¹² David Frank expands on this notion, describing the history of foreign capital in Cape Breton during the 1920s. Drawing upon Marx, he argues that the contradictions prompted by capital accumulation and centralization were visible in the Maritimes from its industrialization.¹³ My dissertation traces the long-term effects of capitalist underdevelopment in industrial Cape Breton through to the 21st century, tying the concept through oral history to local experiences, forms of resistance, and shifting identities.

In his recent book *Lunch Bucket Lives*, Craig Heron examines the relationships between workers, class, and community in Hamilton, Ontario. Although he describes moments of working-class protest and resistance, he writes:

Over the longer term, what stands out is the much quieter heroism of families, neighbours, gangs of friends, and groups of workmates who used every resource available to them to fashion daily lives that would give them a modicum of security and at least a small amount of pleasure – lives that would lead to a profound sense of personal decency and respectability.¹⁴

¹² T.W. Acheson, “The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910,” *Acadiensis* 1, 2 (Spring 1972): 15-19.

¹³ David Frank, “The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation,” *Acadiensis* 7, 1 (Spring 1977): 4; Similar theories were expressed by economic geographers. See David Harvey, “The Urban Process Under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2 (March-December 1978): 101-131.

¹⁴ Craig Heron, *Lunch Bucket Lives: Remaking the Workers’ City* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015), 555.

A similar sentiment percolates underneath the arguments of this text, and it is particularly visible in the life histories of participants. Fundamentally, my research is an examination of the multi-faceted responses of men and women in Sydney to various forms of crises. Despite the economic and bodily violence that is enacted, they do not wholly characterize the lives of these people. The men and women who participated in this project, although deeply impacted by the operation and closure of Sydney Steel, are also a reminder that life continues after disruption—albeit in a changed form. To present the city’s working class residents as “ghosts” of a bygone industrial era, as do some post-industrial aesthetic representations, further marginalizes and displaces their voices from the concerns and issues of the present day.¹⁵

While early studies of deindustrialization focused on economy and activism, by the early 2000s historians began to recognize the significant cultural and representational aspects of industrial decline. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott describe this as “moving beyond the body count” of lost jobs. In their 2003 collection, *Beyond the Ruins*, Cowie and Heathcott argue that we must recognize the impermanency of industrial production – as well as the cultures that production engenders.¹⁶ Many have since taken up this call-to-action; Jackie Clarke, for example, traces the displacement of working-class culture from the centre to the periphery in Alençon, France following the closure of

¹⁵ For further discussion of the aestheticization of industrial decline and erasure, see Steven High and David Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Steven High, “Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 140-153; Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Hilary Orange, ed. *Reanimating Industrial Spaces: Conducting Memory Work in Post-Industrial Societies* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2015).

¹⁶ Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, “Introduction: The Meanings of Deindustrialization,” in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5-7; See also Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

Moulinex.¹⁷ In 2007, a special edition of *Urban History Review* on “The Politics and Memory of Deindustrialization in Canada” emblemized this shift. Authors explored subjects as disparate as the post-industrial “tourist gaze” in Victoria, personalized industrial heritage in Nova Scotia, and the public history of deindustrialization in Manitoba in an effort to recognize what High describes as “a cultural drama of people and communities in transition, changes in the built environment and the politics of place.”¹⁸

Recent work also examines representation and memory in aftermath of deindustrialization. “Crumbling Cultures,” a 2013 special edition of *International Labor and Working Class History*, explores the artistic, literary, and commemorative practices arising in the aftermath of industrial closure. As Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon write, “Representations allow us to consider how those affected by deindustrialization remember it, but, because deindustrialization affects not only those who were immediately displaced, also those who have no direct experience of industrial work, those who were not physically or psychologically present during the era of closings.”¹⁹ This notion is further explored within my research; Raymond Williams’ theoretical “structure of feeling” is particularly useful in understanding this process. In Sydney, cultural productions can be read as part of the shifts in industrial and post-industrial place identities and class sensibilities that occurred between the 1940s and

¹⁷ Jackie Clarke, “Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 19, 4 (November 2011): 443-58.

¹⁸ High, “Introduction,” 2; In the same volume, see: Michael Dawson, “Victoria Debates Its Post-industrial Reality: Tourism, Deindustrialization and Store Hour Regulations, 1900-1958,” 14-24; Robert Summerby-Murray, “Interpreting Personalized Industrial Heritage in the Mining Towns of Cumberland County, Nova Scotia: Landscape Examples from Springhill and River Hebert,” 51-59; Sharon Reilly, “Deindustrialization as Public History: An Exhibition at the Manitoba Museum,” 77-82.

¹⁹ Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon, “Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class and Memory,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 9.

2016.²⁰ The shift from a dominant to a residual industrial structure of feeling is also explored.

My work contributes to a growing body of literature on the trans-national aspects of deindustrialization. The transition between Fordist and post-Fordist managerial paradigms in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. has often made it more difficult for workers to resist efforts at “re-structuring” or “right-sizing.”²¹ These trends also resulted in specific shop-floor changes at the Sydney Works that were further influenced by its existence as a public corporation after 1967. A transnational focus provides insight into how occurrences within the American steel market impacted production in Sydney, the relationship between members of the local steelworkers’ union and national and international leadership, and the business decisions of foreign owners. These discussions correspond with recent trends in Canadian, American, and European labour history.²²

Local, regional, national, and international trends influenced how deindustrialization unfolded in Sydney and how citizens have since come to think about their community, the industrial past, and the place of working-class men and women in the former “steel city” of Atlantic Canada. The dual notions of place and space allow us to understand how these trends are experienced and related through the testimony of workers and other residents. In her 1995 article “Places and their Pasts,” Doreen Massey

²⁰ This concept has also been applied elsewhere; see David Byrne, “Industrial Culture in a Post-Industrial World: The Case of the North East of England,” *City* 6, 3 (2002): 279-89; John Kirk, Sylvie Contrepois, and Steve Jeffries, eds. *Changing Work and Community Identities in European Regions: Perspectives on the Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²¹ See Glen Norcliffe, *Global Game, Local Arena: Restructuring in Corner Brook* (Saint John’s, NFLD: Iser, 2005); Anthony Winston and Belinda Leach, *Contingent Work, Disrupted Lives: Labour and Community in the New Rural Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Tim Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line: Privatization and Culture Change in the UK Rail Industry* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

²² Gordon Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934-1974* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Leon Fink, ed. *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labour History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

articulates relational space theory. Places, she argues, are constructions based upon the interactions of existing social relations. They are not frozen or static; rather, place-identity is constantly shifting as the result of different imaginings of place that exist within separate groups.²³ How, then, can historians responsibly define place? This question is particularly relevant in areas undergoing substantial economic and cultural changes. While Massey rejects essentializing notions of place identity, she admits that “some things are . . . more ‘absorbed’ or incorporated into the place than others.”²⁴ In realizing the multiplicities of place identities, she argues, we open the door both to richness of analysis and the possibility of conflict.²⁵

Industrialization and Working-Class Sydney, 1899-1944

The Second Industrial Revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was predicated upon the expansion of coal and steel production in Europe and North America. Technological advances, urbanization, working-class organization, and the mobility of industrial capital provoked huge changes within the social and economic order. It was within this landscape that four large producers came to corner the Canadian market. These were the Nova Scotia Steel Company (Scotia) in Trenton, Nova Scotia, the Dominion Iron and Steel Company (Disco) in Sydney, the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco) in Hamilton, and the Algoma Steel Company in Sault St. Marie.²⁶ In Sydney, the founder of Disco, H.M. Whitney, had previously established the Dominion Coal Company in 1893, and construction began on the Sydney Works in 1899 to take advantage of this ready supply of raw materials.²⁷

²³ Doreen Massey, “Places and their Pasts,” *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995): 188.

²⁴ Massey, “Places and their Pasts,” 186.

²⁵ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1994), 153.

²⁶ Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 16-23.

²⁷ Donald MacGillivray, “Henry Melville Whitney Comes to Cape Breton: The Saga of a Gilded Age Entrepreneur,” *Acadiensis* 9, 1 (Autumn 1979): 44-70; In addition, Scotia

Deindustrialization, as part of Schumpeterian “creative-destruction,” must be considered alongside these mechanisms of industrialization. Emerging as a secondary industry to the Cape Breton collieries, the Sydney Works could have been the basis for a broad expansion in secondary and tertiary production. This did not occur. There are a variety of reasons for this failure, which are further examined throughout this thesis, but an understanding of the city’s industrial development is necessary before such a conversation can begin. In this section, the growth of Sydney between 1899 and 1944 sets the stage for Chapter One, where the post-war corporate divestment from Cape Breton is fully articulated.

Sydney expanded quickly alongside industrialization.²⁸ In a twenty-year span, between 1891 and 1911, its population more than septupled –growing from 2,427 to 17,723 residents.²⁹ In addition to a smattering of Acadian, Irish, Mi’kmaq, Scottish, and other Cape Breton-born workers, the island’s coal mines and steel mill also attracted workers from further afield. Of the 6,246 immigrants in Cape Breton County in 1901, “54 percent were from Newfoundland, 25 percent from the British Isles, 11 percent from the United States (some of whom were Blacks from the south), 2 percent from Italy, and the remaining 8 percent from other countries.”³⁰ Among these “others” were Eastern Europeans – Ukrainians, Russians, and Polish – as well as European Jews.³¹ Many of

maintained a steel mill in the Cape Breton town of Sydney Mines. This mill would remain in use until the early 1920s. For further information, see James M. Cameron, *Industrial History of the New Glasgow District* (New Glasgow, NS: Hector Publishing Co. Ltd., 1960) and Craig Heron, “The Great War and Nova Scotia Steelworkers,” *Acadiensis* 16, 2 (Spring 1987): 3-34.

²⁸ Stephen J. Hornsby, *Nineteenth Century Cape Breton: A Historical Geography* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 25.

²⁹ E. Roy Harvey, *Sydney, Nova Scotia: An Urban Study* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company Ltd.: 1971), 17.

³⁰ Ron Crawley, “Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry, 1899-1904,” in *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990*, ed. Kenneth Donovan (Fredericton and Sydney: Acadiensis and UCCB Press, 1990), 145-64.

³¹ John Huk, *Strangers in the Land: The Ukrainian Presence in Cape Breton* (Sydney: City Printers, 1986), 10-11.

these ethnic and cultural identities remain visible in the social landscape of industrial Cape Breton today – and these roots are likewise visible in the surnames of many who have contributed to this project.³²

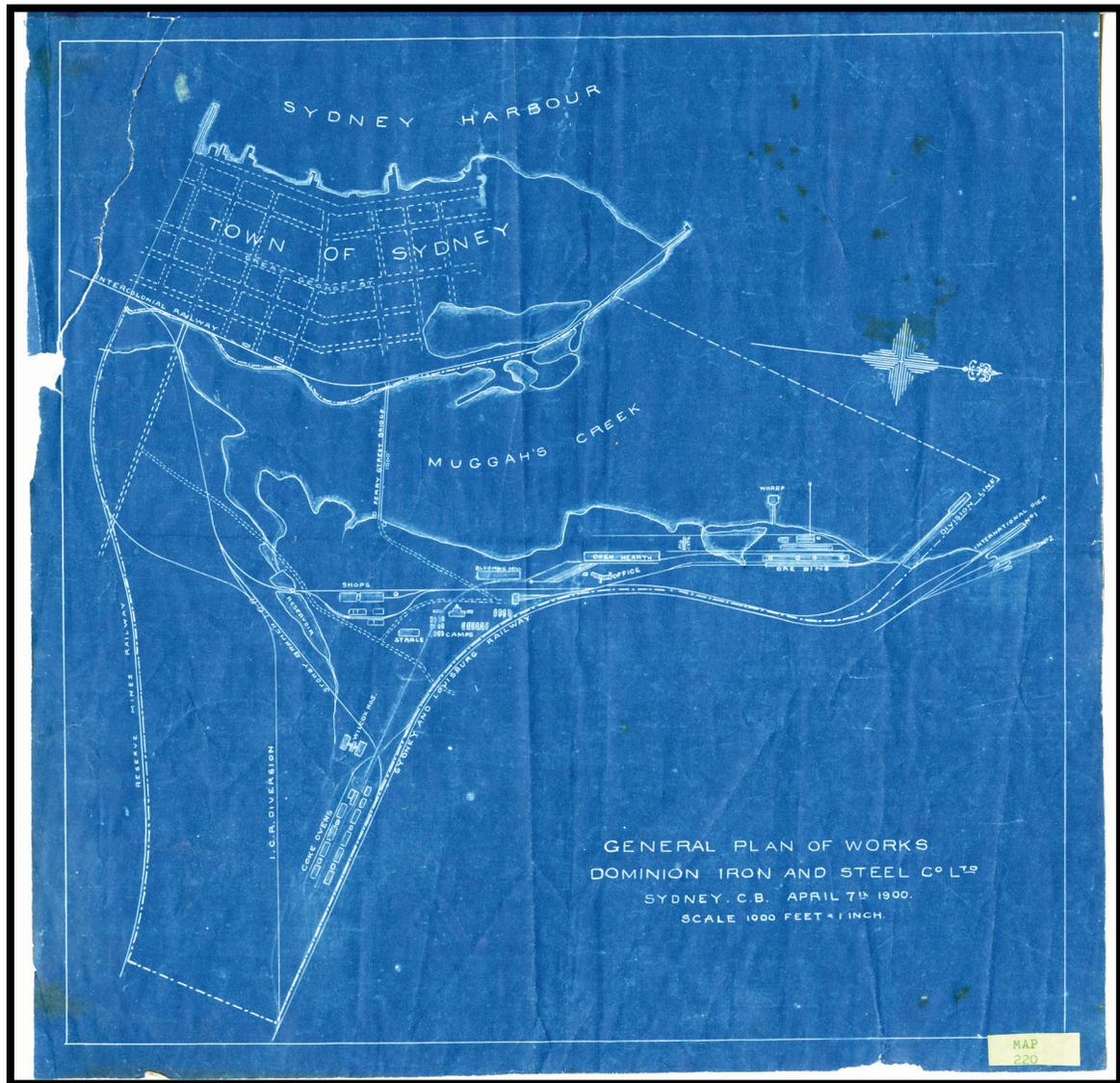


Figure 0.1: General Plan of Works, Dominion Iron & Steel Co. Ltd., Sydney, 1900
Source: Map 220, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

³² Sam Migliore and A. Evo DiPierro, *Italian Lives, Cape Breton Memories* (Sydney: UCCB Press, 1999).

This growth was predicated upon the operations of the steelworks at the centre of the town, which rested on nearly 450 hectares of land. Robert Morgan describes the frantic pace of expansion:

Four hundred structures were completed by 1900 and former estates such as Colby, Ashby, Brooklands, and Sherwood, were divided and rapidly built up [...] An amazed citizen reported that ‘houses are going up in places where the streets are as yet on paper.’³³

These constructions became the neighbourhoods of Ashby and Whitney Pier, where steelworkers and their families would reside throughout the century. At shift change, the streets surrounding the plant would be full of men walking to and from work with lunch pails in hand. By 1 January 1904, the Province of Nova Scotia officially declared Sydney a city.³⁴

The class dimension of life in the steel city was visible from the beginning. Its contrasts were striking; while workers in Whitney Pier struggled to find viable housing – often packing tightly into small, smoky shacks in the streets closest to the plant, Disco management built grand homes on the waterfront. Arthur J. Moxham, the first general manager of the Sydney Works, had his home – “Rockaway” – transported to Sydney brick-by-brick from his prior estate in Pittsburgh.³⁵ The thirty-room mansion, colloquially known as “Moxham Castle” and replete with an indoor swimming pool, was starkly different from the crowded boarding houses near the coke ovens where “beds were constantly being slept in as night workmen turned in as soon as the day workers got up.”³⁶ While workers suffered through periodic outbreaks of smallpox, diphtheria, and dangerous conditions at the mill, Moxham and his wife entertained members of the city’s

³³ Robert Morgan, *Rise Again! The Story of Cape Breton Island from 1900 to Today* (Sydney: Breton Books, 2009), 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁵ David Farber, *Everybody Ought to be Rich: The Life and Times of John J. Raskob, Capitalist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 30-1.

³⁶ “The Steel Boom Comes to Sydney,” *Cape Breton’s Magazine* 39 (1985): 47.

elite at lavish parties where – as Moira Ross writes – “Mrs. Moxham always wore white and Miss Moxham always wore black.”³⁷

Despite this growth, Canadian steel firms faced structural challenges.³⁸ Nova Scotia producers began to trend towards consolidation in the first decades of the 20th century. The Nova Scotia Steel Company in Trenton and Dominion Iron and Steel in Sydney soon found their ownership contested by extra-regional forces. In 1910, Disco was combined with the Dominion Coal Company by a consortium of Montreal and Toronto business interests. Scotia, meanwhile, came under the control of American investors in 1917.³⁹ Craig Heron and Robert Storey describe how both companies “were in serious trouble by the 1920s when their over-specialization and distance from markets in the industrial heartland of southern Ontario forced them to curtail production drastically.”⁴⁰ Further consolidation was the result, as Scotia and Disco were merged under the control of the British Empire Steel Corporation (Besco) in 1921. Operations at

³⁷ Moira Ross, “Dr. Arthur Samuel Kendall, His Life and Times as a Medical Doctor, Politician and Citizen of Cape Breton Island, 1861-1944” (master’s thesis, St. Mary’s University, 1998), 5.

³⁸ See David Alexander, “Economic Growth in the Atlantic Region, 1880-1940,” *Acadiensis* 8, 1 (Autumn 1978): 47-76; James D. Frost, “The ‘Nationalization’ of the Bank of Nova Scotia, 1880-1910,” *Acadiensis* 12, 1 (Autumn 1982): 3-38; E.R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement, 1919-1927: A Study in Canadian Regionalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979); Don Nerbas, “Adapting to Decline: the Changing Business World of the Bourgeoisie in Saint John, NB, in the 1920s,” *Canadian Historical Review* 89, 2 (2008): 151-87.

³⁹ Frank, “The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of British Empire Steel Corporation,” 14; See also: L. Anders Sandberg, “Dependent Development, Labour and the Trenton Steel Works, Nova Scotia, c. 1900-1943,” *Labour/Le Travail* 27 (Spring 1991): 127-62; Kris E. Inwood, “Local Control, Resources and the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company,” *Historical Papers* 21, 1 (1986): 254-82.

⁴⁰ Craig Heron and Robert Storey, “Work and Struggle in the Canadian Steel Industry, 1900-1950,” in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, eds. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1986), 211-12.

a Scotia-owned mill in Sydney Mines were wound down, and the Cape Breton collieries were – at this point – largely under the control of the single company - Besco.⁴¹

The 1920s loom large in the collective memory of industrial Cape Breton. Poor management, a watered stock scandal, and corporate intransigence meant that Besco was beginning to feel the pinch of a protracted market downturn by the late 1910s. In an atmosphere of working-class resistance in Canada, which famously erupted in 1919, the company sought major concessions from its employees.⁴² A failed union recognition strike by the steelworkers in 1923 saw troops stationed at the plant and sporadic attacks on workers and their families along Victoria Road in Whitney Pier. In 1925, coal miner William Davis was shot dead by company police during a strike in the Cape Breton coal field. This event is memorialized each year on June 11 – “Davis Day” in Cape Breton – and local children have the day off of school in the former coal towns.

Besco did not survive the decade. In 1928, it was placed under the control of a new operating company, the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation (Dosco), which controlled the Cape Breton coal and steel industries until the government takeovers of the 1960s. David Frank writes:

As an episode in Canadian economic history, the development of industrial Cape Breton between the 1880s and the 1920s revealed a pattern of industrial growth culminating in severe crisis [...] After the 1920s, the main functions of industrial Cape Breton in the national economy changed: the community was now called upon to provide a large pool of labour for the national labour market, and, in the time of need, to supply reserve capacity for the national energy and steel markets.⁴³

⁴¹ Frank, “The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of British Empire Steel Corporation,” 22; Several smaller producers did remain, although the market was dominated by Besco and, late, Dosco.

⁴² Gregory S. Kealey, “1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt,” *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 11-44; Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1989).

⁴³ Frank, “The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of British Empire Steel Corporation,” 33.

Cape Breton's industrial transition during this period fundamentally changed the island's role within the Canadian economy, and this early history reveals the roots of the deindustrialization process that continues to impact the island's communities.



Figure 0.2: Steel Plant during the 1923 strike, 1923
Source: Photographer unknown, reference number: 89-517-18712,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

Gary Burrill positions this history within a regional framework in his examination of out-migration from the Maritimes. The 1920s, he argues, can only be described as a demographic disaster. “In the course of the decade, more than 147,000 people left the region.”⁴⁴ During its industrialization, Cape Breton had bucked the overall regional trend; the crises of the 1920s and Depression in the 1930s prompted a renewed exodus of workers heading for the Boston States and other points west.⁴⁵ Although the population in

⁴⁴ Gary Burrill, *Away: Maritimers in Massachusetts, Ontario, and Alberta: An Oral History of Leaving Home* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 5.

⁴⁵ Patricia A. Thornton, “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look,” *Acadiensis* 15, 1 (Autumn, 1985): 27-8.

Sydney would continue to increase until reaching an apex of 33,617 in 1961, the context of this growth within a broader environment of regional underdevelopment and out-migration cannot be ignored.

The Depression years witnessed the re-emergence of unionism within the Canadian steel industry. Craig Heron writes, “Steelworkers took their first halting steps in the mid-1930s, when independent unions appeared in Hamilton, Sault St. Marie, Sydney and Trenton.”⁴⁶ The unionization and corresponding struggles of steelworkers in Sydney are further explored in Chapter Two. Although the Second World War proved a boon for Canadian producers, the Sydney Works did not benefit to the same extent as its competitors. Beginning in 1944, I trace the processes of deindustrialization in Sydney past the moment of final closure in 2000 to reveal the layers of personal and collective meaning that emerge as the result of, and in response, to its many impacts.

Sources and Methods: Archival Research and Oral History

This thesis is built on extensive archival and oral history research. It benefits from 29 interviews that I have conducted with former steelworkers, office staff, management, provincial and local politicians, residents, union officials, and community activists. Business records from the operations of the Sydney Works under both Dosco and the Sydney Steel Corporation (Sysco) have been indispensable; the extent to which decisions relating to the mill were documented under public ownership provides an overview of its operations that would be difficult to achieve were the firm held privately. While many of these sources are found within the “Dosco Papers” collection at the Beaton Institute Archives in Sydney, documents relating to provincial ownership, the steelworkers’ union, and the role of the federal government can be found in archives throughout Canada and the United States.

Records detailing the relationship between Sysco, the Nova Scotia government, and regional economic development are held at the Nova Scotia Archives in Halifax. These include all provincial reports relating to Sydney Steel, a series of still images from the early years at the plant, and government correspondence. The Dalhousie University Archives, also located in Halifax, includes in its collection several fonds detailing the

⁴⁶ Heron, *Working in Steel*, 174.

regional holdings of Hawker Siddeley Canada Ltd. – a parent company of the Sydney Works in the decade prior to nationalization. Each of these collections helps to illuminate regional attitudes towards steelmaking in Sydney. As a provincial political issue, the perception of Sysco among regional politicians and other off-island actors had a significant impact on its continued operations, attempts at privatization, and its final closure in 2000.

Collections at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa and the McMaster University Archives in Hamilton include holdings from the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) national and district leadership, the Canadian Labour Congress, governmental departments, and the correspondence of several federal politicians that relate to Sysco. These records help to position the deindustrialization of Sydney Steel within a national context. Records from the Canadian National Office of the USWA, for example, reveal differences in how national, district, and local union officials sought to resist the threat of downsizing and closure. The actions of the federal state, from the steel controls during the 1940s to the role of Environment Canada in the clean up and remediation of the Sydney tar ponds during the 1990s, affect how deindustrialization unfolds at the local level.

The Historical Collections and Labor Archives at Pennsylvania State University in State College have also been instrumental for this study. The international records of the USWA were especially useful in framing the response of organized labour to the anxieties and challenges prompted by deindustrialization. In the audio-visual collection, these archives include recordings of all speeches at the international convention between 1940 and 1999. Minutes of the International Executive Board, as well as records from the Office of the President, the Canadian National Director, and the Canadian districts are also included. These offer insight into how economic changes are perceived within the highest levels of the USWA; although Sydney is not often directly discussed, correspondence relating to the nationalization of the British steel industry, rising inflation, and trade agreements between Canada and the U.S. reveal another layer of influences.

There are also several primary print sources that are used within this thesis. Local and regional newspapers reveal different perspectives on Sydney Steel. Locally, the coverage found within *Steelworker and Miner* – a radical labour paper published during

the 1940s and early 1950s- is contrasted with the more conservative *Sydney Post Record*, *Sydney Daily Record*, and *Cape Breton Post*.⁴⁷ The *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, which provides a provincial perspective, also frequently covered issues relating to Dosco and Sysco. USWA magazines *Steelabor* and *Steelabour – Canadian Edition*, published between 1936 and 2005, help to frame the political circumstances facing steelworkers in Sydney within a broader set of concerns among members of the 20th century labour movement. Finally, the Bras d’Or Collection at Cape Breton University includes federal and provincial publications relating to economic development in Cape Breton, ecology and health, and Canadian steel and coal production.

Oral history helps to personalize the processes of deindustrialization. In her recent book, *Exit Zero*, Christine Walley writes:

Personal stories [...] are, of course, never just about individuals; such stories are also about the social worlds in which we live [...] Our individual stories are also communal ones. Consequently, telling personal stories means not only looking inward but also turning the self outward and tracing the links and relationships that shape and define not only who we are as individuals but also the broader social worlds of which we are a part.⁴⁸

In my research, these individual and communal understandings are explored through the use of two collections of oral history material. The first is comprised of audio and video interviews that I conducted with twenty-nine informants between 2013 and 2016. Our conversations were structured as “life-history” interviews, where participants had the opportunity to reflect upon their personal experiences, their connection with the history of deindustrialization in Sydney, and their perceptions of the city more than ten years after the closure of the steel plant.

The second collection was created in 1990 as part of the “Steel Project” at the Beaton Institute Archives at Cape Breton University, corresponding with the end of integrated steelmaking at Sysco and the transition to an electric arc operation. Through approximately 163 audio interviews, the Steel Project was intended to “emphasize the

⁴⁷ The *Daily Post* was printed between 1900-1933, the *Post Record* from 1933-1956, and the *Cape Breton Post* first ran in 1956 and remains in operation today.

⁴⁸ Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 5.

centrality of the history of Sydney Steel and [to] provide a link between the past and the future of the workers and their community.”⁴⁹ Interviews were conducted with more than 200 steelworkers, many of whom are now deceased. This collection offers historical insight into a moment of economic disruption; as the result of modernization, the Sysco workforce was reduced by nearly half at the time that these interviews were undertaken. Daniel James writes, “Life stories are cultural constructs that draw on a public discourse structured by class and gender conventions. They also make use of a wide spectrum of possible roles, self-representations, and available narratives.”⁵⁰ As a result, the comparative analysis that is afforded by the availability of two collections of oral history interviews, conducted twenty-five years apart, helps to reveal how experiences of deindustrialization are historically contingent.

Thankfully, oral histories no longer require a spirited defense against methodological scepticism – having escaped from what Paul Thompson refers to as “the stigma of amateurism.”⁵¹ The debates of the 1970s, which encompassed issues of historical subjectivity, historical memory, and the role of the historian, have given way to broader understandings of the interview process and the applicability of digital methods.⁵² In my interviews, I rely upon the practical oral history methodologies described by Alessandro Portelli in his 1979 article, “Sulla specificità della storia orale.” In this piece, reprinted in English in 1981, Portelli offers three main lessons: we must

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Beaton, “The Beaton Institute’s Steel Project,” *Archivaria* 27 (Winter 1988-89): 194.

⁵⁰ Daniel James, *Doña Maria’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 124.

⁵¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 2000): 71-2.

⁵² Alistair Thomson, “Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 34, 1 (2006): 51; Steven High, “Sharing Authority in the Writing of Canadian History: The Case of Oral History,” in *Contesting Clio’s Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*, eds. Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson (London: University of London, 2008), 20-46; Steven High, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Jessica Mills, “Telling Our Stories / Animating Our Past: A Status Report on Oral History and New Media,” *Canadian Journal of Communications* 37, 3 (2012): 1-22.

move beyond text-based transcriptions and begin to take language, tone, volume, and body language into account, we must apply narrative analysis to oral testimony and pay attention to narrative cues such as repetition or time spent on a particular subject, and we must keep in mind the question of “who speaks” in the interview process.⁵³ Video interviews provide one avenue for this type of analysis. Only five of my interviewees – when offered the choice between audio and video recording – were comfortable sitting for the camera.⁵⁴ In other instances, I took handwritten notes on a pad of paper during our discussions– making sure to consider *how* the story was being relayed as much as the content of the spoken words.

“Shared authority,” a concept articulated by Michael Frisch, is another methodological goal of many practicing oral historians today. Frisch describes this as the creation of a meaningful dialogue between interviewer and interviewee that offers participants the power to historicize and frame their own past experiences.⁵⁵ Linda Shopes, commenting on shared authority for a 2003 special issue of *Oral History Review*, argues that this practice must result from the construction of long-term relationships between the interviewer and interviewee, a willingness to take participants’ analytical frameworks seriously, and an ability to challenge the notion of uninterrupted objectivity on behalf of the historian.⁵⁶ In practice, however, this is more difficult than it might first appear; as Lorraine Sitzia cautions:

⁵³ Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 63-74.

⁵⁴ See also Steven High and David Sworn, “After the interview: The interpretive challenges of oral history video indexing,” *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* 1, 2 (2009): http://www.digitalstudies.org/ojs/index.php/digital_studies/article/view/173/215; Michael Frisch, “Three dimensions and more: Oral history beyond the paradoxes of method,” in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, eds. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: Guildford Press, 2008), 222.

⁵⁵ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990).

⁵⁶ Linda Shopes, “Commentary: Sharing Authority,” *Oral History Review* 30, 1 (Winter-Spring 2003): 103-110.

I am not sure that it is possible to have a shared critical perspective with our narrators, or that it would be desirable to do so; it is the narrator's story, it is personal to him, or her, and as interviewers our interpretations are affected by age, gender, and subsequent understandings of the past.⁵⁷

Each of my interviews were co-created, but it proved more challenging to extend this collaboration beyond the scope of the recorded interview itself. This was particularly true of instances where informants only agreed to sit for a single interview.

In her 2014 book, *According to Baba*, Stacey Zembrzycki describes the successes and pitfalls of meaningfully sharing authority with her grandmother. She writes, "When I began this project, I believed that I was both a community insider and an outsider, maintaining not only a subjective connection to it through Baba, but also a real distance from it because I had not participated in it."⁵⁸ Like Zembrzycki, I also viewed my role in these terms at the beginning of my project. Although my grandfather worked in the New Waterford collieries, I had no direct connection to the Sydney steel plant. It soon became clear that being born and raised in the city would not open as many doors as I had initially imagined. Cold-calling possible interviewees was made more difficult by my having to respond in the negative to the frequent question: "Are you related to any of the MacKinnon's that were on at the plant?" This slowly became easier, particularly as Gerry McCarron – my wife's uncle and a former Sydney steelworker – became more involved with the project.

Gerry and his brother Tommy were the first two people interviewed during this research. We came together in August 2013 at my in-laws' home, where we sat in the gazebo and talked about their connection to the plant. The McCarron's were a steelworking family. Jim, their father, worked on the plant between 1943 and 1992, as did his father and grandfather. Re-watching our first interview now, in July 2016, I am struck by the awkwardness of the encounter. While we discussed a number of issues relating to work at the plant and socializing among employees, our conversation also contains a

⁵⁷ Lorraine Sitzia, "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?" *Oral History Review* 30, 1 (Winter-Spring 2003): 101.

⁵⁸ Stacey Zembrzycki, *According to Baba: A Collaborative Oral History of Sudbury's Ukrainian Community* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 10.

number of pauses, false starts, and direct answers to narrowly framed questions. Until that point, I had not spent much time in conversation with either of the men; unlike Zembrzycki’s experience with her grandmother, we did not share the type of close personal relationship that would make such an interview immediately comfortable. Although this was the only time that I sat with Tommy for a formal interview, Gerry would help to organize – and sit in on – several others.⁵⁹

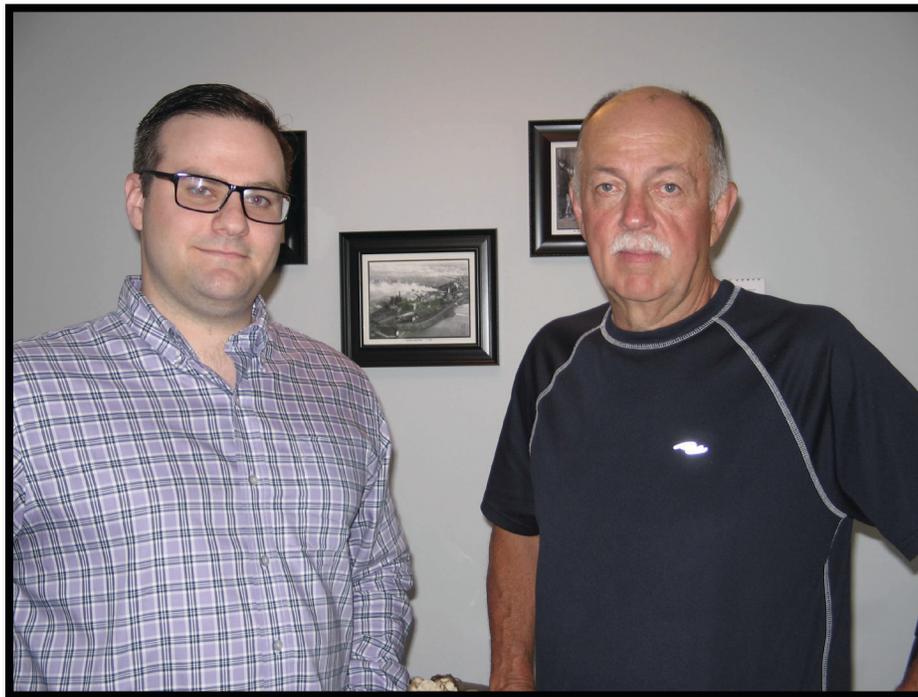


Figure 0.3: Lachlan MacKinnon and Gerry McCarron, July 2016
Source: Photo by author

“Sharing authority,” writes High, “is about much more than speaking to new audiences; it requires the cultivation of trust, the development of collaborative relationships, and shared decision-making [...] Collaboration need not end when the

⁵⁹ Gerry and Tommy McCarron, interview with author, August 7, 2013; Gerry McCarron, Sheldon Andrews and George MacNeil, interview with author, August 5, 2015; Gerry McCarron and Dave Nalepa, interview with author, December 8, 2015; Gerry McCarron and Joel MacLean, interview with author, April 29, 2016; Gerry McCarron, Alana MacNeil, and George MacNeil, interview with author, April 29, 2016.

audio or video is turned off, but that it is an ongoing process of dialogue and sharing.” The interview process is always envisioned as a collaborative space, but it is through Gerry’s participation that this type of extended collaboration was made possible. Not only did we conduct a number of interviews together, as we both became more comfortable the project was able to benefit in other less formal ways.

By 2016, it was not unusual for me to call Gerry with a quick question about the plant, the people who worked there, or any number of other things. Sometimes, when the answer was not immediately clear, he would reach out to other former employees before getting back to me. We met at his home in Sydney on another instance to go over some documents that he came across relating to the history of Sysco. I hope that I have also been able to offer something to the McCarrons. Whenever I came across the work records of their father, Jim, I copied them for the family. When Gerry needed information on the date-of-birth for a former Sysco employee being memorialized on the site of the former plant, our roles reversed and I was able to help him with the information. While this sort of personal relationship is impossible to build with every informant – particularly in the three years given for this project – it represents a meaningful effort at oral history as engaged scholarship, reflexive practice, and shared inquiry.

The sharing of authority is not simply a relationship between interviewer and interviewee, but can also emerge from the relationships between multiple participants in a group setting. As Bethan Coupland writes:

Group oral histories, despite their methodological and interpretive challenges, clearly illustrate a more nuanced, multilayered process of remembering which occurs in small social groups, a process which is largely obscured by the ongoing focus in the exchange between individual and collective positions.⁶⁰

Six of the 29 interviews that I conducted were group interviews. Five of these were organized by Gerry McCarron, and generally consisted of Gerry, myself, and one-or-two additional participants. The sixth group interview involved Mickey Campbell and Adrian Murphy – close friends and former employees of both Dosco and Sydney Steel. In each,

⁶⁰ Bethan Coupland, “Remembering Blaenoven: What Can Group Interviews Tell Us about ‘Collective Memory’?” *Oral History Review* 42, 2 (2015): 278.

aspects of collective memory and shared experiences were discussed, although the “life-history” interview structure was largely superseded by communal discussion.

Although group interviews are sometimes presented as chaotic and un-helpful, in my experience these encounters offer insights that were complementary to those presented through life-history interviews.⁶¹ This format sometimes allowed the informant to wield more authority in our interaction. In my interview with Mickey and Adrian, for example, I had initially asked only Mickey for his participation. Only after arriving at his home to find he, Adrian, and a third man sitting at the kitchen table talking “plant talk” was I told that Adrian had been invited to join us. Although the third man, whose name I did not catch, left before the interview officially began, their discussion continued unabated – aside from the signing of the requisite forms and making introductions. They were deeply involved in a collaborative process that Portelli terms *history-telling*: the intersection of biography and history, between “individual experience and the transformations of society.”⁶² This represented a shift in my authority as an interviewer; rather than taking on my usual role in facilitating the flow of the narrative, my participation was more observational.

Despite this shift, my presence still informed the interview and its boundaries. There was a performative aspect to Mickey and Adrian’s conversation that would likely not have occurred had I not been present. While Adrian spoke about the dangerous conditions in the Open Hearth Department, for example, Mickey stood from the table and removed some papers from a nearby cabinet.

Adrian: And, you know, when I started working on the Open Hearth, the average age . . .

[Mickey places a paper on the table. There are a few seconds of silence as Adrian and I read the headline: “Injury at Steel Plant.” I notice the name of the injured man, Michael Campbell]

⁶¹ For critical perspectives on group interviews, see Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Scientists*, 3rd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 289-90; Donald Richie, *Doing Oral History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 49.

⁶² Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” in *Narrative and Genre*, eds. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1998), 25.

Lachlan: Oh, that's you is it, Mickey?

Mickey: Yes.

[A few more seconds pass as we sit, in silence, skimming the paper. It describes a man falling from a Dosco boat onto ice, and being near death.]

Lachlan: When was this?

Mickey: 1957 [...] It was a German ship, and it had some trouble with the propeller [...] So it came in that day, or the day before – I'm not sure which now – and anyway, the first thousand tonne [of steel] they put on her was on the front, on the deck, to get the back end up to repair the propeller [...] And when I went out that night, on the back shift, we were working on the back end of the boat. So up high. And they were loading rails right on the deck [...] Cold as could be. [...] So this rail, on the edge of the roller, fell off. And with all the frost and everything. I caught ahold of it with the tongs [...] and the tong slipped off . . . And the back of the rail was just below my knees. And backwards I went, over . . . And the distance I fell now . . . quite high. But I went through the ice, held on to it, spread my arms right wide [...] And I got out of it. Rolled my body away, a couple of times, from the hole – not going back in [...] I was there for awhile [...] There was three guys came to help me [...] They had a rope, about a two inch rope . . . and they put it around me. I told them not to [...] I said, 'I'm having a hard enough time breathing now.' [...] I was inhaling blood and exhaling blood. Internal bleeding. Anyhow, I said 'Get me over to that ladder. I'll walk up that ladder. And anyhow, I did. And when I got up that ladder they had a stretcher waiting for me.'⁶³

In this instance, Mickey used a prop to help articulate the trauma of his workplace accident; he found a way to express – as Robert Storey puts it - an experience that was “controlled with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered.”⁶⁴ This type of performative storytelling is not uncommon during communal interviews; physical objects help provide

⁶³ Mickey Campbell and Adrian Murphy, interview with author, 1 September 2014.

⁶⁴ Robert Storey, “Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: Engaging with the ‘Testimony’ of Injured Workers,” in *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*, ed. Steven High (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 57.

an impetus for in-depth discussions than might otherwise be uncomfortable in a group setting.⁶⁵

Using these sources and methods, this dissertation draws together the experiences of deindustrialization at Sydney Steel to reveal the layered nature of its many processes. In eight chapters, this text moves between the impact of deindustrialization on workers' bodies and the changes it prompts on the shop floor, community-based resistance tactics, and political economy. With this approach, I reflect upon the different scales at which industrial decline and closure affects workers, their families, and other residents in post-industrial locales

The first two chapters focus on steelmaking in Sydney from 1944 until 1966, ending on the eve of the near-closure of the mill. Chapter One provides a macro-economic and political overview of the actions of the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation – the controlling company of the Sydney Works. In refusing to provide the necessary upgrades to mill and consolidating its holdings in Montreal and Toronto, the company's actions reveal an explicit corporate strategy of deindustrialization and divestment from Cape Breton. Innis' "staples trap" is used as an explanatory mechanism for Dosco's hesitancy to re-invest in the regional market. Next, Chapter Two shifts focus towards "the local," revealing how the labour achievements of the post-war period resulted in a perceived strengthening of working-class institutions and social positions. This chapter traces the development of a dominant industrial structure of feeling in Sydney and examines the development of the solidarities and social understandings that were at stake in 1967. Here, we witness a turning-away from the so-called "red-phase" of Cape Breton workers' culture towards a set of more mainstream understandings of steelworkers, their place in the city, and the importance of institutional unionism that reflect contemporary concerns throughout Canadian society.

In the third chapter, we examine "Black Friday" – October 13, 1967 – for what it tells us about how nationalization was seen as an acceptable response to deindustrialization by the provincial state. Black Friday, as it became known locally, was

⁶⁵ Hugo Slim, Paul Thompson, Olivia Bennett, and Nigel Cross, "Ways of listening," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 119-20.

the day that Dosco announced the planned closure of the Sydney Works. A corresponding community protest movement, which included a massive “Parade of Concern,” reveals the extent to which locals perceived the mill to be the economic and cultural heart of the city. Oral history testimony expresses a moment of profound disruption; the ‘moral economy’ of industrial Cape Breton was directly challenged and traditional beliefs about industrial employment, methods of resistance, and working-class masculinities were exposed as far more precarious than had been previously imagined.

Now under public ownership, the next chapters explore the mill’s gradual decline and its impact on steelworkers and other residents. Shop floor changes at Sydney Steel between 1968 and 1989 form the basis of Chapter Four. Oral history accounts of steelworkers in the mill’s departments help to articulate the transition from integrated steelmaking to the downsizing of the 1980s, culminating with the changeover to electric arc production. Workers’ accounts provide insight into both individual resistance to managerial control and the tensions that arise between the desire to maintain employment numbers and an administrative desire for “competitive efficiencies” visible throughout the Canadian steel industry. These experiences are framed within a broader discussion of Fordist and post-Fordist production in 20th century Canada. For its part, Chapter Five reveals the aftermath of industrial production as it is expressed within workers’ bodies. By the 1980s, steelworkers were beginning to demand state recognition for the dangers associated with exposure to carcinogenic agents at work. As workers became more aware of these risks, recognizing the significant number of steelworkers afflicted with different types of cancers and other illnesses, a small group of coke ovens workers began independently lobbying the provincial government for workers’ compensation. Their struggle and the resulting concessions on behalf of the province reveal the interconnections between bodily health, political activism, and shop floor environmentalism.

Following the coke ovens workers’ fight for compensation, other groups within the community became increasingly involved in discussions surrounding the environmental and health legacies that resulted from nearly 100 years of industrial production. Much of this discussion centred upon the Sydney “tar ponds” – a polluted watershed that flowed alongside the steel plant into the harbour. The historical question

of how to remediate this site forms the basis for Chapter Six. Included in this chapter is an exploration of a failed incineration plan between 1986 and 1996, environmental protest and cross-class solidarities within the community, and the experiences of two women who were re-located from their homes near the site of the former coke ovens in 1999 after arsenic and other contaminants were found leaching into their basements.

The provincial decision to close Sysco is the focus of Chapter Seven. Circumstances surrounding the plant had changed dramatically between 1967 and 2001 – after Premier John Hamm was elected in Nova Scotia on a platform that included the closure or sale of Sysco. A set of political and ideational influences are probed in this chapter; while Hamm views the decision as simply a state re-orientation of state interventionism, the popular convergence of neoliberal doctrine and regional economic development theory during the 1990s meant that market-based solutions had become *hegemonic* by 1999. This also traces the intellectual history of the notion, still popular today, that an industrial mindset stands in the way of fostering so-called entrepreneurial culture in deindustrializing and post-industrial areas. The role of the local university in this process is also explored, as are the constraints placed upon the ability of workers and other community members to meaningfully challenge the closure decision.

Chapter Eight examines the representation and memory of Sydney Steel in the period following closure. The creation of “Open Hearth Park” on the site of the former plant, part of a \$400 million federal/provincial remediation effort, reveals how industrial history corresponds with modern politics of place and identity within the city. This includes discussion of steelworkers’ current perceptions of the site and a public history exploration of the representational value of industrial heritage. This chapter also includes discussion of a documentary film, *Heart of Steel*, which was released in 2012. The film expresses a view of the industrial past that is depoliticized and removed from concerns of the present. More broadly, these discussions reflect the “residual” industrial structure of feeling that survives in Sydney. Although the steel plant no longer exists, the working-class cultures, understandings, and moral economies that it shaped continue to inform daily life on the island.

Deindustrialization stretches further than the immediate disruption of a factory, mill, or mine closure. It is rooted in the fabric of market capitalism, and its causes – both

direct and indirect –are in place long before the final shift. It is a transformative process, simultaneously affecting political economy, place identity, environment, and even the bodies of workers, their families and neighbours. Writing of a different time and place, Eric Hobsbawm reflects upon conventional wisdom:

The triumph of mechanisation was inevitable. We can understand, and sympathise with the long rear-guard action which all but a minority of favoured workers fought against the new system; but we must accept its pointlessness and its inevitable defeat.⁶⁶

Just as Hobsbawm rejects this view of the machine-breakers, so, too, do I reject its application to 20th century industrial workers. Deindustrialization is not inevitable or, at least, the way in which it unfolds is not pre-determined. From Black Friday to ecological activism during the 1990s, residents of the former “steel city” of Atlantic Canada have been active in their response to the forces buffeting their community. But memory and representation have a role to play, here, as well. How people reflect upon these struggles, victories, and defeats inform how working-class communities respond to present challenges. For Sydney, as for post-industrial rural resource economies throughout the world, the road forward must be based on an honest assessment of the industrial past.

⁶⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, “The Machine Breakers,” *Past and Present* 1 (February 1952): 57

Chapter One

Diversify or Die: Planned Obsolescence in the Dosco Years, 1944-1966

Attention is called to the fact that one can readily get a much different impression when visiting an idle rolling mill or factory [...] compared with walking into mills or factory where the plant is in operation [...] In other words, the activity and the noise of operations may lead to the erroneous conclusion that the plants in operation were superior to those that were idle. There is nothing more depressing than idle works on a cold winter day.

- F.L. Estep. "Report to the Minister of Industry." 1944.¹

Deindustrialization is most visible at the moment of the final closure. Recollections of mass termination centre upon the trauma of learning of plans to relocate or halt operations. This trauma is palpable; on February 10, 2016, Carrier Corp. told its employees at an Indianapolis manufacturing plant to gather for a company message. In a video recording of the announcement, a man in a suit stands on a stage, surrounded by employees, and reads from a script. "It became clear that the best way to stay competitive . . . and protect the business in the long term . . . is to move production from our facility in Indianapolis" – the room stays quiet, although a few voices can be heard muttering in disbelief. One woman clearly says, "Oh no." The man on the stage continues after a brief pause, "to Monterrey, Mexico." The room erupts in anger; employees shout, expletives are hurled, and some immediately head for the exits. With this decision, more than 1,400 employees are left without work. United Steelworkers (USWA) Local 1999 representative Chris Jones told reporters, "This was not expected at all [...] Because of corporate greed [...] Our members and their families have a hell of a price to pay."²

¹ F.L. Estep, report to the Minister of Industry, Halifax, Nova Scotia, regarding operations of Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation [8 April 1944], Nova Scotia Steel and Coal, Trenton Works, Hawker Siddeley Collection, MS-4-106, A-127, Dalhousie University Archives, Halifax, NS.

² "Carrier plans to lay off 1,400 Indy workers in Mexico move," *Indianapolis Business Journal*. February 10, 2016; "Carrier Air Conditioner (part of United Technologies) Moving 1,400 Jobs to Mexico," YouTube Video, 3:31, posted by Joe Brunner, 11 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3ttxGMQOrY>.

The feelings expressed by Carrier employees in Indiana – shock, surprise, and anger chief among them – are products of social, political, and economic processes that impact millions of working class men and women around the world. These processes are germane to global capitalism; Joseph Schumpeter expanded upon this notion as early as the 1940s, when he first described the shape of creative destruction. “In dealing with capitalism, we are dealing with an evolutionary process,” he writes:

The opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organization development from the craft shop and factory to such concerns as U.S. Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation – if I may use that biological term – that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.³

While neoliberals have used this language to illustrate the logical, dispassionate operations of the free market, the recognition that these processes are geographically situated had been less forthcoming. In areas that capital has vacated, the destructive impulse remains far more visible than the creative. Geographically situated, analysis of these processes within Canada reveals the undercurrents of regional disparity.

Historians and economic geographers have recently revisited Harold Innis’ *staples thesis*, arguing that it remains a useful framework for the development and underdevelopment of resource peripheries in Canada. According to Mel Watkins, the staples thesis articulates a geographic and spatial argument for the underdevelopment of rural resource frontiers. While Innis applied his theory to the cod fishery and fur trade to explain Canadian development, his ideas also help to explain the economic challenges that plague the industrial hinterland. This is predicated upon the notion that rural economies become reliant upon primary industry and nearby service resources.⁴ This form of development may lead to a *staples trap*, wherein Roger Hayter and Trevor Barnes argue:

³ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, rev. ed. (1942; repr. London: Routledge, 2003), 82-83.

⁴ Mel Watkins, “Staples Redux,” *Studies in Political Economy* 79 (Spring 2007): 213-226; Mel Watkins, “The Staple Theory Revisited,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (1977): 83-95.

Capitalists in the staples-producing region often maintain an export mentality, which limits the range of activities in which such capitalists are willing to invest. Second, because of the need for large fixed-capital investments in many staple sectors and the resulting indivisibilities of production, firms there are often large, oligopolistic, and externally controlled.⁵

Scholarship on deindustrialization has largely remained focused on industrial towns in the heartland. “In Canada,” writes Steven High, “economic change on the resource frontier is often understood in terms of boom-to-bust, as resource communities highly susceptible to cyclical downturns rather than industrial communities experiencing decline.”⁶

“A penny wise and a pound foolish” is how former Sydney steelworkers Romeo Sylvester and Eddie Parris describe corporate management of the plant in the postwar period. The view that executives were ineffectual and risk-averse, evidenced by the company’s refusal to invest in the necessary upgrades to keep the mill competitive, is popular among many former employees of the Dominion Steel and Coal Company.⁷ An examination of Dosco operations between 1944 and 1966 reveal that these decisions were not based upon a misreading of market conditions; rather, the withholding of modernization and product diversification from the Sydney Works was part of a purposeful strategy of deindustrialization and divestment through planned obsolescence resulting from the staples trap.

The Postwar Recovery: 1944-1950

In addition to the Sydney Works, Dosco was the controlling interest in approximately 85 percent of collieries in Nova Scotia by the 1940s. Following its consolidation of the Besco group in 1928, the company began to exercise control over a number of small

⁵ Roger Hayter and Trevor Barnes, “Innis’ Staple Theory, Exports, and Recession: British Columbia, 1981-1986,” *Economic Geography* 66, 2 (April 1990): 158.

⁶ Steve High, “‘The Wounds of Class’: A Historiographical Reflection on the Study of Deindustrialization, 1973-2013,” *History Compass* 11, 11 (November 2013): 1002.

⁷ Eddie Parris, interview by Diane Chisholm, October 5, 1990, Steel Project, MG 14, 206, Box 7 File 62, transcript, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS; Romeo Sylvester, interview by Diane Chisholm, March 12, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 80, transcript, BI; Adrian Murphy and Mickey Campbell, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

producers. Essentially, Dosco existed as a large-scale holding group; the Dominion Coal Company, for example, had begun operations in 1893 under the direction of H.M. Whitney. After the Dosco acquisition, this company continued to operate under its original title – although ownership and financial control were both wielded by the parent corporation.⁸ Collieries spanned Cape Breton Island; the Sydney Coal Field included the industrial towns surrounding Sydney, such as Glace Bay and New Waterford, while the western portion of the island included a number of other working seams, with coal mines operating in places like Port Hood, Inverness, and Mabou. As the island’s major employer, Dosco wielded a great deal of economic and political power. By the 1950s, its holdings included firms throughout Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, and Newfoundland.

Vertical integration was key to the company’s business model. The firm maintained strict control over its supply chain. Coke made from Cape Breton coal fed the blast furnaces at the Sydney Works from the first years of its operations. Iron ore was shipped to Sydney from Bell Island, Newfoundland, where it was mined between 1893 and 1966. Another subsidiary of Dosco, the Dominion Wabana Ore Limited, operated these mines after 1949.⁹ Limestone, a third major ingredient in the steel making process, was sourced from Dominion Limestone Limited in Aguathuna, Newfoundland. After the 1960s, two additional limestone quarries – Marble Mountain and Irish Cove – began operating in Cape Breton. While the processes of steel making are further explored in Chapter Four, this supply chain illustrates how Dosco was organized upon resource extraction from the Maritimes and Newfoundland.¹⁰

Despite its expansive holdings and profitable operations, Dosco was at a competitive disadvantage by the end of the Second World War. The Canadian steel

⁸ W.F. Carroll, Angus J. Morrison, and C.C. McLaurin, *Report of the Royal Commission on Coal, 1946* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1947).

⁹ Gail Weir, “The Wabana Ore Miners of Bell Island, Conception Bay, Newfoundland: Their Occupational Folklife and Oral Folk History” (master’s thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1986), 30.

¹⁰ F. Shea and D.A. Murray, “Limestones and Dolomites of Nova Scotia – Cape Breton Island, Part 1,” *Bulletin, Nova Scotia Department of Mines* (Halifax: Department of Mines, 1969): 1.

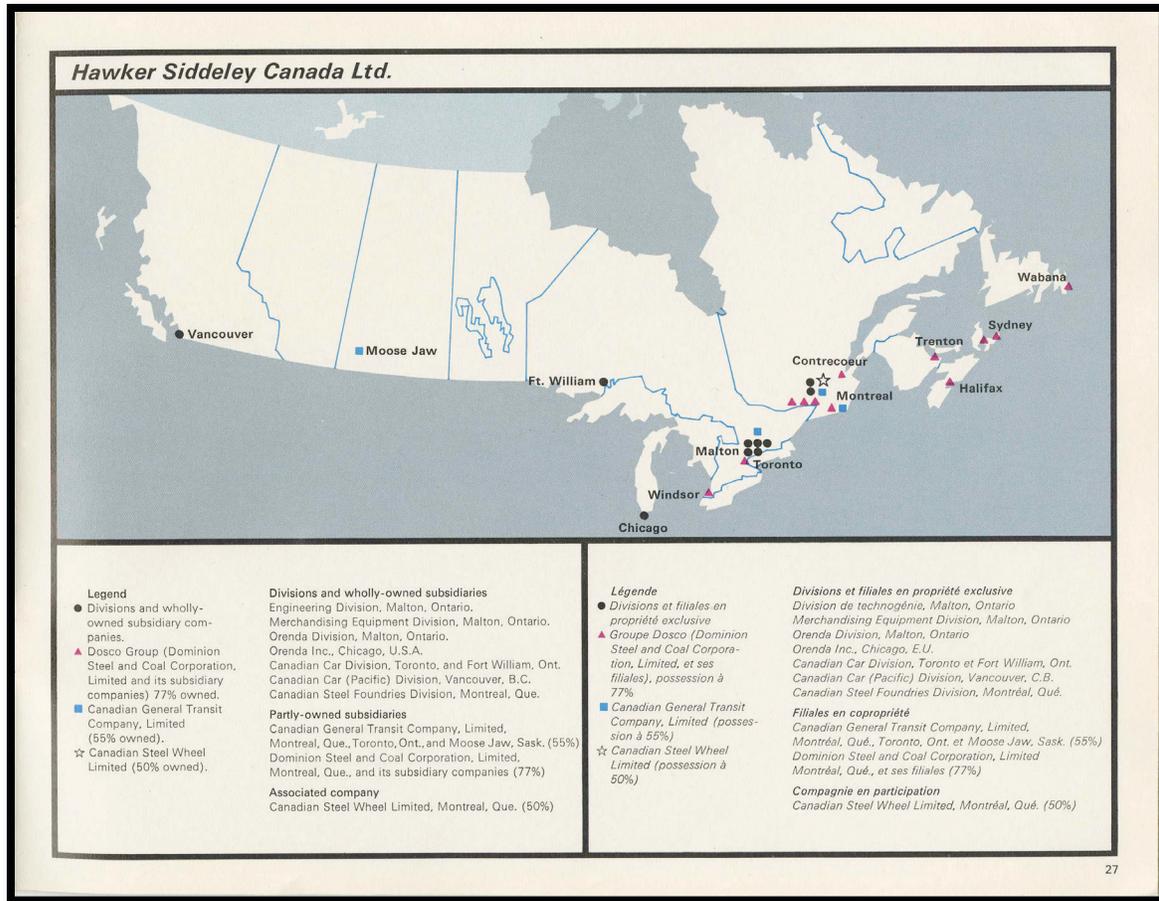


Figure 1.1: Hawker Siddeley Canada 1965; Dosco properties marked in red
 Source: Halifax Industries Fonds, Corporate Records 1990-215-001,
 File 4, Hawker Siddeley Annual Report, 1965, NSARM

industry was the beneficiary of a great deal of federal modernization capital during the conflict. The Sydney Works, however, did not benefit to the same extent as its central Canadian competitors. Ernie Forbes writes:

C.D. Howe and his controllers often appeared to be following an agenda for industrialization based on their perception of Canada’s needs after the war. Their vision of a centralized manufacturing complex closely integrated with the United States apparently did not include the Maritimes in any significant role.¹¹

¹¹ E.R. Forbes, “Consolidating Disparity: The Maritimes and the Industrialization of Canada During the Second World War,” in *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes*, ed. E.R. Forbes (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1989), 174.

As a result, Stelco and Algoma were approved for upgrades to their respective plate and rolling mills while similar subsidy was withheld from operations in Sydney. There is some indication that there may also have been personal conflict between Dosco executives and federal bureaucrats. In the summer of 1940, for example, Clem Anson - the general manager of the Sydney Works - met with steel controller Hugh Scully regarding proposed upgrades to the mill. Anson was incensed when, months later, Scully denied ever having heard the proposal.¹² There remained a sense within Munitions and Supply that Dosco would be unable to handle a high volume of orders; by 1944, the Sydney Works was presented as a perennial laggard when it came to meeting demand.¹³ The repercussions of these decisions were plainly visible; between 1945 and 1950, profit margins for all Canadian steel producers increased – although Dosco’s return on investment was consistently the lowest of its competitors.

The staples trap was already in place by the 1940s. Dosco, organized around the export of coal and steel from the Maritimes, was largely reliant upon fluctuations in the markets for these commodities. Simultaneously, as central Canadian firms benefited from access to both buyers and federal subsidy, it became less enticing for Dosco to re-invest the significant capital required to maintain its regional holdings. This problem pushed the company to crisis by the 1950s, when new steel facilities in Europe and Asia came online. Compounding this were the transportation costs and relative lack of secondary manufacturing capabilities in Cape Breton aside from the Sydney Works. The firm soon began using its holdings in the Maritimes as a resource hinterland to provide capital for the consolidation of more profitable operations and mills in Quebec and Ontario.

Company executives used the apparent weakness of their market position as a bargaining chip against employees in its regional collieries, steel works, and foundries. In advance of the national steel strike in 1946, Dosco ran a series of full-page advertisements in the *Sydney Post Record* to highlight the precarious circumstances at the

¹² Clem Anson, “Memo,” 21 September 1940, F1157, File 6, Angus L. Macdonald Fonds, MG 2, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM), Halifax, NS.

¹³ F.H. Brown to C.D. Howe, 25 September 1944, Records relating to the Department of Munitions and Supply, Box 195, File 196, Department of Reconstruction and Supply Fonds, RG 28-A, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON.

Sydney Works. “We aren’t ostriches,” reads one such ad from July 24, 1946 – nearly two weeks after workers had walked off the job at Stelco, Algoma, and Dosco. “It is apparent that Cape Breton Island and the whole of Nova Scotia have geographical and other problems. The markets for most of our products are in Central Canada. To sell in those markets, Nova Scotians must compete with those already there [...] This means that the province is under considerable handicap.”¹⁴

Table 1.1
Profit Margins for Canadian Steel Firms, 1945-1950 (percent)

Year	Algoma	Dofasco	Dosco	Stelco
1945	8.15	5.47	3.05	3.96
1946	3.88	9.66	2.04	2.28
1947	4.58	9.08	3.63	7.11
1948	7.66	7.45	6.97	8.99
1949	13.06	10.19	7.30	10.87
1950	10.41	9.11	6.31	13.57

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This negotiation tactic was not unique to Dosco, although – unlike Stelco and Algoma – the company tried to link this narrative to an “exceptional hardship” prompted by its geographic placement within Canada.¹⁶ When Anson appeared before the Commons Industrial Relations Committee during the strike, he testified that Dosco required government subsidy to avoid operating at a loss.¹⁷ Meanwhile, production in Sault St. Marie and Sydney remained at a standstill while Stelco continued limited

¹⁴ “Let’s All Know More About Sydney Steel,” *Sydney Post Record*. July 24, 1946.

¹⁵ R.B. Elver, *Economic Character and Change in the Canadian Steel Industry Since 1945* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1969), 20.

¹⁶ The three major producers had coordinated their response to the strike action, despite claims to the contrary. See Duncan McDowell, *Steel at the Sault: Francis H. Clergue, Sir James Dunn, and the Algoma Steel Corporation, 1901-1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 224.

¹⁷ “Dosco unable to pay, Anson says,” *Sydney Post Record*. July 25, 1946.

operations through the use of strikebreakers.¹⁸ On October 2, 1946, the steelworkers voted to accept a contract. The agreement included an 18-cent per hour wage increase, the acceptance of the Rand Formula, and the implementation of the 44-hour week.¹⁹ Pickets came down two days later.²⁰



Figure 1.2: Signing of 1946 agreement, 1946
Source: Photograph by Raytel Photography, Reference 82-1384-8084,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

¹⁸ For the circumstances surrounding the 1946 strike at Stelco, see Robert Storey, “Workers, Unions, and Steel: The Shaping of the Hamilton Working Class, 1935-1948” (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1981), 297-418.

¹⁹ “Steelworkers vote 5-1 to return to work,” *Sydney Post Record*. October 3, 1946.

²⁰ Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers’ Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 290.

Following the strike, Dosco struggled to recover from its wartime shortfalls. At this time, the company also controlled ore mines in Bell Island, Newfoundland; railroad car shops, forge shops, a nut and bolt factory, and rolling mills at Trenton, Nova Scotia; limestone and dolomite quarries; wire mills in Sydney, Saint John, and Toronto; power generating stations; and rolling mills in Montreal, Quebec.²¹ Recognizing the need for product diversification, Dosco was faced with the decision of where to direct capital investment. A report by the Arthur G. McKee & Company outlined some of the problems facing Maritimes industry: significant modernization was required at the Sydney Works, the transportation fleet – which had been destroyed during the war – needed to be replaced, investment was necessary for the beneficiation of raw materials, and – unsurprisingly – labour power needed to be suppressed.²²

These issues translated into a persistent narrative of hard times at the Sydney steel mill; they are recalled in several interviews describing the structural limitations of regional industry. Anson, interviewed by *Cape Breton's Magazine* in 1981, recalled:

We didn't have good raw materials to work with. Our iron ore was one of the very poorest iron ores to smelt in the world, a very dense hematite [...] And the same thing about the coal. You know, the Cape Breton coal is not a good metallurgical coal [...] Made very weak coke, Weak in strength. And the result was that when it got in the blast furnace it broke up before it had done its work. And you had to use more coke than you should have – consequently costing more money.²³

John Campbell, a raw materials engineer and manager at Dosco, described the situation in similar terms during an interview in 2014:

John: One of the disadvantages that we had here was that we were pretty distant from other heavy industries. A lot of the steel plants in the U.S. and even in the Hamilton area would be relatively close to other heavy industries for repairs and maintenance and so on [...] And one of the problems Sydney got into in the early days, even pre-1950 [...] Wabana ore was very poor, by today's standards [...] It was high in phosphorous and high in silica [...] And the conclusion of research at

²¹ Arthur G. McKee & Company, *Report on Steel Industry, Royal Commission on Provincial Development and Rehabilitation* (Halifax: King's Printer, 1944), 31-2.

²² "Sydney Harbour in World War Two," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 13 (1976): 28-9 and Marc Koechl, "Sailor's Ashore: A Comparative Analysis of Wartime Recreation and Leisure in Halifax and Saint John's" (master's thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2003), 120; Arthur McKee & Company, *Report on Steel*, 64-8.

²³ "C.M. Anson and Steel," *Cape Breton's Magazine* 28 (1981): 48-9.

that time that it was difficult, if not impossible to make any great improvement – because of the structure of the iron ore [...] But the other problem was that the coal in Sydney was very high in sulphur, so even [if] you could cut the slag volume down, because you cut the slag volume down you couldn't remove the sulphur anymore. So that showed that Sydney coals were no longer really suitable for making coke, in that situation. So over the years [...] Dosco started to buy iron ore from Labrador [and Brazil], but as time went on they went to pelletizing the iron ore [...] So because of that, it became optimum to buy other coals. So there were coals brought in from the US and even Western Canada to make coke [...] Suddenly the plant finds that all those advantages that they had, you know [...] they lost the main thing, which was the coal supply, and the iron ore supply.

Lachlan: And, so is that what led to the decision in 1967? To close it?

John: Part, I would say . . . There was also a feeling . . . that maybe the investment wasn't being made in the plant. To modernize or to expand.²⁴

Both of these accounts are offered decades after the events of 1967, when it became clear that private industry would abandon Cape Breton coal and steel. For Anson, industrial decline in Cape Breton was predicated upon technological and metallurgical advances that outpaced the capabilities of local raw materials. From his perspective, the decision to develop Dosco's mills in Quebec and Ontario was simply a natural response to the centralization of the Canadian economy and the nature of competitive capitalism. John Campbell remains reluctant to explain the exodus of private industry as inevitable, although he describes many of the same material limitations. Rather, he believes that Dosco was constrained by technological factors that might have been overcome had proper infrastructure investment been provided.

The recalcitrance of C.D. Howe and the extent of wartime underdevelopment cannot be solely blamed for Dosco's loss of market position. In fact, there is evidence that the company had embarked on a program of planned obsolescence by the end of the 1930s. After it took over the remnants of the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal Company (Scotia) facilities at Trenton, Nova Scotia in 1938, Dosco operated these mills at whatever capacity could be immediately obtained. Otherwise, they were allowed to fall into disrepair. In 1943, Dosco bought the Canadian Tube and Steel Products Company in Montreal. Almost immediately, the company announced the closure of its Trenton plant.

²⁴ John Campbell, interview with author, September 6, 2014.

L. Anders Sandberg writes, “War-time labour scarcity provided the political precondition for the closure of the rolling mills and nut and bolt plant; the wage increases awarded by the Federal Labour Board [in 1943] served as an excuse while the cause, a conscious corporate strategy of industrial neglect and winding down, was left unchallenged.”²⁵ Nearly 600 employees were immediately laid-off, during the wartime production boom, and several hundred more were left without work in the following years.²⁶

The corporate response to these pressures is revealing. Brendan Haley argues that the Canadian staples trap results in “a series of self-reinforcing rigidities” that can promote self-destructive behaviour on behalf of regional operators.²⁷ In failing to re-invest in their regional holdings and attempting to take a more substantial share of an already-saturated centralized market, Dosco set the stage for its eventual subsumption by larger firms with greater capital resources. Executives searched for ways by which they might divest from the Maritimes without creating significant political or labour turmoil. After the closure of the Trenton Works, it was revealed that the company had reported a net profit of only \$92,916 between August 1938 and September 1943 for that portion of its operations.²⁸ When a provincial accountant looked into the matter, he found that profits had actually been under-reported by more than \$400,000.²⁹ The purpose of this was two-fold - it was intended to provide cover for the planned closures while also offering an opportunity to increase demands on remaining workers. The plan backfired,

²⁵ L. Anders Sandberg, “Dependent Development, Labour, and the Trenton Steel Works, Nova Scotia, c. 1900-1943,” *Labour/Le Travail* 27 (Spring 1991): 162.

²⁶ Trenton Works, Employees whose services were terminated due to closing down of mills and nut and bolt departments and completion of government contracts, 1944, Nova Scotia Steel and Coal, Trenton Works, Hawker Siddeley Collection, A-150-154, Dalhousie University Archives.

²⁷ Brendan Haley, “From Staples Trap to Carbon Trap: Canada’s Peculiar Form of Carbon Lock In,” *Studies in Political Economy* 88, 1 (2011): 100.

²⁸ William F. Carroll, *Report of the Commissioner on Trenton Steel Works, 1943* (Halifax: 1944).

²⁹ “Government accountant reveals large DOSCO profits are hidden from the people of Canada,” *Steel Labor: Canadian Edition* 9, 7 (July 1944): 1.

however, when it prompted a confrontation with the national leadership of the USWA and created the perception that the company was being badly mismanaged.

Charles Millard, the Canadian Director of the USWA, believed that Dosco was employing a similar strategy at the Sydney Works. In a 1946 memorandum sent to Forman Waye of USWA Local 1064, a labour activist with the Sydney steelworkers' union, Millard presciently expressed:

Either deliberately or through carelessness, management has not paid sufficient attention to the industrial engineering and maintenance. Management must agree to accept the responsibility for reorganizing and streamlining the present plant [...] The Governments, both Federal and Provincial, must be prepared to place a competent administrator in charge of the Sydney operations of Dosco if management fails to meet its responsibility to the Steelworkers and the people of Nova Scotia and Canada.³⁰

This recognition would prompt demands for timely modernization among Sydney steelworkers and their union representatives that would continue for much of the 20th century. Although Dosco provided some additions to the Sydney Works during the late 1940s and early 1950s, these were outstripped by its contributions to mills in Quebec and Ontario. Regional deindustrialization was becoming more visible - a by-product of what David Harvey calls *geographical switching crises*, wherein capital flows and mediating institutions are broadly reorganized to open up new avenues for investment in other places.³¹

As a result of lacklustre production reports, the bungled shutdown at Trenton, and labour conflicts, Howe grew increasingly sceptical of the managerial competence of Dosco's president, Arthur Cross. In contrast to the close friendship that blossomed between Howe and James Dunn of Algoma Steel, Dosco officials often found themselves shut out of industrial planning discussions. As Duncan McDowell writes, "Dosco's lethargic response to wartime incentives irritated Howe to such a point that he

³⁰ Memorandum, "Sydney Steel," 1946, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, C-13112, United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Fonds, MG 28 i268, LAC.

³¹ David Harvey, "The Urban Process Under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 2, 1-4 (March-December 1978): 112-13.

unofficially directed Steel Control to ‘use that company to the minimum extent possible even if we have to buy the steel in the United States.’”³² Some aspects of federal regulatory controls remained after the war; an “accelerated depreciation program,” for example, was intended to stimulate expansion in the national steel industry.³³ Holistically, it was a combination of economic geography, the development of Canadian market capitalism, and the decisions of the federal regulatory state that left Dosco in crisis as it entered the 1950s. State and business interests continued to promote steel production, though in ways that flattened and ignored regional differences.³⁴

In Sydney, steelworkers and their families suffered the immediate impacts of these changes. Corey Slumkoski describes how nearly 50 percent of Nova Scotia’s 20,000 unemployed workers were located in Cape Breton in 1947. Many hoped for the entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, as newly discovered ore deposits were viewed as an answer to an emerging raw materials problem at the Sydney Works. Renewed American commitment to the St. Lawrence Seaway project, however, would make it easier to transport Labrador ore to central markets by the end of the 1950s, to the great benefit of Dosco’s competitors. As a result, Slumkowsi writes, the argument for modernization at Sydney began to shift away from geographical proximity to raw materials and towards the creation of a sound national industrial strategy.³⁵ This would resound after the mid-1950s within a political environment more attuned to the economic realities of Canadian regionalism.

³² McDowell, *Steel at the Sault*, 200.

³³ O.J Firestone, *Encouragement to Industrial Expansion in Canada: Operation of Special Depreciation Provisions, 10 April 1944 – 31 March 1949* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1948); Richard Goode, “Accelerated Depreciation Allowances as a Stimulus to Investment,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 69, 2 (May 1955): 191-2.

³⁴ Matthew Tonts, Kirsten Martinus, Paul Plummer, “Regional development, redistribution and the extraction of mineral resources: The Western Australian Goldfields as a resource bank,” *Applied Geography* 45 (2013): 367.

³⁵ Corey Slumkoski, *Inventing Atlantic Canada: Regionalism and the Maritime Reaction to Newfoundland’s Entry into Canadian Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 45-8.

Losing Ground in the Boom Years, 1950-1957

The ability of international steel firms to realize economies of scale during the 1950s was a key metric of increased productivity and profitability. Reconstruction in West Germany witnessed the development of several new integrated mills in the Ruhr, which overtook the smaller British steelworks in productive capacity by 1959.³⁶ This pattern of development was not unique; the countries of the European Coal and Steel Community each significantly expanded steel production during the decade.³⁷ Although Japanese industry weakened in the immediate aftermath of the war, the geopolitical atmosphere of the 1950s prompted the U.S. to support the re-development of Japan's industrial capabilities. As a result, Japan more than doubled its steel output from approximately 9.5 million tons in 1955 to more than 22 million tons in 1960.³⁸ Each of the major Canadian firms also expanded, although the concentration of output within the industry slightly declined during this same period as a result of comparative growth by small producers.³⁹

Tariff policy further impacted the Canadian steel industry, and fostered a closer economic relationship with the United States. As Bruce Muirhead writes, "Almost alone with the United States, Canada implemented the tariff reductions negotiated under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) at Geneva, Switzerland (1947), Annecy, France (1949), and Torquay, England (1950-1951) without resort to non-tariff barriers. And that resulted in a predictable twist; it helped to develop Canada's economic relationship with the United States into a sort of *de facto* bi-lateralism."⁴⁰ These tariffs

³⁶ Jonathan Ayles, "Plant Size and Efficiency in the Steel Industry: An International Comparison," *National Institute Economic Review* 100, 1 (May 1982): 68-9.

³⁷ This included Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany.

³⁸ Stephen G. Bunker and Paul Ciccantell, *East Asia and the Global Economy: Japan's Ascent, with Implications for China's Future* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 62.

³⁹ Elver, *Economic Character and Change in the Canadian Steel Industry Since 1945*, 8.

⁴⁰ Bruce Muirhead, "Perception and Reality: The GATT's Contribution to the Development of a Bilateral North American Relationship, 1947-1951," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 20, 3 (1990): 281.

were imposed based upon type of product and nation of origin. In 1955, three major tariffs remained: the General Tariff, the Most Favoured Nation Tariff, and the British Preferential Tariff. These were applied to a variety of products, including bars and rods, plate, sheet, band and strip, angles and shapes.⁴¹ Rates were simplified to a 5, 10, and 20 percent structure after 1958, and specific products - after this point - were not singled out for protection.⁴²

Exchange rates prompted a decrease in the barrier to imports. The Canadian dollar began trading higher than the U.S. dollar in 1952 - a circumstance remained until 1961 when it returned below parity.⁴³ Despite healthy demand for consumer goods and a corresponding increase in basic industry and manufacturing throughout North America, Dosco's ability to reach markets was an important constraint. Dosco shipped coal and steel products to purchasers in the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario, but high transportation costs meant that central Canadian steel firms could often outcompete within these markets. American markets were restricted through trade policy; as late as 1966, USWA researcher Harry Waisglass and Andrew Hogan called for "a Canada-U.S. common market for steel" to allow for prosperous trade between Atlantic Canada and New England.⁴⁴ Lacking a stable domestic market, the Sydney Works was more reliant on world exports than were its direct competitors.

⁴¹ L.I. Morgan, *The Canadian Primary Iron and Steel Industry* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), 83.

⁴² Peter Warrian, *The Importance of Steel Manufacturing to Canada: A Research Study* (Toronto: Munk School of Global Affairs, 2010), 34.

⁴³ University of British Columbia Sauder School of Business Pacific Exchange Rate Service, "Foreign Currency Units per 1 Canadian Dollar," 1948-2014, <http://fx.sauder.ubc.ca/>.

⁴⁴ Harry Waisglass and Andrew Hogan, *A Submission to the Atlantic Development Board on the Prospects for Nova Scotia's Steel Industry* (28 March 1966): 11; It should be noted that a company-sponsored report in 1966 challenged viability of New England markets, see Tom Webb, "The Dosco Crisis: Some Political Aspects of a Regional Economic Problem" (master's thesis, Carleton University, 1972), 36.

Despite the capabilities of the Sydney steel plant, Dosco's product line was not comparable to Stelco or Algoma. Steel ingots and casting remained the largest product, followed by pig iron, blooms and billets, rails and track material, rods and bars, wire, and nails. The Sydney Works was not capable of producing sheet and strip or skelp and plate.⁴⁵ While hostilities in Korea resulted in steel orders after 1951, these could not offset the relative decline of the firm.⁴⁶ The ingot capacity at Canadian integrated mills increased between 1950 and 1959, but each of the other firms eclipsed Dosco's growth. This includes Dominion Foundries and Steel Company (Dofasco), which opened its first blast furnace in August 1951 and began operations as a fully integrated mill.

Table 1.2
Annual Ingot Capacity of Major Canadian Steel Firms, 1950-1960
(Thousands of tons and percentage of total)

Year	1950	1955	1960
Stelco	1,247 (35.8)	2,150 (42.9)	2,500 (37)
Algoma	866 (24.9)	1,120 (22.4)	1,600 (23.7)
Dofasco	378 (10.9)	785 (15.7)	1,165 (17.3)
Dosco	877 (25.2)	733 (14.7)	1,050 (15.6)

* Remaining percentages are divided between small producers.⁴⁷

Lionel Forsyth, who took over as president of Dosco in 1949, did not hesitate to use promises of modernization to try and suppress resistance from the steelworkers' union. On October 2, 1951, he addressed the Maritime Provinces Board of Trade at the Isle Royale Hotel in downtown Sydney. The future of industry in the Maritimes, he told the audience, would be cemented through a massive modernization project. Investment included \$18 million in additions to the Sydney plant, \$7.4 million for the Wabana ore mines, and smaller upgrades at Trenton and the Halifax Shipyards. Almost immediately,

⁴⁵ R.B. Elver, "Competitive Position of Dosco as a Steel Producer," Prepared for the Royal Commission on Coal, 1959, Sydney Steel Corporation, Box 44, Natural Resources Canada Fonds, RG 21, LAC.

⁴⁶ Dominion Steel and Coal Company, "Munitions: Korea," 1952-1953, Nova Scotia Steel and Coal, Trenton Works, Hawker Siddeley Collection, F-17, Dalhousie University Archives.

⁴⁷ Elver, *Economic Character and Change in the Canadian Steel Industry Since 1945*, 23.

Forsyth moved on to discuss his concern over union activity. In pressing for cost of living wage increases, rank-and-file members had recently engaged in a number of work stoppages. He cautioned:

Such conduct has within it the seeds of a harvest which may well set at naught our plans for the future of the industry [...] At the risk of undue repetition may I mention again our program for capital expenditures in the Maritime Provinces and the impressive total of the funds which we are committed to provide to complete that program. Such a project creates a heavy burden of responsibility for those who have conceived it [...] It places an even heavier burden upon any individual or any group who by failing to do his or their share toward its realization may interfere with, impede, or defeat it. Nothing [...] could cause me greater disappointment than to be obliged for any reason to curtail this program or delay its execution.⁴⁸

The company, aware of the desire for modernization within the USWA, used such threats as part of a carrot-and-stick strategy to promote discord within the union.

The terms outlined in Forsyth's address were not simply public posturing. In correspondence with Millard through 1952, he indicated that the national union should concede to specific contract points, such as wage structure, so that the company could enact its planned facility upgrades.⁴⁹ Millard had a history of fighting for shop floor rights rather than submitting to the wishes of planners; as Laurel Sefton Macdowell writes, "[during the war, Millard] disagreed with many politicians and government officials who thought that labour should help win the war first and then demand collective bargaining legislation and wage increases."⁵⁰ He soon disabused Forsyth of the notion that the plan would find support among the rank and file. Rather, he articulated the

⁴⁸ Address by L.A. Forsyth, President of Dosco, to the Maritime Provinces Board of Trade, 1951, Nova Scotia Steel and Coal, Trenton Works, Hawker Siddeley Collection, K-74, Dalhousie University Archives.

⁴⁹ L.A. Forsyth to Charles Millard, 8 September 1952, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, USWA Fonds, LAC.

⁵⁰ Laurel Sefton Macdowell, "The Career of a Canadian Trade Union Leader: C.H. Millard 1937-1946," *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* 43, 3 (1988): 616.

USWA position: steelworkers at Dosco would not offer concessions based upon promises of forthcoming modernization.⁵¹

A recession in the final quarters of 1953 and early 1954 briefly stalled the Canadian economy.⁵² Forsyth was put in the unenviable position of detailing a stagnant profit rate to shareholders. On May 7, 1954, he explained that they had posted net earnings of \$3,867,714.97 for the year 1953 – lower by \$330,160.73 than the previous year.⁵³ Despite its threats, Dosco had invested in several additions to its Atlantic Canada operations between 1952 and 1954. These included rail-finishing mills and a blooming mill at the Sydney plant, as well as a new open hearth furnace; the Wabana mines, Trenton Works, and the Halifax Shipyards also benefitted. These additions, Forsyth hoped, would offset Dosco’s slumping market position and increase the quality of available raw materials. The new rolling mills cemented the Sydney works as one of the most efficient rail producers in North America – though it could still not produce flat rolled product.⁵⁴

Dosco’s capital investments during the mid-1950s were not able to offset the structural challenges prompted by the staples trap. Political scientist Adam Wellstead describes the role of investment in overcoming structural barriers: “backwards linkages” are created when dollars are allocated towards upgrading or modernizing the processes by which staples are extracted; “forward linkages” emerge from investment in secondary processing of staples; and “final demand linkages” are created through investment in

⁵¹ Charles Millard to L.A. Forsyth, 16 September 1952, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, USWA Fonds, LAC.

⁵² Richard E. Craves, Grant L. Leuber, Robert W. Baguley, John M. Curtis, and Raymond Lubitz, *Capital Transfers and Economic Policy: Canada, 1951-1962* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 183.

⁵³ Dosco Annual Report, 1954, Corporate Records, 1990-215-001, File 1, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

⁵⁴ Address to Annual Meeting of Shareholders, 7 May 1954, Corporate Records, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, File 1, NSARM; Donald Kerr, “The Geography of the Canadian Iron and Steel Industry,” *Economic Geography* 35, 2 (April 1959): 154.

alternate industries that complement and diversify the sector.⁵⁵ If we consider coal the primary staple that Dosco extracted from Cape Breton, then investment in the Sydney Works might be considered a “forward linkage.” According to Wellstead, “final demand linkages” are the most important in offsetting the staples trap; though this remains elusive, he writes, if “exports are in the hands of foreign investors who siphon off their profits [...] leaving little behind to invest in local manufacturing.”⁵⁶

Table 1.3
Profit Margins for Canadian Steel Firms, 1951-1957 (percent)

Year	Algoma	Dofasco	Dosco	Stelco
1951	14.13	5.63	6.31	9.18
1952	6.83	6.08	6.72	7.85
1953	9.36	6.36	5.67	7.89
1954	6.91	6.30	5.46	7.27
1955	11.76	9.04	4.71	10.01
1956	14.35	9.40	3.59	10.53
1957	11.94	8.96	6.57	9.35

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Although Dosco posted higher-than average net profits in 1956 and 1957, it was not able to achieve profit margins comparable to its competitors during the decade.⁵⁸ Forsyth passed away in 1957 on New Years Day at his home in Montreal.⁵⁹ C.B. Lang, Dosco’s Chairman of the Board, resigned his position and took up the office of President. According to Frank Manning Covert, a Nova Scotia lawyer and corporate executive, Forsyth had previously approached him for the position. He writes, “[I was] not remotely interested [...] On another occasion, [Forsyth] told me that Dosco had no future in Cape

⁵⁵ Adam Wellstead, “The (Post) Staples Economy and the (Post) Staples State in Historical Perspective,” *Canadian Political Science Review* 1, 1 (2007): 11.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Elver, *Economic Character and Change in the Canadian Steel Industry Since 1945*, 20.

⁵⁸ “Dosco Net at Record for 1957,” *Montreal Gazette*. April 3, 1958.

⁵⁹ Peter C. Newman, “Lionel Forsyth,” *The Atlantic Advocate* (January 1960): 63-64.

Breton in the long run.”⁶⁰ In his first address to shareholders, Lang described the terms of a two-year contract that had been negotiated with the steelworkers’ union, the slight increase in the company’s finances, and ongoing mechanization efforts that had been supported by a \$5.3 million loan from the federal government.⁶¹ Just two months after this address, representatives of A.V. Roe Canada Ltd. approached Lang and officially expressed interest in acquiring ownership of the firm.

The corporate history of A.V. Roe Canada is complicated. Its earliest predecessor was A.V. Roe and Company, an aircraft production company founded by Alliot Verdon Roe in Manchester, England on New Years Day, 1910. The company designed, produced, and tested aircraft in the U.K. throughout the First World War and during the interwar period. In 1935, another U.K.-based aeronautics firm – the Hawker Siddeley Group – purchased A.V. Roe and Company as a subsidiary. By the Second World War, Hawker Siddeley was one of the largest aircraft producers in Britain. Its designs included the Hawker Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire, both of which were used extensively during the Battle of Britain. In 1944, Hawker Siddeley entered into negotiations with C.D. Howe to purchase the Victory Aircraft factory in Malton, Ontario. When this purchase was finalized on November 11, 1945, Hawker Siddeley created A.V. Roe Canada as a subsidiary of A.V. Roe and Company. The Canadian division was tasked with repairing and retrofitting older aircraft and undertaking aeronautical research and development.

A.V. Roe’s overtures to Dosco were part of a broader strategy of expansion and diversification within the Hawker Siddeley Group. Chairman Thomas Sopwith, speaking to the company’s 22nd general meeting in London on January 8, 1958, describes:

Two years ago the net assets of the Group were divided in the proportion of 85 per cent aviation and 15 per cent industrial. Today they are roughly 30 per cent aviation and 70 per cent industrial [...] We have expanded and diversified considerably. We have become one of the leading industrial organizations both in

⁶⁰ Frank Manning Covert, *50 Years in the Practice of Law*, ed. Barry Cahill (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005): 135.

⁶¹ Annual Address to Shareholders, June 1957, Nova Scotia Steel and Coal, Trenton Works, Hawker Siddeley Collection, K-43, Dalhousie University Archives.

the United Kingdom and in Canada [...] I think you will agree that with such an industrial spread we should be able to weather any storm which may arise.⁶²

Dosco's steel holdings were explicitly mentioned during this speech. While Dosco had underperformed, the steel market as a whole had experienced remarkable growth. In 1956, A.V. Roe and several European conglomerates attempted to gain control of Algoma following the death of owner James Dunn. Duncan McDowall writes, "In a transaction involving \$60 million, a half-million Algoma common shares were sold to Mannesmann AG, A.V. Roe Canada, McIntyre Porcupine Mines, and the Royal Bank."⁶³ Soon after acquiring these shares, A.V. Roe President Crawford Gordon approached Dosco.

Gordon wrote to Lang on August 7, 1957 to establish the terms of the proposed sale and to describe A.V. Roe's industrial strategy. Dosco would exist alongside other Canadian holdings, which were divided between aeronautical and industrial divisions. The aeronautical division included lesser subsidiaries such as Avro Aircraft, Orenda Engines, and Canadian Steel Improvement, while the industrial division held, among others, Canadian Car and Canadian Steel Foundries.⁶⁴ Gordon assured Lang:

The importance of Dosco to the Maritime Provinces and to Canada is fully realized by Avro and the Hawker Siddeley Group. It would be the position of Avro to strengthen and maintain the separate identity and autonomy of Dosco within the framework of Avro's Canadian group [...] You may wish, for the early information of Dosco security holders and to put an end to rumours [...] to communicate the contents of this letter to them pending [...] the formal offer.⁶⁵

The rumours to which Gordon refers had circulated for nearly six months, with various company officials speaking off-the-record about possible bids by A.V. Roe, Pheonix-Rheinrohr, and Mannesmann International. As news of the deal was leaked, Dosco stock

⁶² "Hawker Siddeley Switches Emphasis to General Industry," *New Scientist* 3, 60 (January 9, 1958): 31.

⁶³ A.V. Roe dumped these shares following the acquisition of Dosco. See McDowall, *Steel at the Sault*, 234.

⁶⁴ Hawker Siddeley Canada, 1963, Orenda Engines Division, T-3419, Department of Labour Fonds, RG 27, LAC.

⁶⁵ Crawford Gordon to C.B. Lang, 7 August 1957, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, USWA Fonds, LAC.

prices climbed to approximately \$30 per share, although some community members publicly speculated about the possibility of industrial closures.⁶⁶

The terms of the proposed purchase agreement would see A.V. Roe immediately gain control of more than 52 percent of Dosco common shares as follows:

- a.) For each ordinary share of Dosco acquired directly – 1 ¼ fully paid Avro common shares plus \$10.25.
- b.) For each \$500 principal amount of Dosco 4% Convertible Debentures due August, 1961, with all coupons maturing subsequent to August 15, 1957 attached thereto – 31 ¼ fully paid Avro common shares plus \$199.75
- c.) For each \$1,000 principal amount of Dosco 4 ¼ Convertible Debentures due May 15, 1970 with all unmatured coupons attached thereto – 68 ¾ fully paid Avro common shares plus \$574.46.⁶⁷

The Board of Directors was surprised to receive this offer, and several argued resolutely against accepting the deal. Roy Jodrey, the founder of Minas Basin Pulp and Power, led the opposition with support from regional capitalist Frank Sobey.⁶⁸

This opposition culminated with a letter to shareholders recommending against the offer. “The price being offered is too low,” write Jodrey and Sobey, “Your Board of Directors is in a position to report the highest earning for any first six month period in the history of the Company.” The \$80 million spent on modernization, argued the directors, had already resulted in a stronger, more competitive industrial firm. They enumerate the recent upgrades: a new 120-acre site in Etobicoke purchased for the expansion of Graham Nail and Wire Products and the Canadian Steel Corporation, a plant in Toronto, a new Canadian Bridge Company facility and a plant for Truscon Steel in Montreal. Investment in Atlantic Canada included funding for another blast furnace at the Sydney works. The authors conclude with an appeal:

⁶⁶ R.M. Baiden, “A.V. Roe’s Bid for Dosco Control,” *Saturday Night* (14 September 1967): 7-33, G-17, W.G. Allen Fonds, MS 2-96, Dalhousie University Archives.

⁶⁷ Gordon to Lang, 7 August 1957.

⁶⁸ Notes, August 1957, G-17, W.G. Allen Fonds, Dalhousie University Archives.

Acceptance of the Avro offer will mean that you, as a Dosco shareholder now playing an independent part in one of Canada's oldest and largest industries, will become one of a vast number of minority shareholders in a post-war holding company (itself a subsidiary) whose future plans for Dosco are still to be disclosed.⁶⁹

Fears that the multi-national conglomerate would immediately shut down extraneous or "inefficient" facilities were common in the days following the proposal. William Allen, a Halifax-based journalist, writes:

The miners, the steel workers, and in their communities, the grocer, the doctor, and of course the tax collector all have a concern with the company's future plans. These communities know only too well the crushing effect of a halt to industrial activity. Several communities are suffering because mines have closed [...] What this will mean, then, concerns everyone in Nova Scotia.⁷⁰

Deindustrialization was not alien to Nova Scotians in 1957. Since the labour wars of the 1920s, uncertainty and instability were synonymous with absentee ownership; the proposed removal of corporate control from Montreal to Hawker Siddeley headquarters in London was of great concern to those for whom the conflicts with Besco remained in living memory. Despite the surprise with which the Black Friday announcement was received in 1967, this response to the A.V. Roe purchase reveals that the availability of work in the province's steel and coal communities was precarious.

While Jodrey continued to campaign against the sale, A.V. Roe assumed control over nearly 76 percent of Dosco common shares on Wednesday, October 9, 1957. The Sydney Works, just as in the Besco days, was now under the control of a foreign conglomerate based in the U.K. Shareholders hoped that new management could escape the comparative decline that had plagued Dosco since the war years.⁷¹ In spite of some infrastructure investment, the Sydney Works remained technologically underdeveloped in

⁶⁹ R.A. Jodrey and F.H. Sobey to Dosco Shareholders, 30 August 1957, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, USWA Fonds, LAC.

⁷⁰ Notes, August 1957, G-17, W.G. Allen Fonds, Dalhousie University Archives.

⁷¹ "A.V. Roe in Control of Dosco Shares," *Saint John's Daily News*. October 16, 1957.

comparison with its central-Canadian counterparts.⁷² Although former employees often identify the Hawker Siddeley takeover as “the beginning of the end,” the acquisition appears to have initially been intended to play a role within the company’s diversification and expansion strategy. As circumstances facing A.V. Roe changed in the late 1950s, this strategy very quickly transitioned into a policy of explicit deindustrialization and liquidation.

‘Death by Natural Causes?’

From A.V. Roe to Hawker Siddeley Canada, 1957-1966

With the October takeover complete, A.V. Roe was positioned in the midst of what William MacNutt termed the “Atlantic Revolution.”⁷³ Technological advances contributed to a developing consumer market. Television and telephones brought Atlantic Canadians into closer contact with their neighbours across the country. Regional economic development became an important plank in federal and provincial platforms, and the election of Robert Stanfield in 1956 signalled a commitment to economic growth in Nova Scotia predicated upon state intervention and regionalism. Meanwhile, Margaret Conrad writes, “Centralizing pressures tolled the death knell for many of the region’s rural areas” as the total number of workers employed in primary and secondary industries declined.⁷⁴ At the Sydney steel plant, employment fluctuated—peaking at an all-time high in 1952 – although ultimately shedding 1,043 jobs between 1951 and 1960.

The federal election in June 1957 swept the Liberals from power and established John Diefenbaker as Prime Minister with a Conservative minority government. C.D. Howe, who had controversially supported the Trans-Canada natural gas pipeline during the campaign, lost his seat in Port Arthur to Co-operative Commonwealth Federation

⁷² Dofasco installed North America’s first Basic Oxygen Furnace in 1954. Daniel Madar, *Big Steel: Technology, Trade, and Survival in a Global Market* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 24.

⁷³ W.S. MacNutt, “The Atlantic Revolution,” *Atlantic Advocate* (1957): 11-13.

⁷⁴ Margaret Conrad, “The 1950s: The Decade of Development,” in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, eds. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 386.

(CCF) candidate Doug Fisher.⁷⁵ Although Howe had reservations about the management style of Hawker Siddeley director Roy Dobson, he had largely supported the company's Canadian operations since the Second World War. It was Howe, in fact, who recommended Crawford Gordon to Dobson as a candidate for the A.V. Roe Canada presidency in 1951.⁷⁶

Table 1.4
Sydney Works, Average Employment, 1950-1960

Year	Number of Hourly Rated Workers
1951	5,439
1952	5,952
1953	5,674
1954	4,494
1955	4,486
1956	4,732
1957	4,976
1958	4,335
1959	4,040
1960	4,396

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The Diefenbaker administration had fewer professional associations with A.V. Roe. Conservative MP George Nowlan, who maintained close ties with the newly appointed cabinet, had supported Jodrey's resistance to the Dosco sale - citing fears of decline in Maritime coal and steel.⁷⁸ Although the Conservatives did not interfere directly, these political developments were of concern to A.V. Roe directors. In 1957, all but one

⁷⁵ Randall K. Morck, Michael Percy, Gloria Y. Tian, and Bernard Yeung, "The Rise and Fall of the Widely Held Firm: A History of Corporate Ownership in Canada," in *A History of Corporate Governance Around the World: Family business Groups to Professional Managers* ed. Randall K. Morck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 126.

⁷⁶ Greig Stewart, *Arrow Through the Heart: The Life and Times of Crawford Gordon and the Avro Arrow* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 77.

⁷⁷ Sydney Works Force, Employment Office, 1950-1967, Dominion Steel and Coal Company Papers, MG 14, 26, Box 7, File 1, BI.

⁷⁸ Margaret Conrad, *George Nowlan: Maritime Conservative in National Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 237-238.

member of the board were committed Liberal Party loyalists. Their fears were compounded by the fact that the company's most lucrative contracts were awarded by the Canadian government, including orders for the CF-105 – the “Avro Arrow.”

The original \$200,000 CF-105 design contract was awarded to A.V. Roe in May 1953, and hundreds of millions of dollars were allocated to the project before the end of the decade. Officials were concerned with the strategic capabilities of Soviet long-range bombers, and the Arrow was designed specifically as an interceptor aircraft.⁷⁹ The roll-out of the first CF-105 occurred on October 4, 1957, and several test flights took place over the next months. On March 31, 1958, Diefenbaker was elected with a majority government and was now in a position to scrap the project altogether.⁸⁰ Although the reasons for the decision remain contested, the Canadian government decided to follow American proposals for a missile-based air defense system and cancel the Arrow.⁸¹ The decision was announced to the public on February 20, 1959, and the company immediately laid-off 14,528 Avro and Orenda employees. With its aeronautical division decimated, A.V. Roe was in crisis during the final months of 1959.⁸²

The Dosco division could not help offset this disaster, as the Maritime coal and steel industries were also facing hardship. In 1959, R.B. Elver authored a report to the Royal Commission on Coal on the competitive position of Dosco. Although he describes problems with raw materials, Elver argues that the Sydney Works could regain competitive status if it were supported with proper infrastructure investment. This view remained popular among Sydney steelworkers. Elver cautions:

If very little is done in the way of increasing the types of steel products produced, improving the quality and relative cost of raw materials consumed, and improving

⁷⁹ Donald C. Story and Russell Isinger, “The origins of the cancellation of Canada’s Avro CF-105 arrow fighter program: A failure of strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30, 6 (2007): 1027-28.

⁸⁰ Libbie Park and Frank Park, *Anatomy of Big Business* (Toronto: James, Lewis, and Samuel, 1973): 109.

⁸¹ Palmiro Campagna, *Storms of Controversy: The Secret Arrow Files Revealed* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992): 93-95.

⁸² Stewart, *Arrow Through the Heart*, 152.

processing techniques, it is quite likely that the company will stagnate and even decline, in absolute as well as in relative terms.⁸³

The Commission also found that Cape Breton coal reserves were becoming less economically recoverable, as miners had to travel further underground for their tonnages. Ivan Rand, the head of the commission, wrote in support of further subsidy but predicted the closure of at least four collieries before 1970.⁸⁴

A study by Arthur D. Little Inc. revealed further challenges. The inability of the Sydney mill to produce flat-rolled product had now become a major problem; these comprised 50 percent of the rolled steel market in 1960. The company recognized this by 1957, when planning began for a new mill with flat-rolling capabilities to be established at Contrecoeur, Quebec. In the view of management, the addition of these mills to operations at Sydney was not an option; freight rates meant that shipping from Sydney, over a ten-year period, would accrue an approximate cost differential of \$40 million.⁸⁵ By the early 1960s, it became clear that USWA-led calls for diversification of the product line at the Sydney Works – to “diversify or die” – would go unheeded by Dosco, A.V. Roe, and the Hawker Siddeley Group.⁸⁶

These issues were compounded by national and international developments buffeting the North American steel industry. The opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959 proved a boon for mills in Hamilton and the Sault, as it offered a ready supply of iron ore from the Ungava region of the Labrador-Quebec border, but this further diminished the geographical reasoning for production at Sydney.⁸⁷ Competition from modernized European and Japanese producers remained fierce; in 1958, British

⁸³ Elver, “Competitive Position of Dosco as a Steel Producer,” 15.

⁸⁴ I.C. Rand, *Report on the Royal Commission on Coal, August 1960* (Ottawa: Roger Duhamel, 1960), 23-4.

⁸⁵ Arthur D. Little Inc., *The Future of Steel-Making in Sydney: Report to the Government of Nova Scotia* (Cambridge, MA: Arthur D. Little, 1960): 28.

⁸⁶ Waisglass and Hogan, *A Submission to the Atlantic Development Board*, 2.

⁸⁷ Daniel MacFarlane, *Negotiating a River: Canada, the US, and the Creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 51.

steelmakers spent \$280 million on upgrades to achieve an even greater productive capacity.⁸⁸ In the U.S., the *Iron and Steel Rate Disparities Investigation* in 1963-64 found “the lower Japanese production costs were an almost insurmountable barrier to American sales in that country,” although ocean shipping rates did not explicitly discriminate against North American steel.⁸⁹

Table 1.5
Installation of New Steel Facilities Between 1950-1960

Type of Equipment	Canada and US	Europe and Japan
Blooming Mills	37	40
Hot Strip Mills	16	31
Structural Mills	1	6
Plate Mills	4	30
Merchant and Light Mills	15	28
Rod Mills	7	14

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On the labour front, Canadian unionists grew increasingly concerned over the confrontation taking shape on the American side of the border. USWA President David McDonald promised American steelworkers higher wages in 1959 to offset several years of inflation. Management at U.S. Steel and other producers had grown similarly disenchanted with the terms of existing agreements, particularly surrounding issues of work control.⁹¹ Strike action was the result, and more than 500,000 American workers walked off the job on July 15. After three months on the picket line, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act forced steelworkers back to work.⁹² Larry Sefton, director of District 6

⁸⁸ “Britain; Economics,” Labor clippings files, 1941-1968, HCLA 1941, Box 7, USWA Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University (PSU), State College, PA.

⁸⁹ James S. Gordon, “Shipping Regulation and the Federal Maritime Commission, Pt. 1,” *University of Chicago Law Review* 37, 1 (Autumn 1969): 142-45.

⁹⁰ Arthur D. Little Inc., *The Future of Steel-Making*, 34.

⁹¹ “Economics, 1956-1959.” Labor clippings files, 1941-1968, USWA Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, PSU.

⁹² Eric Arnessen, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-class History, Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1322-24.

in Ontario, feared a similar employer offensive in Canada. In April 1960, he called for a spirited defence of the union's achievements and asked members to support the nascent New Democratic Party (NDP) "in order that the workers and farmers of [Canada] have a government that truly represents them."⁹³

At Dosco, Roy Dobson and the new president A.L. Fairly outlined the company's financial position: the company had posted a \$495,192 net profit between July and December 1960. This indicated a decline from the previous twelve-month period, wherein the company had amassed nearly \$3.5 million. They write, "There has been no general increase in selling prices, thereby offsetting our increased costs, mainly labour, which have continued to rise. Basically wage costs [...] handicap Canadian producers against those of every country except the United States."⁹⁴ Net income decreased again in 1961, to \$1.1 million, before an uptick in 1962 to nearly \$2.3 million –the result of a declining Canadian dollar and increased steel exports. By 1962, rails were shipping to countries such as the U.K., Colombia, Mexico, South Africa, and Venezuela.⁹⁵

The problems facing A.V. Roe worsened in the early 1960s; since the cancellation of the Arrow, a number of the company's executives – including Crawford Gordon – had resigned. The rail division was increasingly uneconomical as the result of car and air transport, and a failed attempt to acquire American shipbuilding contracts resulted in protracted losses.⁹⁶ The company reported nearly \$3.6 million in losses during 1961.⁹⁷ Dobson responded by appointing a former executive from Ford and Massey Ferguson,

⁹³ Larry Sefton, director's report on District 6, 21-22 April 1960, Canadian Staff Conference, 1952-1961, Box 8, Files 3-4, Education Department records, 1924-1995, HCLA 1931, USWA Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, PSU.

⁹⁴ Dosco, report for the five month fiscal period ending December 31, 1960, Corporate Records, File 2, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

⁹⁵ Dosco Annual Reports, 1962, Corporate Records, File 3, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

⁹⁶ Palmiro Campagna, *Requiem for a Giant: A.V. Roe and the Avro Arrow* (Toronto: Dundurn Group, 2003), 157-8.

⁹⁷ A.V. Roe Canada Annual Report, 1961, Corporate Records, File 3, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

T.J. Emmert, as President and CEO of A.V. Roe and to a directorship at Dosco.⁹⁸ Emmert's job, as it soon became clear, was to oversee the transition to a new company, Hawker Siddeley Canada Ltd, and the divestment from Nova Scotia coal and steel.

At this point, the staples trap was quickly resulting in a terminal crisis. The failure to create final demand linkages under Dosco meant that when nearby raw materials were exhausted there would be little need for continued investment in Cape Breton. The supply chain of the Sydney Works, the initial basis for the location of the facility, was now threatened by problems throughout the Cape Breton coal industry and in the Wabana ore mines. These issues were compounded by the financial problems facing A.V. Roe after the collapse of its aviation division. Once Dosco was re-organized under Hawker Siddeley Canada, it became clear that the intentions of the parent company were to begin winding down steel operations in the Maritimes entirely.

The creation of Hawker Siddeley Canada Ltd. was officially announced at the annual shareholders meeting of A.V. Roe in Toronto on April 30, 1962. Emmert told those gathered:

[A new name will] convey more accurately the scope of your Company's operations. As you know, these now embrace [...] shipbuilding [...] different primary products and services ranging from iron ore and basic steel to electronic equipment and railway rolling stock. Since, in many minds, the name A.V. Roe Canada has been identified with aviation almost exclusively, the new name will help to correct this situation quickly and effectively.⁹⁹

The company had already taken steps towards disassociating with the legacy of the Arrow. The previous year, Hawker Siddeley Group transferred management of its aircraft facilities at Malton to De Havilland Aircraft of Canada.¹⁰⁰ In 1962, A.V. Roe's holdings were placed under five new divisions of Hawker Siddeley Canada.

⁹⁸ "A.V. Roe Canada President," *Flight* (31 August 1961): 276.

⁹⁹ "The Board of Directors announces that effective immediately the group of company's operating as A.V. Roe Canada Limited will now be known as Hawker Siddeley Canada Ltd.," *Ottawa Journal*. May 3, 1962.

¹⁰⁰ Campagna, *Requiem for a Giant*, 158.

As part of this transition, the Dosco Empire was split between several different management structures. The new steel division included the integrated works at Sydney, rolling and wire mills at Montreal and Etobicoke, a power plant near Sydney, the limestone quarry in Newfoundland, and the \$20 million rod and bar mill at Contrecoeur – which became fully operational in 1964. Emmert named Chipman Drury, a former president of the Canadian General Transit Company, as head of the steel division. The Wabana mines, Halifax shipyard, Cape Breton collieries, and fabrication mills at Trenton were placed under the auspices of J.E. Clubb and Dosco Industries. Other A.V. Roe holdings were re-organized under the Transportation Equipment Division, Orenda Division, and Engineering Division.¹⁰¹

Financial reports reveal a short-term plan for divestment from Atlantic Canada and the move away from vertical integration. Hawker Siddeley Canada continued to fund the expansion of flat-rolling capabilities at Contrecoeur and continuous billet casting in Montreal, while demanding subsidization from the Nova Scotia government for any upgrades at Sydney. Although construction began on a \$12 million coal pier at the Sydney Works in 1965, this project was largely funded through a grant from the Atlantic Development Board (ADB). Steel production was briefly interrupted that year, as the two antiquated blast furnaces in Sydney were in such poor condition that they could not continue to operate without modernization. The company responded by re-lining both furnaces, but refused to replace the aging equipment. This was necessary to maintain even a basic level of production at the plant, and it mirrors Dosco's earlier actions during the wind-down at Trenton.¹⁰²

Despite an upward trend for net sales within Hawker Siddeley Canada, the parent company blamed the industrial division for a shortfall in expected profits. "Income from

¹⁰¹ Hawker Siddeley Canada, report on operations, 30 April 1964, Corporate Records, File 4, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

¹⁰² "Major market areas eyed in Dosco expansion plans," *Montreal Gazette*. February 14, 1963; "Dosco's new flat-rolled mill will reduce sheet steel costs to industries in Quebec," *Montreal Gazette*. February 9, 1966; As early as 1964, the Quebec government expressed interest in the possibility of purchasing the Contrecoeur operation. "Takeover hint lifts shares of Dominion," *New York Times*. August 21, 1964.

operations for 1965 was appreciably below that of 1964,” reads the company’s annual report, “The decline was wholly attributable to operating results of our largest partly-owned subsidiary (77%), Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation.”¹⁰³ The company soon began liquidating assets; the Seaboard Power Station in Cape Breton was sold to Nova Scotia Power for \$2,553,465.¹⁰⁴ Dosco closed two of its Bell Island ore mines between 1959 and 1962, and on April 19, 1966 announced that Wabana No. 3, the longest continuously-operating iron ore mine in the country, was to shut down by June.¹⁰⁵

The steelworkers’ union recognized these actions as a corporate exit-strategy. New wire drawing machines had been added to the Sydney Works during the 1950s as part of the Forsyth modernization. In March 1966, Dosco announced that two of these machines, valued at more than \$60,000, were to be transported out of Sydney to facilities at Etobicoke, Ontario. Sydney steelworker and USWA District 2 President James Nicholson opined that Dosco was “stripping the mill” of useful equipment. He writes:

One can quite honestly assume that, after a comparatively short period with the additional high costs [associated with stripping the mill] and inefficiency arguments added to their arsenal of reasons why finished steel should not be processed in Sydney, the Company may well want to close this mill.¹⁰⁶

Waisglass and Hogan supported these points in their presentation to the ADB at the end of the month:

Our concern is not a new one. For a very considerable period of time, [the USWA has] warned of impending disaster for the Sydney Steel operations if diversification was not carried out. Our admonitions seem, for all practical purposes to have fallen on deaf ears

[...]

What should be the ultimate fate of the Sydney Steel Plant? That is the critical question [...] We can be sure that the future for steel will not be decided by the

¹⁰³ Hawker Siddeley Canada Annual Report, 1965, Corporate Records, File 4, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

¹⁰⁴ Hawker Siddeley Canada Limited, Annual Report, 1965.

¹⁰⁵ Weir, “The Wabana Ore Miners of Bell Island,” 31-32.

¹⁰⁶ Memorandum: Transfer Sydney Wire Drawing Machine, 23 March 1966, Bras d’Or Collection, 0915, Cape Breton University Library.

Steelworkers or by the people of Cape Breton, nor should it be expected that the decision should rest exclusively on the basis of their particular economic interests, or solely on the considerations of their welfare. At the same time, however, the decision should not be based exclusively on the ambitions of private business to maximize its profits, or on the self-interest [sic] decisions of private capital which are rationalized by the counterfeit principles of a free enterprise system which has proved to be neither free nor enterprising.¹⁰⁷

These concerns went unheeded, although they informed the decisions of provincial and federal politicians tasked with responding to the industrial crisis taking shape on the island. By the end of 1966, the company revealed plans to divest from its holdings in the Cape Breton coal field entirely, and the federal government announced that these operations would be taken over by the newly formed Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco).

Considering this framework of a years-long process of corporate withdrawal, it is hardly surprising that Dosco announced the closure of the Sydney Works on October 13, 1967. For residents in Sydney, however, the decision could not have come as more of a surprise. Shock is the primary sentiment expressed through written narratives, oral history accounts, and cultural productions of the event from the decades after 1967. While the provincial government quickly announced plans to take control of the Sydney mill, Hawker Siddeley Canada continued to shutter and sell Dosco operations as part of what they called the “elimination of non-competitive costs.”¹⁰⁸

Operations in central Canada, including the mills at Contrecoeur, were sold to Sidérugie du Québec (Sidbec) – a provincial crown corporation formed in 1964 by the Quebec government. In the midst of the Quiet Revolution, the Sidbec nationalization occurred alongside a renewed conceptualization of the provincial state under Jean Lesage. It corresponded with the overarching trend toward modernization and organization of the public service, the secularization of education and healthcare, and the creation of several

¹⁰⁷ Waisglass and Hogan, *A Submission to the Atlantic Development Board*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ Hawker Siddeley Canada Annual Report, 1967, Corporate Records, File 4, Halifax Industries Limited Fonds, NSARM.

state-run enterprises.¹⁰⁹ Between 1960 and 1966, Quebec created several public corporations; these included: Société Générale de Financement, the Société Québécoise d'Exploration Minière, and the Caisse de Dépôt et Placement du Québec. In 1963, the province also nationalized private power corporations to add to Hydro-Québec.¹¹⁰ Through its industrial acquisitions, "Sidbec" officially became "Sidbec-Dosco" in 1968.¹¹¹

The federal government also wrestled with questions of economic nationalism. After Lester Pearson defeated Diefenbaker in 1963, these challenges became more visible. Although, as Doug Owsram writes, agreements such as the 1965 Auto Pact imply move away from economic nationalism, politicians on the right and the left used its language to frame their policy arguments. This included, for example, a defeated proposal by Finance Minister Walter Gordon to issue a 30 percent "takeover tax" on foreign companies seeking to gain majority shares in Canadian firms.¹¹² Economic nationalism also informed bottom-up resistance; Steven High describes how workers' protests against deindustrialization elsewhere in Canada drew upon this "new nationalism" to prevent offshoring and job losses.¹¹³

The provincial takeover of the Sydney Works is further explored in Chapter Three, but that decision was also informed by a Keynesian sense of nationalism, wherein governments were more willing to taking direct action in the economy. Meanwhile, the

¹⁰⁹ Marc Renaud, "Quebec's New Middle Class in Search of Social Hegemony: Causes and Political Consequences," in *The Challenge of Modernity: A Reader on Post-Confederation Canada* ed. Ian McKay (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1992): 348.

¹¹⁰ Pierre Fortin, "Quebec's Quiet Revolution, 50 Years Later," *Inroads* 29 (Summer/Fall 2011): 91.

¹¹¹ Albert Cholette, *Le fer du Nouveau-Québec et la saga de la sidérurgie: la faillite d'un rêve* (Saint-Nicholas: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2000): 1.

¹¹² Doug Owsram, "Economic Nationalism," in *Canadian History Post-Confederation*, ed. John Douglas Belshaw (BC Campus, OpenEd): <https://opentextbc.ca/postconfederation/>

¹¹³ Steven High, "'I'll Wrap the F*#@ Canadian Flag Around Me': A Nationalist Response to Plant Shutdowns, 1969-1984," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 12, 1 (2001): 204.

remainder of Dosco's holdings in Atlantic Canada were transferred to another Hawker Siddeley Group subsidiary, Hawker Industries Ltd. These included the Trenton Works, Halifax Shipyards, Canadian Bridge Divisions, Dosco Overseas Engineering, and all colliery assets outside of Cape Breton.¹¹⁴ The company that had controlled Cape Breton coal and steel since its incorporation in 1928 had, by this time, become so fragmented and fractured as to be unrecognizable. After more than two decades of planned obsolescence, the era of private ownership at the Sydney Works drew to a close.

Conclusion

On Black Friday, steelworkers and other residents experienced the culmination of a decades-long staples trap. The island's economy, long predicated upon the ability of extractive industries to facilitate secondary steel production in Sydney, required a scale of fixed investment that dissuaded extra-regional owners from contributing to existing facilities or developing other areas of secondary manufacturing. The provincial government assuaged concerns immediately, through the nationalization of the mill, but modernization and technological upgrades would remain contested under provincial ownership. At this point, the operation of the plant became a provincial political issue.

Throughout the postwar period, private owners continued to view investment at Sydney or Trenton as less profitable than expenditures at Montreal, Etobicoke, or Contrecoeur. Far from the traditional boom-and-bust of the resource frontier, the economic history of Dosco reveals the mechanisms through which regional industry was intentionally exploited and abandoned as profits were re-invested elsewhere. When modernization funds were provided, these were simply intended to facilitate the basic maintenance of production. Substantive upgrades, such as the changeover to Basic Oxygen Furnaces, were never provided - although open hearth systems were already becoming out-dated by the 1950s. When A.V. Roe gained control of the Sydney Works, decision-making was further removed - from Montreal to London. Once the Arrow program collapsed in 1959, Dosco became a target of corporate re-structuring and liquidation.

¹¹⁴ Hawker Siddeley Canada Annual Report, 1967.

The long exodus of private capital from the Maritimes steel industry has more in common with steel crisis in the industrial heartland of the U.S. than it does with central Canadian producers. High effectively contrasts obsolescence in American and Canadian steel industries; American firms failed to reinvest after lacklustre expenditures in the 1950s, while Canadian producers benefitted from tax incentives to upgrade facilities and remain competitive. As a result, U.S. companies like Youngstown Tube and Steel and Bethlehem Steel decided to expand upon mills located in the Midwest – to the detriment of “out-dated” operations in places like Lackawanna and Youngstown.¹¹⁵ Had the provincial government not interjected in 1967, the closure of the Sydney Works would have occurred in response to the same set of disinvestment decisions that resulted in the collapse of American heartland firms in the following decades.

Uniquely Canadian, however, is the reasoning behind the abandonment of regional steelmaking by the ownership class; while American firms pressed westward after growing markets, Dosco was constrained by its geography and the centralization of its direct competitors. Decisions made by corporate executives in Montreal or London did not take into account the wellbeing of the still-profitable communities from which they extracted surplus capital, and the staples trap meant that re-investment would always favour locations closer to central markets. Diversification, argue Hayter and Barnes, represents “the only permanent solution” to this trap – a revelation clearly understood by Sydney’s steelworkers since the 1940s.¹¹⁶ This was not a strategy employed by the absentee owners of the Sydney Works; rather, constructed crises and the spectre of labour conflict were marshalled to excuse the economic violence of regional divestment.

¹¹⁵ Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 121.

¹¹⁶ Hayter and Barnes, “Innis’ Staples Theory, Exports, and Recession,” 171.

Chapter Two

Radical Reds and Responsible Unionism: The Postwar Compromise and an Industrial Structure of Feeling, 1944-1966

The most difficult thing to get hold of, in studying any past period, is this felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living.

- Raymond Williams, 1961¹

Dosco's long downgrading of its Maritime operations reflects a particular aspect of maturing Canadian capitalism, but workers' accounts of the postwar period reveal a very different understanding of life in Sydney. Rather than viewing the years between 1945 and 1967 as an unmitigated slide towards closure, marked by underinvestment and decline, former employees recall the better wages and working conditions that were made possible through trade unionism, an emerging consumer culture, the urban expansion of the city, and the development of local businesses. While the historical and sociological representation of these positive recollections have sometimes been castigated as "smokestack nostalgia," Steven High and David Lewis write that "there is also a danger in middle class academic audiences assuming that the warm memories of working people are *nothing but* nostalgia. This, too, serves to depoliticize."²

Steelworkers in Sydney did not ignore corporate divestment; Chapter One reveals the extent to which representatives from Local 1064 and the international steelworkers' union challenged this management strategy as early as the 1940s. In the realm of memory, however, the postwar years are characterized by a sense of progressive modernism and class achievement. It is for this reason that Black Friday is recalled as a moment of such

¹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), 63.

² Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, "Introduction," *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 14; Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 94; See also Tim Strangleman, "'Smokestack Nostalgia,' 'Ruin Porn,' or Working Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation," *International Labor and Working Class History* 84 (2013): 23-37.

profound disruption. Despite the declining fortunes of Dosco and the removal of equipment from the Sydney Works, employees and community members perceived a strengthening of local institutions and class identities – a maturity of what David Byrne has termed an “industrial structure of feeling – the sentiments which inform and construct ‘ways of life’, ways of doing things, sense not just of personal but of collective identity, [and] understanding of possibilities.”³ Workers’ livelihoods were threatened on Black Friday, and an entire set of social understandings and working-class cultures were at stake.

Raymond Williams first articulated the “structure of feeling” in his *A Preface to Film* (1954); he describes art and literature as the primary modes through which “the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, [are] expressed and embodied.”⁴ The theory is expanded in *The Long Revolution* (1961):

It is as firm and definite as structure suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure of feeling is the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization. [...] I do not mean that the structure of feeling, any more than the social character, is possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community. But I think that it is a very deep and very wide procession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it that communication depends.⁵

This is not simply the reduction of *the social* to fixed forms, or to a Hegelian spirit of the times; Williams explains in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), “the mistake, as it so often is, is in taking terms of analysis as terms of substance. Thus we speak of a world-view or of a prevailing ideology or of a class outlook.”⁶ While working-class culture in the West has been constrained and shaped by the economic and social relationships germane to global capitalism, Williams argues that we must pay close attention to the negotiations and contestations that occur within “residual” and “emergent” cultural expressions. These, he

³ David Byrne, “Industrial Culture in a Post-Industrial World,” *City* 6, 3 (2002): 287.

⁴ Raymond Williams and Michael Orrom, *A Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954), 21.

⁵ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 64-65.

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 129.

writes, “are significant both in themselves and in what they reveal about the characteristics of the ‘dominant’.”⁷

David Frank draws upon Williams’ cultural analysis to explore the emergence of an industrial working-class culture in Cape Breton during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁸ “In the coal and steel towns,” he writes, “older expressions of the folk tradition survived, often incorporating new themes. At the same time, common experiences in the industrial environment promoted the creation of a vigorous local tradition of industrial folk song.”⁹ During the Cape Breton labour wars of the 1920s, working-class poets and songwriters such as Dawn Fraser and Dannie Boutilier contributed to a form of local identity based upon shared experiences of work and class struggle. These radical worker-poets existed at the crux of a cultural crisis. David Frank and Donald MacGillivray argue:

[These individuals], Fraser included, became "reds", attended "red" events and supported "red" leaders, but it would be misleading to claim that the majority of [workers] became committed communists. The "red" phase was too brief and transitory to develop an entirely new radical culture. Nevertheless, the crisis of the 1920s did strengthen and maintain the [workers] "rebel" outlook and their populist critique of industrial capitalism. These remained the basic elements of working class culture in industrial Cape Breton for more than a generation.¹⁰

Work-poetry in Cape Breton soon reflected these changes. John “Slim” McInnis, an employee at the Sydney Works, wrote several poems between 1940 and 1988. His earliest, “From Breadlines to Battlefields” in 1940, questioned the war effort and called for class-based solidarity:

⁷ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 122.

⁸ David Frank, “Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Cape Breton at 200 Essays in Honour of the Island’s Bicentennial, 1785-1985*, ed. Kenneth Donovan (Sydney, NS: UCCB Press, 1985), 203-18.

⁹ David Frank, “The Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton,” *Canadian Folklore Canadian* 8, 1-2 (1986): 22.

¹⁰ David Frank and Donald MacGillivray, introduction to *Echoes from Labor’s War: Industrial Cape Breton in the 1920s*, by Dawn Fraser (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976), 20-1.

What right, we ask, have this useless class
To demand we engage a foe
They helped maintain with the selfish aim
Of saving the 'status quo'?

Why should we band in a far off land
And wealth for another wrest,
If here at home we have only known
The fate of the dispossessed?¹¹

McInnis' work retained this rebel outlook, although his poetry soon began to express the hope that industrial unionism could achieve better circumstances for workers without necessitating revolution. From his 1946 poem, "The Steel Strike:"

But at last there came an end to the pain
And my heart no more could feel,
Then the talks were stalled and the union called
For a national strike in steel.

So we're struck at last and all we ask
Is a forty hour week
So our brave young sons who fought the Huns
Can find the work they seek

And a slight increase will give release
From the worry we have long known
And a chance to pay for the right to stay
In the hovel we call our home.¹²

By the 1950s, local cultural productions lacked the bitterness and explicit calls for class war that were visible in their predecessors. Through the late 1940s and early 1950s, the "Dishpan Parade" program on CJCB radio asked local composers to contribute songs and poems. Nell Campbell of Glace Bay, whose husband Joseph worked in the Dosco collieries, wrote "Plain Ol' Miner Boy" to describe working-class life:

I'm a plain ol' miner boy, a tough hard-workin' miner boy,
I have a few on Saturday night and I sleep all day on Sunday

¹¹ "From Breadlines to Battlefields," *Steelworker and Miner*, August 17, 1940; "Work-Poetry of Slim McInnis," *Cape Breton Magazine* 64 (August 1993): 48-53; Donald MacGillivray, "The Industrial Verse of Slim McInnis," *Labour/Le Travail* 28 (Fall 1991): 271-83.

¹² "The Steel Strike," *Steelworker and Miner*, July 27, 1946.

I lead a very simple life, but I love my kids and I love my wife
I'll be goin' down that ol mine shaft when the whistle blows on Monday.¹³

Campbell's song expresses a different sort of experience than does the earlier poetry of Fraser and McInnis. In her verses, the life of a Cape Breton working-class family remains difficult – but it is a far cry from the poverty, starvation, and state-sanctioned violence of the interwar years. Eric Hobsbawm remarks, “In the course of the 1950s many people, especially in the increasingly prosperous ‘developed’ countries, became aware that times were indeed strikingly improved, especially if their memories reached back to the years before the Second World War.”¹⁴ For steelworkers in Sydney, this sentiment cannot be divorced from the achievement of union recognition in 1937 and the material gains of Canadian steelworkers in the years following the Second World War.

In this chapter, a discussion of political trends within the steelworkers' union and the achievements of Local 1064 reveal the emergence of a mainstream industrial structure of feeling that found purchase during the 1950s. This begins with the turn away from what David Frank has termed the “red phase” of Cape Breton workers' culture, when radical ideals flourished in a landscape of crisis and class conflict. Following the 1946 national steel strike, and keeping with trends throughout Canada and the United States, Local 1064 turned towards the promise of “responsible unionism” – a compromise that initially produced significant benefits. The dominance of this structure of feeling offered steelworkers *visibility*; this is reflected in oral history recollections and cultural productions that highlight the plant and its workers as a fundamental aspect of the city's class identity.

The final section examines steelworkers' responses to the increasing pace of planned obsolescence in the early 1960s. As Hawker Siddeley's disinvestment from the Sydney Works became clear, some employees at the plant began to recognize shortcomings in the ability of responsible unionism to confront crises. In the early 1960s,

¹³ Frank, “The Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton,” 39; Nell Campbell, “Plain Ol' Miner Boy,” Audio file, <http://www.beatoninstitutemusic.ca/mining/plain-ole-miner-boy.html>, John C. O'Donnell Tape Collection, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS.

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1994), 257.

workers responded to a structure of feeling under threat through a return to more militant forms of unionism – including wildcat strikes and the election of oppositionists to the 1064 executive. In contrast to other areas of Canada during the 1960s, the workers at the heart of this effort in Sydney were not “rebel youth;” rather, they were experienced steelworkers who perceived deindustrialization as a challenge to their hard-won place within their workplace and community.

This argument broadly emerges from the theoretical foundations of historical materialism, but not as the concept has narrowly been considered within classical or orthodox Marxism. Rather, drawing again upon Williams, this discussion does not begin with the assumption that economic pressures and the resulting class struggle *determined* the contours of an industrial structure of feeling in Sydney, but that:

‘The base’ to which it is habitual to refer variations, is itself a dynamic and internally contradictory process – the specific activities and modes of activity, over a range from association to antagonism, of real men and classes of men – that we can begin to free ourselves from the notion of an ‘area’ or ‘category’ with certain fixed properties for deduction to the variable processes of a superstructure.”¹⁵

Through an understanding of these contradictions, we come to recognize the production of cognitive dissonance through, on one hand, Dosco’s disinvestment in the Sydney mill and, on the other, the perceived economic security established through the actions of Local 1064 and the participation of steelworkers and labour leaders in the public sphere. It was the continued relevance of this structure of feeling that produced such a strong community backlash on Black Friday; the notion that it could be displaced through a simple corporate announcement seemed unimaginable.

Turning Right: The Decline of Union Militancy, 1946-1949

Gordie Gosse, a third-generation steelworker in Sydney, remembers growing up in Whitney Pier and hearing about work at the plant from his father and grandfather. Gosse was hired by Sysco in 1974, and worked in the mill until he was laid-off in 1992. Following his time at Sysco, Gosse acted as the director of the Whitney Pier Boys and

¹⁵ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 82.

Girls Club; he also served as the MLA for Sydney and Whitney Pier between 2003 and 2015. He recalls:

I remember my grandfather talking about Bloody Sunday [...] when they came to Whitney Pier with troops . . . and beat them up and ran them over and everything [...] They had brought in the army, my grandfather said, and the provincial police at that time. And they were on horses. And people were coming home from church [...] And the army and provincial police beat them up and everything [...] And they had Gatling guns at the General Office, set up on the roof! [...] Oh [things] were a lot better [by the 1950s]. My father said, and my grandfather . . . They could retire then, with a small pension, and get on with their lives – you know?¹⁶

The event to which Gosse refers occurred in the summer of 1923 during a strike at the Sydney Works. On June 28, workers walked out of the mill and set up pickets preventing strikebreakers from entering the plant. Soldiers arrived from Halifax two days later, and provincial police reached Sydney on July 1. That evening, David Frank writes:

A squad of sixteen mounted provincial police charged through the pickets at the plant gates [...] The police charged on [...] and headed up Victoria Road into Whitney Pier. They attacked all pedestrians who came in their way. Men, women, and children were chased off the streets, many of them escaping into yards and homes.¹⁷

Although the steelworkers were unable to achieve union recognition in 1923, the state violence enacted upon them has remained a lasting part of their collective memory. With memories of direct conflict remaining with later generations of steelworkers, it is unremarkable that some recalled the postwar period with a sense of nostalgia – particularly when contrasted with the violence of earlier struggles. These changes mirrored shifts in industrial relations occurring nationally and internationally.

In Canada, labour relations were increasingly bureaucratic and institutional during the 1940s. Between 1941 and 1943, more than 425,000 workers were involved in strikes related to wages, working conditions, or shop-floor issues. This includes a national steel strike of more than 13,000 steelworkers in 1943, wherein Steel Workers Organizing

¹⁶ Gordie Gosse, interview with author, April 19, 2016.

¹⁷ David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1999), 303; Donald MacGillivray, “Military Aid to the Civil Power: The Cape Breton Experience in the 1920s,” *Acadiensis* 3, 2 (Spring 1974): 56.

Committee (SWOC) unionists sought to equalize wage rates across the entire industry.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the CCF was increasing in popularity among moderate organized workers – particularly those within the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). In addition to these economic and political pressures, members of the National Wartime Labour Board pressured the federal government to develop a collective bargaining policy.¹⁹ In response, the King administration passed order-in-council PC 1003 on March 20, 1944. This legislation compelled employers within federal and war-related industries to bargain with unions, participate in conciliation, and engage in grievance arbitration.²⁰

PC 1003 emerged from an historical context broadly shaped by the passage of the 1935 National Labour Relations Act in the United States. This offered American workers a set of procedures to achieve state recognition of trade unionism. This legislation, also known as the Wagner Act, prompted an expansion within the American labour movement – but so, too, did it prescribe a set of industrial and workplace relations that did not challenge managerial and capital control on the shop floor. PC 1003 was, in many ways, more illiberal than its American predecessor; according to Bob Russell, “the Canadian legislation contained [...] special provisions intended specifically to preserve the unique status of craft organizations in national industrial relations [...] [and] added a corresponding category of employee transgressions to the list of employer unfair practices.”²¹

The contours of this “capital-labour compromise” remain contested; Marxist and feminist scholars have challenged the notion that PC 1003 represented a major victory for

¹⁸ Douglas Cruickshank and Gregory S. Kealey, “Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950: I. Analysis,” *Labour/Le Travail* 20 (Fall 1987): 117; Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “The 1943 Steel Strike Against Wartime Wage Controls,” *Labour/Le Travail* 10 (Autumn, 1982): 67.

¹⁹ Taylor Hollander, “Making Reform Happen: The Passage of Canada’s Collective-Bargaining Policy, 1943-1944,” *Journal of Policy History* 13, 3 (2001): 313-14.

²⁰ Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers’ Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 273

²¹ Bob Russell, “Labour’s Magna Carta? Wagnerism in Canada at Fifty,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: 50 Years of PC 1003*, eds. Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, and Jesse Vorst (Winnipeg and Halifax: Society for Socialist Studies and Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 182.

Canadian labour on the grounds that it simply reified traditional systems of power.²² Peter McInnis argues that “historians have either assessed this moment as one of intense conflict that secured a measure of legitimacy for organized labour or, alternatively, as a time when workers and their leadership entered into a Faustian bargain that limited unions’ effectiveness in succeeding generations.”²³ Nonetheless, by the war’s end Canadian steelworkers were poised for a confrontation that would result in higher wages, a shorter workday, and the spread of unionization throughout nearly the entire industry.

The steelworkers’ union in Sydney achieved recognition earlier than had occurred at the other Canadian firms. The Independent Steelworkers’ Union of Nova Scotia met as early as 1935 and gained a SWOC charter as Lodge 1064 the following year under the CIO. Nova Scotia Premier Angus L. MacDonald signed the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act in 1937, which forced Dosco to recognize the new union; this was done in the hopes of avoiding a plant-wide recognition strike.²⁴ The timing of these decisions matched with developments on the American side of the border; on March 3, the *New York Times* reported that CIO President John L. Lewis and Myron C. Taylor, the Chairman of the Board for U.S. Steel, had reached an agreement for SWOC recognition from the country’s largest steel producer.²⁵ In 1942, SWOC Lodge 1064 officially became Local

²² See Aaron McCrorie, “PC 1003: Labour, Capital, and the State,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains*, 15-38 and Anne Forrest, “Securing the Male Breadwinner: A Feminist Interpretation of PC 1003,” *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations* 52, 1 (Winter 1997): 91-113.

²³ Peter McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada: 1943-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 6-7.

²⁴ The unionization of the Sydney steelworkers has been explored elsewhere; See: George MacEachern, *George MacEachern: An Autobiography*, eds. David Frank and Donald MacGillivray (Sydney, NS: UCCB Press, 1987) and “Organizing Sydney’s Steelworkers in the 1930s,” in *We Stood Together: First-hand Accounts of Dramatic Events in Canada’s Labour Past*, ed. Gloria Montero (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co. Ltd., 1979), 47-68; Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*; Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); Ron Crawley, “What Kind of Unionism? Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers in the SWOC Years, 1936-1942,” *Labour/Le Travail* 39 (Spring 1997): 99-123.

²⁵ “Taylor and Lewis Had Secret Talks,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1988; Richard A. Lauderbaugh, “Business, Labor, and Foreign Policy: U.S. Steel, the International Steel

1064 of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA). Despite these early victories, as Craig Heron and Robert Storey remind us, “Canadian steel companies fought back, and the struggle for collective representation became bitter and pronounced.”²⁶

The Canadian “Wagner model” was strengthened in January 1946 with the implementation of the Rand Formula. Following a bitter, ninety-nine day strike at the Ford plant in Windsor, Ontario, Supreme Court Justice Ivan Rand awarded the United Auto Workers (UAW) the right to automatic deduction of union dues. In addition, however, his decision would weaken the relationship between union leadership and their members. Union executives were forced to repudiate the direct-action tactics that had characterized much of the labour battles of the 1920s and 1930s in favour of a more bureaucratized, legalistic model.²⁷ Despite this changing landscape of labour relations, Canadian workers turned to their traditional method of achieving gains from recalcitrant employers: strike action. Between May 11, 1946 and November 18, 1947, more than 180,000 workers engaged in strikes across the country. This includes the 1946 Canadian steel strike, which involved workers from Stelco, Algoma, and Dosco.

This strike wave has attracted scholarly interest, much of which focuses on the charged conflict at Stelco. The industry leader was positioned as a bellwether for the Canadian steel industry and management had long attempted to avoid unionization through the creation of a workers’ council. Stelco was forced to recognize USWA Local 1005 and a contract was agreed upon in February 1945. Despite this, workers and management both foresaw conflict once the federal government ended its direct control

Cartel, and the Recognition of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee,” *Politics and Society* 6, 4 (December 1976): 433-57.

²⁶ Craig Heron and Robert Storey, “Work and Struggle in the Canadian Steel Industry, 1900-1950,” in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, eds. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1986), 230.

²⁷ Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 280-84; Don Wells, “The Impact of the Postwar Compromise on Canadian Unionism: The Formation of an Auto Worker Local in the 1950s,” *Labour/Le Travail* 36 (Fall 1995): 147-73.

of industrial relations.²⁸ Hamilton was also an epicentre for workers resistance in other sectors; employees at Westinghouse, the *Spectator*, and the National Knitting Mills all engaged in strike action before the year's end.²⁹ Dofasco steelworkers were conspicuously absent from this agitation; that company was successful at stamping out unionism through a campaign of corporate welfare and targeted intimidation during the 1920s and 1930s.³⁰

Union organizers at Stelco, Algoma, and Dosco each formulated their demands based upon the fundamental tenets of *fairness* and *security*. This did not extend to challenging the right of employers to control production; rather, as Heron and Storey describe, steelworkers sought internal systems of bureaucracy that would regulate hiring and provide economic security from the arbitrary exertion of power by shop floor foremen or supervisors.³¹ Despite the common goals of industrial unionism, better wage rates and working conditions, and the 40-hour week, steelworkers at Dosco were more hesitant than those at Stelco or Algoma to conclude their strike in favour of the proposed contract. The offer left the matter of a 5¢ wage differential in Sydney undecided and did not offer steelworkers the 40-hour week.³² Although members of Local 1064 voted five

²⁸ Robert Storey, "Unionization versus Corporate Welfare: The 'Dofasco Way'," *Labour/Le Travail* 12 (Autumn 1983): 7-42 and "The Struggle to Organize Stelco and Dofasco," *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* 42, 2 (1987): 366-85; See also William Kilbourne, *The Elements Combined: A History of the Steel Company of Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Co., 1960); *Baptism of a Union: Stelco Strike of 1946*, ed. Wayne Roberts (Hamilton: McMaster University, 1981).

²⁹ Craig Heron, "The Mill: A Worker's Memoir from 1945-1948," *Labour/Le Travail* 43 (Spring 1999): 172.

³⁰ Storey, "Unionization versus Corporate Welfare: The 'Dofasco Way'," 7.

³¹ Heron and Storey, "Work and Struggle in the Canadian Steel Industry, 1900-1950," 233.

³² Following the cessation of the strike, the differential was put to the National War Labour Board for adjudication.

to one in favour of the contract, this was a far narrower margin than at the central Canadian firms, implying stronger support for militancy within Sydney's rank-and-file.³³

The response of Local 1064 to the new contract was fractured; there were a significant number of workers who voiced displeasure over the compromise offered by National Director Charles Millard. Not all of this opposition was rooted in the radical left; Ron Crawley writes, "The criticisms of the settlement were voiced mainly and most strongly by non-communist oppositionists."³⁴ Canadian communist leader Tim Buck, who visited Sydney in the aftermath of the strike, congratulated steelworkers on their gains – undercutting the position of some left-oppositionists within the local. Buck reflects, "I argued it was a tremendous *achievement* because recognition of the *legal* necessity for collective bargaining, placing it *on the level of the law* [...] was, perhaps, one of the most revolutionary advances that the trade union movement had made."³⁵

Among management, Dosco president Arthur Cross was also unhappy with this outcome. Refusing to re-open the Sydney Works, the company sought assurance from the federal government that any redress of the Sydney differential would be provided through subsidy – not from the company's profits. Some 1064 members viewed this as further grandstanding not dissimilar from Dosco's earlier claims of financial exigency; a poem published in the Sydney independent labour weekly, *Steelworker and Miner*, by the pseudonymous "Roddie Rodd" reveals:

No brother, Dosco carries on
Entirely for Cape Breton's good
It daily loses cash upon
It's job of giving you your food
Or so it says.³⁶

³³ "Steelworkers vote 5-1 to return to work," *Sydney Post Record*, October 3, 1946.

³⁴ Ron Crawley, "Conflict Within the Union: Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers, 1936-1972" (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 1995), 160.

³⁵ Tim Buck, *Yours in the Struggle: Reminiscences of Tim Buck*, eds. William Beeching and Phyllis Clarke (Toronto: NC Press Limited, 1977), 329.

³⁶ Roddie Rodd, "Rhyming Roundup," *Steelworker and Miner*. August 24, 1946.

The National War Labour Board found that “the weight of evidence supports the Union’s contention that a gross inequality existed in the wage rates of the production workers at Sydney,” and revealed a prorated wage scale ranging from full 5¢ per hour increase for those employees earning less than 61¢ per hour, to a 1/2¢ increase for employees between 80-89.5¢ per hour.³⁷ Donald Gordon, chairman of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, announced on October 8 that the federal government would provide a subsidy for Dosco to offset these increases.³⁸ Soon after, Dosco agreed to restart steel production.

Moderate institutional unionism was entrenched within the national and international leadership of the USWA by the end of the 1940s. By 1950, Heron writes, “the most important skills for effective union leadership were [no longer] the ability to inspire [...] from the back of a pickup truck or to maintain picket lines [...] but rather to engage in closed-door, across-the-table dialogue with management representatives.”³⁹ This shift was cemented through Cold War political conflict within the labour movement; the same impulse that resulted in the 1949 expulsion of left-led unions from the CIO also allowed conservative leaders within the USWA to gain a strategic foothold.⁴⁰ According to John Hinshaw, “before the infamous 1948 USWA convention, at which communists were banned from holding office, most left-wingers had already been driven from office.”⁴¹

Despite these changes, radical voices remained; several letters to the local labour newspaper excoriated Millard and 1064 president Ed Corbett for their failure to achieve

³⁷ Memorandum, National War Labour Board on Dosco and USWA, Local 1064, 26 November 1946, Box 120, A1 viii e.) File 1, Dominion Steel and Coal Company Papers, MG 14, 26, BI.

³⁸ E.B. Jolliffe to J.C. Nicholson, 8 October 1946, Correspondence, briefs, and reports, 80-157-1187, D. 3, United Steelworkers of America, MG 19, 7, BI.

³⁹ Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1989), 89.

⁴⁰ *The CIO’s Left-Led Unions*, ed. Steve Rosswurm (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

⁴¹ John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), 98.

the 40-hour-work week following the national strike.⁴² By 1948, with communists officially excluded from the executive, an editorial in *Steelworker and Miner* reflected:

The workers, now being securely shackled, the big talks starts all over again. Our information is that National Director C.H. Millard is calling on the locals to take part in a nation-wide campaign for a forty-hour week. And so the cycle starts again – militant statements to the press, militant demands, tub thumping at its phoniest between negotiations, and then, in the crisis, the let-down.⁴³

Left-opposition within Local 1064 suffered their major defeat in 1949, when a strike by the Communist-led Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) brought radical and conservative trade unionists into direct conflict.⁴⁴ Harry David, President of the CSU, announced the strike on March 31, 1949; steelworkers in Sydney initially supported this action, as did Corbett and the union executive. Members were ready to support CSU pickets at the Dosco piers and ignore orders to unload cargo brought in by non-union crews.⁴⁵ Then, rather suddenly, the executive reversed its decision and announced that Local 1064 would not honour CSU pickets. In his autobiography, former 1064 president and labour activist George MacEachern writes:

When Eddie Corbett [...] was called to Ottawa, he was supporting the seamen's strike. When he came back from Ottawa, he was in a terrible nervous state. They had to get a doctor for him. They had to put a policeman out on the lawn. I don't know what they did to him in Ottawa, but he was terrified when he came home. He wasn't bribed, because he wasn't any better off when he came back than he was going. But whatever pressures they put on him, whatever they told him [...] I never asked him.⁴⁶

⁴² "Bulwarks," *Steelworker and Miner*. April 17, 1948.

⁴³ "11 Pieces of Silver," *Steelworker and Miner*. May 1, 1948.

⁴⁴ For further discussion of the CSU strike, see Jim Green, *Against the Tide: The Story of the Canadian Seamen's Union* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1986); William Kaplan, *Everything that Floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Seamen's Unions of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Craig Heron, "Communists, Gangsters, and Canadian Sailors," *Labour/Le Travail* 24 (Fall 1989): 231-7.

⁴⁵ Crawley, "Conflict Within the Union," 204.

⁴⁶ MacEachern, *George MacEachern*, 135-6.

In 1990, former steelworker Walter Pickles recalled the situation during an interview with Michael Earle:

Michael: Well, there were some pretty controversial things that went on when [Corbett] was president. That business with the Canadian Seamen's Union and so on . . .?

Walter: Oh yes, a lot of those things, yeah. And he told us a lot of stories about being in Montreal and places like that and being followed, shadowed, and knowing that their phone was tapped and . . . government keeping track of things going on too, you know? [...] Oh yeah, he went on at great lengths to tell us different stories about that.

Michael: But who'd be doing that though?

Walter: Oh, God. Who knows the intrigue that goes on between unions and rival political factions, and governments, you know.⁴⁷

Although other workers expressed disbelief that Corbett could have been intimidated, this common explanatory narrative presents the executive's abandonment of radical politics as the result of unnamed "off-island" actors and agitators – including within the national USWA.⁴⁸

Achieving Visibility: A Working-Class Structure of Feeling in the 1950s

The decisive turn towards so-called "responsible unionism" occurred alongside what Ira Katznelson describes as "the long moment when liberalism thickened and became both more legitimate (swallowing some of its former conservative and socialist competitors) and more vulnerable."⁴⁹ While Cold War political tensions played a role in this process,

⁴⁷ Walter Pickles, interview by Michael Earle, May 15, 1990, Steel Project, MG 14, 206, Box 6, File 65, transcript, BI.

⁴⁸ Wally MacKinnon told Michael Earle that he did not believe the story of Corbett's trip to Ottawa. See Wally MacKinnon, interview by Michael Earle, April 11, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 40, transcript, BI; "Anson's Allies in Steel Union Engineer Sell Out of Seamen at 'Fixed,' Stormy Meeting!" *Steelworker and Miner*. May 28, 1949.

⁴⁹ Ira Katznelson, "The 'Bourgeois' Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labour History," *International Journal of Labour and Working Class History* 46 (Fall 1994): 26-7.

including anti-democratic red-baiting within the USWA, material gains achieved through contract negotiations helped to shore-up support among the local rank-and-file.

Between November 15, 1941 and October 15, 1946, the basic wage rate at the Sydney Works increased from 43.5¢ to 59.5¢ per hour – outpacing increases in cost of living during the same period.⁵⁰ Members benefitted from another 6 percent wage increase following the 1946 strike and an additional 11.5¢ in 1948, which was based on the patterns set by Local 1005 at Stelco.⁵¹ Although the 40-hour week was not achieved in 1949, members of Local 1064 voted to approve a contract that offered a 10¢ increase and the 44-hour week; this was in spite of popular criticisms of the “penalty clauses,” which punished strike action during the terms of the contract.⁵² With these gains, the years immediately following the Second World War are recalled fondly. As Wally MacKinnon told Michael Earle in 1990:

That was really the crunch in 1946 [...] From then on, the union played a major part in the industry and in the community. Local 1064 played a magnificent role, in my opinion. It produced great leaders. And it’s a sad commentary on the fact that many men who led the union are forgotten. They’re still my heroes. They’re still men who made a major contribution to the welfare not only of steelworkers, but of steelworkers’ families, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. You know vacations with pay, the right to have free time, to have some sort of quality of life, came out of Local 1064 [...] It was a bright, bright period in the history of this region.⁵³

During the 1950s, USWA negotiators continued to seek wage concessions from employers across Canada. In 1950, Local 1005 reached a deal whereby steelworkers were

⁵⁰ Sidney Miffen, minority report to the Regional War Labour Board for Nova Scotia, 17 October 1946, Box 120, A1 viii e.) File 11-12, Dosco Papers, BI; Wage Rates, 1944-45, 1946-1947, Box 12, B i. b) Files 11-12, Dosco Papers, BI; Bryan C. Williams, “Collective Bargaining and Wage Equalization in Canada’s Iron and Steel Industry,” *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations* 26, 2 (1971): 317-19.

⁵¹ “Supplemental Agreement to 6 February 1947,” and Dosco – Local 1064 contract, 1 May 1948,” Box 119, A1 viii b.) Files 1-2, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁵² Dosco – Local 1064 contract, 5 July 1949, Box 119, A1 viii b.) File 3, Dosco Papers, BI; Crawley, “Conflict Within the Union,” 188.

⁵³ Wally MacKinnon, interview by Michael Earle. April 11, 1990.

offered the 40-hour week and a wage increase.⁵⁴ Dosco refused to abide by this pattern; rather, the terms of the 1064 contract provided a smaller wage increase and a scaled transition to the 40-hour week over a period of two years.⁵⁵ Sydney steelworkers were once again unable to achieve parity in 1952, when those in Hamilton had negotiated for a \$1.43 ½ base labour rate per hour and the introduction of the co-operative wage survey (CWS) to help regulate job rates throughout the industry.⁵⁶ 1064 achieved short-lived parity in 1954, when Dosco agreed to the implementation of the CWS system, but broke from the pattern again in 1956 when held to only an 8¢ increase over a two-year period.⁵⁷ Although Local 1064 continued to bargain for higher wages, Sydney steelworkers remained approximately 6¢ behind their colleagues in Ontario for the remainder of the decade.

For historian Ron Crawley, the gains made by Local 1064 during the late 1940s and 1950s pale in comparison to the achievements that may have been possible had the membership decided to take a more radical approach. Noting the declining share of productivity achieved by workers during the decade, he writes, “Overall, the moderate and accommodationist approach by the leadership produced modest results in improving the material benefits to workers when one considers the possibilities that presented themselves to the union.”⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the accommodationist approach *did* provide tangible benefits for employees at the Sydney Works, and the repeated re-election of moderate leaders within the union reflects support among a majority of the rank-and-file.

⁵⁴ Crawley, “Conflict Within the Union,” 218.

⁵⁵ Dosco – Local 1064 contact, 1950-1952, Box 119, A1 viii. b.) File 5, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁵⁶ Stelco – Local 1005 contract, 1952, Box 4, File 1, United Steelworkers of America: Local 1005 (Hamilton, Ontario), Thomas McClure sous-fonds, 1928-1976, RC0300, McMaster University Archives and Research Collections, Hamilton, ON; L.A. Forsyth to C.H. Millard, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, C-13112, United Steelworkers of America Fonds, MG 28 i268, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON.

⁵⁷ “Job classification analysis by occupation” and “Wage Administrative Agreement, 1954,” Box 134, Files 27-8, Dosco Papers, BI; Williams, “Collective Bargaining,” 325.

⁵⁸ Crawley, “Conflict Within the Union,” 262.



Figure 2.1: Local 1064 contract negotiations, 1950

Front: M.E. Corbett, Walter Coadic, Alphonso Murray, Clarence Mac Innis, Charles Millard, E.P. Pledge, James Nicholson. Back: Eamon Park, Martin Merner, Bob McNaughton, Ben O'Neil, Dan Mac Kay, unidentified, Cleve Kidd, Ted Joliffe.

Source: Photographer unknown, Reference 76-78,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

This is highlighted further through oral history testimony of former workers, who recall the 1950s as a “boom” period for the city and its inhabitants.

As with any oral history accounts, workers’ recollections of the 1950s in Sydney must be contextualized within the life histories of each speaker and the circumstances surrounding each story’s transmission. Among the informants interviewed between 2013 and 2015, Bernie Britten, Mickey Campbell, John Campbell, and Fabian Smith each

worked at the plant prior to 1960.⁵⁹ While the specificities of wage gains during the decade are not explicitly discussed, all four men reflect upon the interconnections between work in the steel mill, familial relationships, and the fabric of the community. John, who began on the plant as a summer student in 1950, describes:

I grew up in a steelmaking family with dad and uncles and, you know, steel was a topic of conversation when anybody dropped in [...] The steel plant was a dominant part of the fabric of the community in 1950. A lot of people worked there and a lot of people depended on it.⁶⁰

Bernie started working in the chemical lab at the Dosco mill in 1951 at the age of 18. He says:

That was 1951. The people were coming back from the war were now well-established. And finished university, that kind of thing. So things were booming [...] In the Dosco days, I was quite far removed from the seats of power but Mr. Anson was the general manager at a time. He was a very powerful individual and he didn't take too much baloney from people in Montreal as far as we could tell. And he ran a good ship. Always made money, as far as we know. Which of course changed after Hawker Siddeley took over and that . . . wasn't the best of times, with them.⁶¹

Mickey also speaks of a boom in the post-war years, and recalls - correctly - that it was in 1952 that the mill employed the most workers of any time in its operational history.⁶² All agree that Sydney in the 1950s was a quintessential steel town – a “going concern.”

These memories, relayed more than 60 years after-the-fact, and 13 years after the final closure of the mill, reveal an “in-between moment” that stretches from the end of the Second World War to the uncertainty of the 1960s. Within this period, the achievements of unionism were being felt without the violence of the earlier labour wars, while the worst anxieties of deindustrialization were yet to manifest. In terms of organizational nostalgia, these retirees recognize an epoch when Sydney steelworkers

⁵⁹ No relation between Mickey Campbell and John Campbell.

⁶⁰ John Campbell, interview with author, September 6, 2014.

⁶¹ Bernie Britten, interview with author, September 2, 2014.

⁶² Mickey Campbell, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

fundamentally *belonged* to the time and place.⁶³ Jackie Clarke writes that deindustrialization renders industrial workers *invisible* through “various forms of marginalization, occlusion, and disqualification from the mainstream political and media discourses which play an important role in shaping public understanding of the social world.”⁶⁴ Contrarily, it was in the postwar decade that a working-class structure of feeling – albeit one de-radicalized from its pre-war iterations – was most *visible* and strongly felt.

Cultural representations of working class life in Sydney during the 1950s also reflect these transitions. While Ian McKay argues that bourgeois representations of Cape Breton Island were increasingly informed by anti-modern romanticism, local songs and poems relating to working-class experience in Sydney expressed an optimistic sense of modernity not found within the protest songs of earlier decades.⁶⁵ It should be noted, however, that the community of working-class cultural producers also expanded beyond the factory floor. The early poetry of Dawn Fraser and John “Slim” McInnis was revealed in the pages of local labour newspapers or through word of mouth, while the availability of mass media in later decades provided avenues for other popular representations of life in the steel city.⁶⁶

⁶³ Tim Strangleman, “The Nostalgia of Organizations and the Organization of Nostalgia: Past and Present in the Contemporary Railway Industry,” *Sociology* 33, 4 (November 1999): 727; Steven High, “Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization,” *International Labor and Working Class History Journal* 84 (Fall 2013): 140-53.

⁶⁴ Jackie Clarke, “Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France,” *Modern and Contemporary France* 19, 4 (2011): 443-58.

⁶⁵ Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994); Meaghan Beaton and Del Muise, “The Canso Causeway: Tartan Tourism, Industrial Development and the Promise of Progress for Cape Breton,” *Acadiensis* 37, 2 (Summer 2008): 39-69.

⁶⁶ Wendy Bergfeldt-Munro, “Tuned-In: Radio, Ritual and Resistance: Cape Breton’s traditional music, 1973-1998” (master’s thesis, Athabasca University, 2015), 25-28.

While Nell Campbell's "Plain Ol' Miner Boy" described life in Cape Breton's coal towns, several other entries detail life in and around the Sydney Works. Aileen Stephen penned "Dumping the Slag" for CJCB – a song that has since entered into popular memory in Sydney. The verses detail a newcomer to the city becoming acclimatized to the night-time noises of steel production:

The first night in Sydney heard an awful bang,
The windows rattled and the rafters rang!
Jumped three feet and was half out of bed,
Papa grabbed me by the ankle and calmly said:

They're dumping the slag over at the steel plant,
Dumping the slag in the middle of the night,
They're dumping the slag over at the steel plant,
Come back to bed, Momma, everything's alright!⁶⁷

Industrial sounds, at first alien to the narrator, slowly become symbols of normalcy and comfort. In the final verse, the narrator returns to her "country town" and finds herself unable to sleep without the noise of the plant. The notion that industrial noise was central to the sensory-scape of Sydney is also something that arises in accounts of the post-industrial city. Sydney Slaven, who was raised in the city and also worked at the plant, writes:

When I was a boy I would lay in bed on open window summer nights listening to the symphony of night music that pervaded our community [...] A loud clang signified the dropping of a sling of rails at the rail-finishing mill. On a clear night the softer sound of rails being loaded into a ship's hole could be heard from the distant International Piers. The zing of the hot saw cutting a glowing rail at the rail mill had a unique sound of its own [...] Now, outside of the siren of an emergency response vehicle, the nights of Sydney are, please excuse the metaphor, as silent as a cemetery.⁶⁸

Another unattributed entry describes how fair wages at the Sydney Works impacts the entire city:

⁶⁷ "Dumping the Slag," c. 1950, Lloyd McInnis Fonds, unaccessioned, 2015-010, Box 3, File: CJCB Radio, BI.

⁶⁸ *Sydney Steel Museum website*, "Sounds of Silence – The End of an Era," entry by Syd S. Slaven, http://www.sydneysteelmuseum.com/history/end_era.htm.

What is it keeps the steelman on his mettle night and day,
It's the income . . .
What is it pays his pension when he's getting old and gray,
It's the income . . .
What's it keeps the living standard of Cape Breton up to par
And buys the rum that buys the vote that puts in Gallagher
It's the income.⁶⁹

“Spring in Sydney,” contrasts the natural change of seasons with the ever-present sooty air in the neighbourhoods surrounding the plant:

Went for a walk around the town,
Wore a grey hat and now it's brown
The soot and smoke sure get me down,
It's Spring in Sydney darlin',⁷⁰

These cultural artefacts reflect the culmination of a more mainstream working-class structure of feeling than was visible in earlier radical expressions. The steel plant and its employees, in each of these entries, are central to the sense of place within the city. This structure of feeling is not entirely divorced from the “red-phase” articulated by David Frank, but it is informed by the political circumstances of the postwar compromise and the achievements of Local 1064. These descriptions reflect an entirely different set of meanings than were present in earlier decades; they could not be more distinct from the vision of the city articulated by H.M. Bartholomew in 1923:

Steel is the backbone of Sydney. The long rows of ugly chimneys belching forth torrents of smoke and fire bear witness to the fact (of which the papers are so proud) that Sydney is a town of steel [...] Under this small forest of chimneys toil the slaves of steel – chained, by grim necessity, to the chariot of a brutal, relentless corporation.⁷¹

Williams' metaphor of language is useful for understanding the fuzzy processes by which these structures of feeling are transformed. He writes, “No generation speaks quite the

⁶⁹ “Untitled Entry,” c. 1950, Lloyd McInnis Fonds, 2015-010, Box 3, File: CJCJB Radio, BI.

⁷⁰ “Spring in Sydney,” c. 1950, Lloyd McInnis Fonds, 2015-010, Box 3, File: CJCJB Radio, BI.

⁷¹ *Maritime Labour Herald*, February 3, 1923. Quoted in Frank, *J.B. McLachlan*, 294.

same language as its predecessor [...] It is a general change, rather than a set of deliberate choices, yet choices can be deduced from it, as well as effects.”⁷²

By the time of the A.V. Roe takeover in 1957, the declining power of left-opposition within the USWA had resulted in the entrenchment of moderate and conservative leadership. In Sydney, this transition found purchase among the rank-and-file as a result of both Cold War anti-communism and the material achievements of the postwar period. The leadership of 1064 had become an important part of the community; Ed Corbett, for example, held positions on the Canso causeway committee and the hospital commission – and was even invited to sit on the conservative Board of Trade, although this offer was declined.⁷³ For a brief moment, expressed through the recollections of former employees and contemporary cultural creations, Sydney steelworkers were able to reflect upon their achievements and look forward to a promising future. This sense of *belonging* would be challenged as deindustrialization became more visible in the early 1960s.

A Return to Militancy? Responding to Deindustrialization, 1957-1967

Corporate divestment from the Sydney Works became more noticeable on the shop floor in the years after 1957. The decision to locate new facilities at Contrecoeur, Quebec rather than in Sydney and a desire to depress labour costs by increasing the “efficiency” of a smaller workforce caused some workers to re-evaluate the accommodationist impulse.⁷⁴ This reflects the illusory nature of working-class achievement under industrial capitalism; as O. Nigel Bolland writes, “To obtain unionization within a factory [...] may be a strategic victory for the workers, but in the society as a whole trade unionism remains a tactic of the weak in so far as it continues to acknowledge the subordination of the workers under capitalism.”⁷⁵

⁷² Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 131.

⁷³ Crawley, “Conflict Within the Union,” 170.

⁷⁴ Harry J. Waisglass to G.I. Smith, 25 June 1964, General Correspondence, C-13112, USWA Fonds, LAC.

⁷⁵ O. Nigel Bolland, “Review,” *Labour/Le Travail* 39 (Spring 1997): 345.

While periodic layoffs and the threat of disinvestment challenged the economic foundation of the city's largest employer, shop floor changes began to contest some aspects of work-control. In 1961, Dosco greatly contributed to rank-and-file dissatisfaction by hiring a team of Taylorist "efficiency experts." The Alexander Proudfoot Company, un-affectionately nicknamed "the cutworms" by steelworkers, was contracted to conduct an on-site efficiency review of all operations at the Sydney Works.⁷⁶ Otis Cossit, a linesman at the plant, recalls:

They were just a bunch of hoodlums from up around Chicago, I believe, is where that outfit came from. They all came dressed like Dick Tracy. They all looked alike. They reminded you of some of these religious sects that you see going around like a flock of herring.⁷⁷

Another steelworker, Walter Clarke, describes the activities of the efficiency experts:

Everybody was up in arms about it because . . . you had to write down what you done on this job and how long it took you to do this and how long it took you to do that [...] All the while they were there, they had trouble [...] One less man, that was the name of their game – to cut down on manpower and get more production [...] Sometimes he used to have a stopwatch there – how long did it take you to do this? And you'd have to write it down.⁷⁸

Popular discontent with these measures resulted in increasing support for direct action and militant tactics during the early 1960s. The "cutworms," combined with growing uncertainty surrounding the Hawker Siddeley deal, prompted steelworkers to walk off the job at least 46 times between 1961 and 1964.⁷⁹ The largest of these occurred between the fall and winter of 1961-62, when the efficiency teams arrived on-site.⁸⁰ On October 10,

⁷⁶ Alexander Proudfoot Company, "Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation, Ltd. Operating Procedures," 1962, Box 145, B.1.i.k). File 2, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁷⁷ Otis Cossit, interview by Michael Earle, June 12, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 9, transcript, BI.

⁷⁸ Walter Clarke, interview by Diane Chisholm, July 4, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 7, transcript, BI.

⁷⁹ Memorandum: Work Stoppages, 1961-1964, Box 13 B. i. c.) File 2, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁸⁰ Review of Strikes since 1957, Box 14. B. i. c.) File 75, Dosco Papers, BI.

1961, nearly 500 employees walked out in a protest over proposed scheduling changes; workers interviewed by the *Cape Breton Post* also expressed dissatisfaction over managerial strategy.⁸¹ Larger walkouts occurred in January and March, when wildcat strikes by workers in the rod and bar mills prompted employees in other departments to join in sympathy.⁸² Local union officials and members of the USWA International Executive Board condemned these expressions of class militancy.⁸³

The walkouts at the Sydney Works correspond with a period of growing radicalism within the Canadian labour movement. This culminated in the “wildcat wave” of 1965-1966, when between 359 and 575 wildcat strikes took place across the country.⁸⁴ Bryan Palmer describes an emerging “demography of dissent,” with males under the age of 25 occupying a larger percentage of the labour market and facing more precarious employment than their older colleagues.⁸⁵ Ian Milligan offers further evidence for the importance of youth and masculinity to this emerging radicalism through his analysis of strikes by USWA 6500 (Sudbury) and USWA 1005 (Hamilton) in August 1966. He writes, “At both, young men were the sparks that ignited large conflagrations, confounding union leaders, government agents, and managers alike.”⁸⁶

Youth at the Sydney mill had less of an impact on this renewed labour militancy. During the 1966 Stelco walkout, Palmer relates, an older union member blamed “young

⁸¹ “Walkout staged at steel plant,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 11, 1961.

⁸² “750 involved in plant walkout,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 24, 1962; “Mill employees walk off job,” *Cape Breton Post*, March 13, 1962.

⁸³ Draft report of the Committee on Unauthorized Strike Activity,” First Accrual, Box 134, File 12, United Steelworkers of America District 6 (Toronto, Ont.) Fonds, McMaster University Archives and Research Collections.

⁸⁴ Bryan Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 223.

⁸⁵ Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s*, 217.

⁸⁶ Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014), 46.

men who worked at the plant for only 6 to 9 months” for the strike action.⁸⁷ This was not the same demographic that prompted the 1962 walkout wave at the Sydney Works. Of the approximately 255 workers in the Sydney rod and bar mill in 1962, where the two largest walkouts began, the employees with the least seniority had already been working at the plant for more than a decade.⁸⁸ After an extremely brief work stoppage on 30 August 1963, management identified seven workers as the possible cause. Only one of these men had been hired within the past year, while each of the others had started at the plant between 1940 and 1953.⁸⁹ By 1964, the average worker within the department had 20.8 years of plant experience.⁹⁰

Nor was resistance in Sydney confined to extra-union activity. In 1962, oppositionist leader Jim Ryan was elected as president of Local 1064. Ryan, who defeated the moderate Merner, favoured a more militant style of trade unionism.⁹¹ National leadership was concerned; Ryan was a reputed communist, which was brought to the attention of Canadian Director William Mahoney in 1963. Roy Flood, another member of 1064, wrote to Mahoney to describe the “breakdown of leadership” within the local. He describes a confrontation between himself and Ryan:

[Mr. Ryan] berated what he referred to as my ideology and among other things called me a “wiseacre” and a “smart Alec.” Here I might say that I suspect the outburst was prompted by past experience when on numerous occasions I took issue with Mr. Ryan and some of his cohorts who were noted for their loud-mouthed negativism. You are no doubt aware that Mr. Ryan is suspected of having communist leanings. Certain it is that he fought every effort of the previous President.⁹²

⁸⁷ Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*, 227.

⁸⁸ Rod and Bar Mill Seniority List, 1964, Box 125, File 23, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁸⁹ F.E. Curry, Rod and Bar Mills, 3 September 1963, Box 14. B. i. c.) File 75, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁹⁰ Rod and Bar Mill Seniority List, 1964, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁹¹ Ryan's tenure as president was short-lived. Merner returned to the presidency in 1964 after Ryan failed to achieve majority support for the 1963 contract.

⁹² Roy Flood to William Mahoney, 1963, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, USWA Fonds, LAC.

Mahoney responded to another member of the 1064 executive, Ben O’Neill, noting that “[Flood] sounds like a type who might be quite useful in the local union.”⁹³



Figure 2.2 Local 1064 Steelworkers' Hall, Prince Street, Sydney, 1963
Source: Photograph by the Steel Project, Reference 90-1790-21222b,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

If young workers in Ontario and Quebec rallied against their employers and union executives based upon a forward-looking enthusiasm for ‘new unionism’ and ‘the just

⁹³ William Mahoney to Ben O’Neill, 1963, Sydney Local 1064 Correspondence and Reports, USWA Fonds, LAC; Henry Harm, a the regional director of the CLC, also identified resurging radicalism within 1064 by 1965. Henry Harm to C.A. Scotton, 9 October 1965, Atlantic Region: Sydney and District, 1961-1967, Volume 488, File 27, Canadian Labour Congress Fonds, MG 28 i103, LAC

society,' employees at the Sydney Works responded to a different set of influences.⁹⁴ While the workforce at Stelco expanded by 62 percent between 1960 and 1966, employment at the Sydney plant was reduced by 28 percent during the same years.⁹⁵ This reduction was most palpable during the period in which the majority of walkouts occurred, as 887 workers were laid-off between September 1961 and March 1962.⁹⁶ Unlike Stelco's "rebel youth," who perhaps took the gains of the postwar years for granted, steelworkers in Sydney were confronted with a slow unraveling of their *place* on the shop floor – through the efforts of the Proudfoot efficiency experts – and, ultimately – within the community altogether.

The turn towards "responsible unionism" by Local 1064 coincided with an increasingly dominant industrial structure of feeling that placed the city's steelworkers at the economic and cultural heart of their community. The brief period between 1946 and 1957 is recalled fondly in oral testimony, narratively situated after the strife of the Cape Breton labour wars and prior to the worst impacts of deindustrialization. These experiences fit squarely within "les trente glorieuses" in Canadian history – described by Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford as "an extended moment of unprecedented prosperity, developed welfare states, high modernity, and advanced capitalism."⁹⁷ The unevenness of this process became clear in the experiences of the Sydney steelworkers who, as the pace of disinvestment quickened, attempted to return to the labour radicalism of earlier struggles. It was in this context that steelworkers formed their response to the sudden announcement on October 13, 1967 that the Sydney Works were to be closed.

⁹⁴ Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*, 221.

⁹⁵ Sydney Works Personnel Statistics, Box 7, B. i. a.) File 1, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford, introduction to *Creating Postwar Canada: Community, Diversity, and Dissent, 1945-1975*, eds. Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 2.

Chapter Three

It Brought Us Joy, It Brought Us Tears: Black Friday and the Parade of Concern, 1967

We Stand United, One and All
The Maritimes must never fall
So let's all get behind the wheel
To save our coal and save our steel

- Charlie MacKinnon, 1967

On Thursday afternoon, October 12, 1967, a group of Dosco executives arrived in Ottawa to meet with federal officials. Representing Dosco was T.J. Emmert, the President of Hawker Siddeley Canada Ltd., Sir Arnold Hall, President of the Hawker Siddeley Group of the United Kingdom, and Chipman H. Drury, President of Dosco. These three men met for nearly two hours with Allan MacEachen, the Minister of National Health and Welfare, Jean-Luc Pépin, the Minister of Energy, Mines, and Resources, and Charles M. “Bud” Drury, the Minister of Industry.¹ Charles and Chipman Drury were both sons of Montreal businessman Victor M. Drury, who had gained prominence through his involvement with the Royal Securities Corporation in the early 20th century.² Although each remained tight-lipped after the meeting, this assembly of powerful men prompted rumours on the shop floor at the Sydney Works.

Steelworkers openly wondered whether the company would announce a new product line, or if officials planned to expand or reduce investment in the aging plant. Others considered the possibility of a seasonal layoff or downturn in the international steel market. Such whispers were so frequent that they were often shrugged off; former steelworker Charles MacDonald laughed as he recalled, “Some people always said, you

¹ “Ottawa Meeting Casts Gloom Over Future of Sydney Mill,” *Chronicle Herald*, October 13, 1967.

² Peter C. Newman, *The Canadian Establishment: Volume One: The Old Order* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 447; For further discussion of the Drury family and their involvement with Maritimes industry, see: A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 24-28 and Dimitry Anastakis, “Building a ‘New Nova Scotia’: State Intervention, The Auto Industry, and the Case of Volvo in Halifax, 1963-1998,” *Acadiensis* 34, 1 (Autumn, 2004): 3-30.

know, if you didn't hear a good rumour by ten o'clock it's time to start one."³ In this instance, the findings of the *Sydney Steelmaking Study* – released just a week prior - had described competitive challenges arising from technological advancements in steelmaking. Nonetheless, the report assured that production in Sydney would be maintained.⁴

The next morning, Dosco's Board of Directors gathered at corporate headquarters in the neighbourhood of Ville Sainte Pierre, Montreal. In the spacious offices, Emmert outlined a recommendation that the company "disengage itself from the operations carried out at the Sydney Steel Plant at Sydney, Nova Scotia, effective April 30th 1968." The Board unanimously passed the resolution, although Frank Sobey abstained from the vote.⁵ It was this decision that had been communicated privately to members of the federal government the prior afternoon in Ottawa. Emmert and Hall immediately set out for the Montreal airport, where they boarded a private aircraft for a scheduled 4:30 p.m. meeting in Halifax with Nova Scotia Premier George Isaac Smith.⁶ According to the *Brandon Sun* newspaper, "the two company officials were stern-faced and silent when they entered the meeting [...] They left with similar expressions, still refusing to comment."⁷

³ Charles MacDonald, interview with author, March 3, 2015.

⁴ Voluntary Economic Planning Board, *Sydney Steelmaking Study* (Halifax: Queen's Printers, 1968). Dosco executives and the Atlantic Development Board also played a significant role in researching and publishing this report. "Steel Report is Released: Sydney Plant Will Remain Basic Producer," *Cape Breton Post*, October 3, 1967.

⁵ Dosco Meeting Minutes, 13 October 1967, Premier's Correspondence, Volume 39, File 11, Office of the Premier Fonds, RG 100, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM), Halifax, NS.

⁶ Emmert offers differing accounts of exactly when Premier Smith was informed of the decision to close the plant. In his testimony before the legislature, Emmert mentions that he informed the premier on 12 October. Later in the same session, he clarifies that he had only mentioned that the subject of conversation would be the Sydney steel mill. Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, December 5 1967: 172-78.

⁷ "Closing of Dosco Stuns Cape Breton," *Brandon Sun*, October 14, 1967.

Three hours later, at 7:35 p.m. Emmert's assistant released a press notice that outpaced even the most pessimistic shop floor conjecture. The decision had been made. The Sydney Works was to close, effective by November. Further, the release explained, "If the money was available to completely modernize the mill, its geographical location relative to markets and the resulting freight charges on its products would still prevent Sydney from being truly competitive."⁸ In human costs, 3,225 steelworkers – more than twenty-five percent of the city's workforce - would be unemployed within months. Switchboards at newspaper offices and radio stations throughout the Maritimes lit with activity as the news spread to Sydney and beyond. "The Company has become increasingly aware that its Sydney Works has an abnormally high cost of production due to age and attendant maintenance and manning costs," the release explained. "Consequently, high capacity production and a reasonably stable market price and labour cost are essential conditions to its economic operation. Such conditions have disappeared over a relatively short period."⁹ Martin Merner, who had regained his position as President of Local 1064, heard the news while returning from the USWA national offices in Toronto. Upon arriving in Sydney, Merner found himself before television cameras attempting to calm a city already in the grip of panic.¹⁰

With more than 3,200 employees on Black Friday, the Sydney Works was by far the city's largest employer. In the entirety of the island, only Devco employed more Cape Bretoners. In 1961, a labour force classification study lists the operations of the Sydney

⁸ J.N. Kelley - Hawker Siddeley Canada Press Release, 13 October 1967, Premier's Correspondence, Volume 39, File 11, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM; The stated reason for announcing the decision on Friday evening was to avoid an impact on stock prices. In the words of Arthur Pattillo, senior council to Dosco: "[it was] so that there would be an opportunity for the week end, for people not to become hysterical and perhaps go into the market, and try to make money or upend things." Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, December 5, 1967: 150.

⁹ "Sydney Steel Plant Will Close By April," *Cape Breton Post*, October 14, 1967; "Dosco to Close Sydney Steel by April 30," *Chronicle Herald*, October 14, 1967; Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, December 5, 1967: 135.

¹⁰ Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, December 5, 1967: 4.

Works as comprising 26.01 percent of the total employment in the city. This did not substantially change during the decade; if anything, the decreasing population of Sydney coupled with a small increase in the number of employees at the plant between 1961 and 1966 made the mill's importance even more visible.¹¹ Seventy percent of the city's employment drew from the labour pool within the city. While few residents commuted to the nearby towns for employment, it was not unusual for residents in the nearby coal towns to travel into Sydney for work. This matches the workforce at the steel plant; while comprised largely of workers from within the city, steelworkers from Glace Bay, Sydney Mines, and other rural areas were not uncommon.¹² As a result, the Sydney Works was important not only to Sydney, but to the economy of the entire island.

Men, women, and children who experienced Black Friday recall the announcement as a moment of collective trauma; it was truly a defining point in the history of Sydney. The owners of several local businesses denounced the decision; the shops and stores that had sprouted in the streets surrounding the plant were suddenly facing the complete destruction of their consumer base. The day, locally tarred with the pejorative "Black Friday," is now seared into the memories of those who experienced it.¹³ Psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik first coined the term "flashbulb memories" in 1977 as an explanation for the phenomenon where people who are affected by a public tragedy "can remember, with an almost perceptual clarity, where he was when he heard, what he was doing, who told him, [and other details]."¹⁴ Black Friday is a local example of this phenomenon.

¹¹ E. Roy Harvey, *Sydney, Nova Scotia: An Urban Study* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Company Ltd.: 1971), 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹³ The earliest reference to "Black Friday" that I have identified is in a *Cape Breton Post* article that uses the term as though it is already in common usage. See "Called Black Friday," *Cape Breton Post*, October 17, 1967.

¹⁴ Roger Brown and James Kulick, "Flashbulb Memories," *Cognition* 5, 1 (1977): 73. See also Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 195-205; William Hurst, et. al., "Long-term memory for the terrorist attack of September 11: Flashbulb memories, long term memories, and the

Adrian Murphy was in his early twenties when he had his first shift in the mill's general yard on April 28, 1964. He worked the night of the announcement:

I was down in the docks, down in the rail boat, and it was over a dirty, rotten, cold night. On the 4:00 to 12:00. And it was rainy and miserable, it was. Somebody said, "They're closing the plant." And all, well, like I said what would I have been then – 24 or [2]5, whatever I was, not very old. "Thank Christ, let me out of here," I said. I came up, my father – he had, well, he was on 1940, so he had 27 years on – he had tears coming down his cheeks. And rightly so, he had about 7 or 8 kids going to school. So rightly so. He was in big trouble. And then they had the big Parade of Concern. And then they got together and turned it around.¹⁵

Fabian Smith, who worked in the General Office, was married with three children in October 1967. He clearly remembers the shock, and describes going downtown in the aftermath:

It was a Friday night. And Bill Jessome was on [...] to read the news. And he had a lead in. He said, "We have a very important announcement about the steel plant." And at that time, I think it was Brazil. We were looking for a rail order, anyway. And I said, "Oh jeez, we must have got that rail order. And I had my coat on, I was sitting on the arm of the chair, and we, my wife and I were going to the Vogue for a movie. And she said, "Are you coming," and I said "No, no, let's wait for that announcement. Anyway, he came on. And he read . . . And if you have ever been hit in the stomach – hard - that's what it felt like. And I mean, she was in shock. We had four kids, you know? Well, three kids at the time [...]" She says, "What are we going to do?" I said, "We're going to a movie. And we went . . . Charlotte Street was wall-to-wall people. The whole length of Charlotte Street. [...]" Just people. And it was almost like you were looking at zombies because, you know, everybody's shaking their heads. "How could this possibly be?" You know? [...] And Monday morning at work was total silence.¹⁶

Mickey Campbell remembers seeing the Dosco press release posted inside the Coke Ovens Department:

I seen guys there that didn't believe it. Yeah, there was a notice put up in every office in the plant [...] that they were going to close. So one guy read it, and he was going to tear it off the wall. And I told him if he did that I'd report him [pauses] I said there's other fellas that'll want to see it. Sure enough, they didn't

factors that influence their retention," *Journal of Experimental Psychology General* 138, 2 (May 2009): 161-176.

¹⁵ Adrian Murphy, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

¹⁶ Fabian Smith, interview with author, September 7, 2014.

believe it. Thought it was put there for a joke or something. It was right out of the blue.¹⁷

In these accounts, the perceived finality of the decision and its potential impact on the families of the plant's workers are highlighted. The interpenetration between workplace and industrial community is clearly visible; as Steven High remarks, "oral narratives suggest that [where people work and where they live are] physically and psychologically interconnected."¹⁸ Fabian recalls the impact of the decision in the city's streets, while Adrian immediately compares his youthful obliviousness with his father's sober understanding of the closure from inside the mill's gates. In many accounts, the moment of disaster – while deeply important – is quickly superseded by a lengthier description of the community-based response.

In the hours and days following Black Friday, shock turned to anger. The *Cape Breton Post* featured a "Street Reaction" column; of the ten men interviewed, six immediately called for resistance. Gus MacDonald, the operator of a local service station, was clear: "We can't allow this to happen. The steel industry is the mainstay of our economy. Let's fight to keep it. Unity is necessary."¹⁹ The editorial cartoon summed up the situation with an image of two stereotypical capitalists, replete with top hats and coats marked "Hawker Siddeley," strolling away from Cape Breton Island as it sinks beneath the waves of the Atlantic.

These sentiments are not unique to Sydney. In response to plant closings in Youngstown, Ohio more than a decade after the Sysco announcement, Staughton Lynd questioned:

Why may a corporation unilaterally decide to destroy the livelihood of an entire community? Why should it be allowed to come into a community, dirty its air,

¹⁷ Mickey Campbell, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

¹⁸ Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt: 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 53.

¹⁹ "Street Reaction," *Cape Breton Post*, October 14, 1967.

foul its water, make use of the energies of its young people for generations, and then throw the place away like an orange peel and walk off?²⁰

Residents responded in ways that mirrored American fightback campaigns in the late 1960s and 1970s. Why did steelmaking continue in Sydney for another 33 years, while in the United States these protest movements were frequently ineffectual? Through November, the public and members of the political class worked in tandem to formulate a suitable response to the threat facing the city.



Figure 3.1: Black Friday, Editorial Cartoon
Source: *Cape Breton Post*, October 16, 1967

²⁰ Staughton Lynd, *The Fight Against Shutdowns: Youngstown's Steel Mill Closings* (San Pedro: Singlejack Books, 1982), 4.

The Parade of Concern, a massive anti-closure protest held in Sydney on November 19, 1967, exists concurrently with Black Friday in the collective memory of those who experienced the events. For residents, this moment of solidarity was the defining moment when the mill was saved. In their protest, residents drew upon a shared identity as Cape Bretoners to defend the economic basis of their city and island. In these accounts, however, the willingness of provincial politicians to intervene is often understated. Immediately upon leaving the meeting with Emmert and Hall, Nova Scotia premier G.I. Smith was visibly angry. He denounced Dosco in the strongest terms as a company “completely lacking in any sense of corporate responsibility to its employees and to the community in which it has operated.”²¹ Unlike in the United States, where state governments failed to respond to plant shutdowns, the administration of G.I. Smith was positively activist in its response to the Sydney Steel Crisis. Barring this unique set of regional circumstances, the Parade of Concern – based, as it was, on a localized sense of community – would perhaps have met the same fate as the failed American fightback campaigns of later decades.²²

The first section examines the actions of G.I. Smith and the provincial government in the month following the Black Friday announcement. The development of a Keynesian framework for regional economic development under the previous Tory administration of Robert Stanfield, Smith’s desire to employ these tactics in Nova Scotia, and the politics of the Steel Crisis are further explored. In the second section, an overview of the community response – focused on the Parade of Concern – reveals the contours of Cape Breton Island identity during the 1960s. Recollections of the fightback campaign frame Sydney as a fundamentally white, masculine, working-class city. Women, citizens opposed to the nationalization of the plant, and Mi’kmaq residents are

²¹ G.I. Smith, statement, 7:40 p.m, 13 October 1967, Premier’s Correspondence, Volume 39, File 11, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM.

²² For further discussion of the tension between ‘community’ and political responses to plant shutdowns, see Steven High, “In Defense of Local Community,” in High, *Industrial Sunset*, 131-66; Dimitry Anastakis, “Industrial Sunrise? The Chrysler Bailout, the State, and the Re-industrialization of the Canadian Automotive Sector, 1975-1986,” *Urban History Review* 35, 2 (Spring 2007): 37-50.

largely absent from these recollections except as illustrations of solidarity. As Talja Blokland argues, “the processes of collective remembering reconstruct places and recreate their identities;” memories of those who lived through the 1967 Steel Crisis reflect an understanding of place and space that expresses the social relationships found within the 1960s steeltown.

Taking Action: Deindustrialization and Regional Economic Development

The man tasked with organizing the provincial response to the Steel Crisis, G.I. Smith, held an extensive pedigree in Nova Scotia politics. Though elected as an MLA for Colchester County in 1949, Smith’s first cabinet experience came under Premier Robert Stanfield when the Progressive Conservative (PC) party was elected in 1956. Stanfield viewed state-driven industrial diversification as a response to regional underdevelopment and disparity. In 1957, this focus resulted in the creation of Industrial Estates Limited (IEL) – a provincial crown corporation headed by Dosco board member and regional businessman Frank Sobey. IEL’s mandate was to attract extra-regional investment to the province.²³ Following the popularity of these efforts, the government rechristened the Department of the Provincial Treasurer as the Department of Finance and Economics in 1962. Stanfield named G.I. Smith as minister of this new department.²⁴

In his role as minister, Peter Clancy writes, Smith was an “enthusiastic advocate of planned regional development [...] [he] described the European planning experiences as a middle way, offering advantages over laissez-faire policies on the one hand and wholesale social ownership on the other.”²⁵ Smith’s positions were also informed by a trip he had taken to Britain and France in 1962, where he witnessed firsthand the successes of the Marshall Plan development strategy.²⁶ Consequently, he supported the

²³ Roy George, *The Life and Times of Industrial Estates Limited* (Halifax: Dalhousie University Institute of Public Affairs, 1974), 7.

²⁴ Peter Clancy, “Concerted Action on the Periphery? Voluntary Economic Planning in ‘The New Nova Scotia,’” *Acadiensis* 26, 2 (Spring 1997): 8.

²⁵ Clancy, “Concerted Action on the Periphery?,” 9.

²⁶ Ed Haliburton, *My Years With Stanfield* (Windsor, NS: Lancelot Press, 1972), 93.

establishment of the provincial Voluntary Economic Planning Board later that year. This board was designed to operate alongside IEL to mobilize business and labour in the service of a workable economic plan for Nova Scotia.²⁷

Between 1962 and 1967 these methods of economic intervention appeared to have found some success. According to Dimitry Anastakis:

[IEL] attracted companies from outside Nova Scotia and Canada and helped a number of Nova Scotia firms through direct lending and providing facilities. By 1968, more than 60 firms had been supported by IEL initiatives, and Sobey boasted that nearly 10,000 jobs had resulted from IEL agreements and projects, adding \$40 million to the province's revenue.²⁸

James Bickerton argues, "the absolute improvement in economic conditions in the Atlantic region during this period did not substantially reduce the relative disparities separating it from the rest of Canada."²⁹ When Smith took the reigns of the province in 1967, he found himself thrust into a heady atmosphere wherein targeted state intervention and economic support for private industry was seen, in some quarters, as a panacea.

On May 30, 1967, Nova Scotia went to the polls. The incumbent PCs routed the opposition Liberals and wiped out the provincial NDP contingent. Stanfield's economic reforms were at the heart of the campaign, and his personal popularity helped to drive the party to victory.³⁰ Meanwhile, the federal Tories were deeply split between duelling political factions. By the summer of 1967, Stanfield was under pressure from party loyalists to submit his candidacy for the September leadership convention. On September

²⁷ Andrew Thiesen, "G.I. Smith and Economic Development in Nova Scotia" (master's thesis, Saint Mary's University, 1995), 100-101.

²⁸ Anastakis, "Building a New Nova Scotia," 8.

²⁹ James P. Bickerton, *Nova Scotia, Ottawa, and the Politics of Regional Development* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 171.

³⁰ When the election was over, the PC party took 40 of the 46 available seats in Nova Scotia. The Liberals sat in the legislature with a mere six seats, while the NDP were unable to hold a single seat. Richard Clippingdale, *Robert Stanfield's Canada: perspectives of the best prime minister we never had* (Kingston, ON: Queen's University School of Policy Studies, 2008); Geoffrey Stevens, *Stanfield* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 138.

9, 1967, he was elected leader of the federal party and after resigning his provincial post on September 11, 1967, G.I. Smith officially became the 18th Premier of Nova Scotia.³¹

Smith was premier for just over a month when the Black Friday crisis erupted. Smith immediately vowed to meet with representatives of the federal government and community members to help and organize a concerted response.³² He contacted Allan MacEachen to schedule a Sunday meeting to explore the options. The two men met late into the night at the Isle Royale Hotel in downtown Sydney, along with several provincial and federal cabinet ministers, to discuss the possibility of some form of nationalization of plant operations. In a handwritten note by Smith, dated October 16, the Premier outlines possible government actions under the “Industry Closing Act.” This includes the option of calling an inquiry and forcing Dosco to open its financial records for inspection by the province.³³ On Monday, MacEachen revealed to reporters that a takeover of the Sydney plant by the recently formed Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco) was another possibility.³⁴

In raising the spectre of federal intervention, MacEachen was referring to the solution recently enacted in the Cape Breton coal industry. By the mid-1960s, the Dosco-controlled Sydney coal field alone employed more than 5,000 miners.³⁵ In 1966, the company announced plans to phase out these operations. The federal government commissioned J.R. Donald to draft a report on the state of the industry, who recommended that the state help to facilitate the transition away from an industrial coal

³¹ P.E. Bryden, *A Justifiable Obsession: Conservative Ontario's Relationship With Ottawa* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 153; See, for a fuller discussion of Stanfield's campaign for national leadership, Stevens, *Stanfield*, 172-80.

³² “Premier Smith Irked: ‘An Incredible Change of Attitude,’” *Cape Breton Post*, October 14, 1967.

³³ G.I. Smith, handwritten note, Premier's Correspondence, Volume 39, File 10, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM.

³⁴ “Plant Nationalization Possibility – MacEachen; Says Cape Breton Development Corporation has wide powers,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 17, 1967.

³⁵ J.R. Donald, *The Cape Breton Coal Problem* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966), 52.

mining economy in Cape Breton.³⁶ Devco, a federal crown corporation with a mandate to “phase out Cape Breton’s collieries, while establishing new industries on the Island to take the place of coal-mining,” was the result of this decision.³⁷ The Cape Breton coal field was nationalized under the control of Devco in 1966.

MacEachen’s colleagues in the leadership of the federal Liberal Party were more hesitant to commit to the nationalization of the Sydney Works. As with Devco, Allan Tupper argues, any consideration of nationalization was concerned with popular welfare – not an economic alternative to private capital.³⁸ It was for this reason that Jean-Luc Pépin – another federal Liberal - condemned the “instant solution” of nationalization in the House of Commons. According to Pépin, if such an operation were undertaken in Sydney, it would be difficult to deny the same consideration for deindustrializing communities in Northern Ontario or North-western Quebec. Prime Minister Lester Pearson later wrote to Smith:

As indicated, [we are] prepared to assist financially in certain immediate steps [...] to meet this situation. The primary responsibility [...] remains with the Provincial Government. The Federal Government will continue to assist the industrial development and economic growth of the region as a whole.³⁹

In a move designed to buy time, Smith announced that the province would underwrite Dosco’s debt – up to \$4 million – if the company would maintain existing production until April 1968 without implementing a mass-layoff.⁴⁰

In the following weeks, Smith attended several meetings with Dosco and Hawker Siddeley officials in Sydney, Halifax, Montreal, and Toronto.⁴¹ The Premier’s intentions

³⁶ Donald, *The Cape Breton Coal Problem*, 34-35.

³⁷ Bickerton, *Nova Scotia, Ottawa, and the Politics of Regional Underdevelopment*, 200.

³⁸ Allan Tupper, “Public Enterprise as Social Welfare: The Case of the Cape Breton Development Corporation,” *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques* 4, 4 (Autumn 1978): 530-546.

³⁹ Lester Pearson to G.I. Smith, 8 November 1967, Premier’s Correspondence, Volume 39, File 3, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM.

⁴⁰ “Provincial Government Acts in the Sydney Steel Crisis; Offers to ‘Buy Time,’” *Cape Breton Post*, October 17, 1967.

are clearly visible in the draft copy of a letter sent to Emmert on October 24. In marginalia, Smith scrawled:

The immediate objective of the Province is to maintain the Sydney Works as a going concern until such time as we have an opportunity to examine every way by which the Sydney Works may be continued as a going concern.

In a redacted paragraph, he continues, “These concepts are advanced in the light of your understanding that our objective is to assure the continued operations at the Sydney works for an indefinite period.” Instead, this phrasing is replaced with:

Our immediate purpose is to assure that nothing would be done in the immediate future to render the continued operation of the Sydney works an impracticability or an impossibility. These means [sic], of course, that operations as a going concern must be continued until such time as we have had an adequate opportunity to consider and make arrangements for possible alternatives.⁴²

By the end of October, Dosco agreed to allow provincial auditors to examine its finances. The province pressed for access to these files in the hopes that a private buyer for the Sydney plant could be found.⁴³ Although there were several meetings with representatives from both Algoma and Stelco, neither company expressed interest.⁴⁴

Despite Smith’s desire to maintain production in Sydney, even if it meant nationalization, the Premier never intended the plant to operate indefinitely under provincial control. This position, also favoured by Allen MacEachen, is visible in governmental approaches to regional economic development. Federal organizations, such

⁴¹ Memorandum, 19 October 1967, Michael V. Knight Correspondence, Volume 7, File 6, Office of Economic Development Fonds, RG 30, NSARM.

⁴² G.I. Smith to T.J. Emmert, draft letter, 24 October 1967, Premier’s Correspondence, Volume 39, File 9, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM.

⁴³ G.I. Smith to Touche, Ross, Bailey and Smart, 31 October 1967, Premier’s Correspondence, Volume 39, File 9, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM.

⁴⁴ “Auditors Work on Dosco Records,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 31, 1967; “Premier Smith in talks with Stelco, Algoma,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 7, 1967.

as Devco, were never intended to operate solely as industrial firms, but to facilitate the orderly transition to an economy based upon other combinations of private capital.⁴⁵

A major break in the Steel Crisis occurred on Wednesday, November 15 - just four days before the planned Parade of Concern. Following an afternoon conference between Emmert and Smith, the premier revealed that an “agreement in principle” had been reached. This would see the ownership of the plant pass into the hands of the provincial government by the end of December 1967; Smith hoped “to call a special session of the Legislature to approve the sale and establish a provincial Crown corporation to operate the plant.”⁴⁶

That weekend, as residents of Sydney crowded the downtown in mass protest, Smith and his cabinet finalized the terms of the agreement. On November 22, the deal was signed. The province would pay approximately \$25 million for all remaining stock and infrastructure and assume full control of the facility.⁴⁷ Although operations would continue under provincial management for more than 30 years, the decision was initially designed to protect against immediate social and economic collapse while an alternative to public control could be found.⁴⁸ On New Year’s Day 1968, the Province of Nova Scotia assumed control of operations through the newly formed Sydney Steel Corporation, and a new era for steelmaking in Sydney began.⁴⁹

The immediate state response to the Black Friday announcement reveals the extent to which governmental action can influence the processes of deindustrialization.

⁴⁵ Allan J. MacEachen, address to Atlantic Ports Day Dinner, 7 December 1967, Allan J. MacEachen papers, MG 9, 1, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS.

⁴⁶ “Provincial Government to Operate Steel Mill,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 16, 1967.

⁴⁷ Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, 1 December 1967: 56-61; “Steel Agreement Will be Signed Today: Government will take over on Jan. 1,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 22, 1967.

⁴⁸ Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, December 1, 1967: 63; See also Joan Bishop, “Sydney Steel: Public Ownership and the Welfare State, 1967-1975,” in *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton history, 1713-1990*, ed. Ken Donovan (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1990), 169.

⁴⁹ “Dosco, Sysco Talks are Scheduled,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 1, 1968.

This notion has been explored elsewhere. In the United States, *laissez faire* notions of free-market stability prompted inaction in the face of crisis by the federal government. As Judith Stein reminds us in her examination of the 20th century American steel industry, “the incentives to which all companies must respond are constructed by states.”⁵⁰ In failing to recognize and act upon this reality, the state ultimately doomed many American steel facilities. Stein explains, “For the industry as a whole, U.S. trade, fiscal, and foreign policies increased the costs of steel modernization at a time when American efficiency was being matched by foreign competitors that were supported by their governments.”⁵¹ Such inaction, Jefferson Cowie writes, prompts a situation wherein “industrial capital [leaves] not just local sites, but the nation itself [...] the community whose needs are in tension with those of capital is not just the place defined by a zip code but the imagined community of the nation.”⁵²

While the circumstances surrounding deindustrialization in the United States have been particularly well examined, the American process should not be assumed to be universal. Deindustrialization is profoundly transnational, and policy responses have varied throughout North America and Western Europe. In the United Kingdom, discussions surrounding deindustrialization have more often focused on the explicit role of the Thatcherite state in prompting industrial decline in favour of finance capital during the 1980s. In *Work Identity at the End of the Line*, Tim Strangleman explores the impact of state-driven privatization in the nationalized British railway industry. While the explicit turn towards fiscal austerity, privatization, and deregulation quickened after 1979, he asserts that a national narrative supporting these types of policies existed as early as the first Beeching Report in 1963.⁵³ Deindustrialization in Britain is frequently referred to

⁵⁰ Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press, 1998), 214.

⁵¹ Stein, *Running Steel*, 214.

⁵² Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy Year Quest for Cheap Labour* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 188.

⁵³ Tim Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line: Privatization and Culture Change in the U.K. Rail Industry* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).

as an explicit consequence of particular forms of direct state action; this differs from the American experience, wherein the unwillingness of state actors to combat damaging market fluctuations is more commonly blamed.

In Canada, Steven High examines several legislative responses to proposed shutdowns in a comparative analysis of the central Canadian “Golden Horseshoe” and the American “Rust Belt.” High argues that workers and their organizations were able to draw upon a nascent “new nationalism” to combat the threat of industrial closure in the 1970s and 1980s. This response is particularly visible in the popular campaigns of Ontario workers to protest the closure announcement of British-owned Dunlop Tire in 1970. The optics of a large multi-national corporation leaving Canadians out of work with only a few weeks notice prompted calls for a legislative response.⁵⁴ This tactic prompted federal and provincial governments to develop policy that would shield workers against the impact of sudden closures. High concludes:

The identification of the inhabitants of industrial Ontario with a national community provided the unity of interest necessary to resist plant closings. [...] Canadian trade unionists literally wrapped themselves in the flag in order to defy foreign owned companies that wished to abandon workers with little or no compensation.⁵⁵

Popular and political responses to the 1967 Sydney Steel Crisis were not as heavily influenced by the sense of new nationalism that would soon enliven the Ontario labour movement. Why such a sentiment did not emerge within the local protest movement is unclear; perhaps Cape Bretoners had grown used to the notion of foreign ownership behaving in a manner fundamentally at odds with “the local.” Dating back to the General Mining Association in the 19th century, or the struggles against Besco in the 1920s, the island’s workers had to forge local solidarities against the machinations of absentee owners. Motivations for political action can be quite different. As Anastakis writes, “The ‘visible hand’ of state intervention provides an essential element in helping

⁵⁴ High, *Industrial Sunset*, 172-176.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

to understand why [Canadian auto manufacturers] largely avoided deindustrialization.”⁵⁶ In circumstances that matched the later political response within the auto sector, Nova Scotia politicians “did not need to be ‘convinced’ to act to protect worker interests [...] It was more than part of a political calculus: it simply made good public-policy sense.”⁵⁷ Steeped, as he was, in the politics of Stanfieldian interventionism, Smith did not hesitate in applying the levers of government to combat structural effects of disparity.

The impact of regionalist modes of thinking on the processes of deindustrialization has also been explored in other contexts. Andrew Perchard and Jim Phillips argue that a regionalist “moral economy” in the Scottish coal field directly informed local resistance to workplace closures. In 1980, when Albert Wheeler became the Director of the Scottish Area of the National Coal Board, Scottish miners operated under the dual presumption of joint industrial regulations, decided upon by both labour and management, and some state responsibility for economic security. A series of draconian cuts, which disrupted worker-management relations, resulted in a transgression of the established moral economy of the coal field. Thus, the authors’ conclude, “the great but doomed strike in 1984-1985 in Scotland was duly much more the product of Wheelerism than Thatcherism [...] [though] it was tailored to suit Thatcherite political economy.”⁵⁸

The concept of moral economy is defined at its basest level as a form of “popular consensus as to what [are] proper or improper [business] practices,” community outrage and direct action are the expected responses to any transgression.⁵⁹ Certainly, economic security was central to an existent moral economy in Sydney. The perception that Dosco

⁵⁶ Dimitry Anastakis, *Autonomous State: The Struggle for a Canadian Car Industry from OPEC to Free Trade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 352.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁵⁸ Andrew Perchard and Jim Phillips, “Transgressing the Moral Economy: Wheelerism and the Management of the Nationalised Coal Industry in Scotland,” *Contemporary British History* 25, 3 (2011): 400.

⁵⁹ E.P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present* 50 (February 1971): 79.

was in violation of these mores is clearly visible.⁶⁰ The immediacy of the planned shutdown, with massive layoffs scheduled for the following month, is considered particularly galling, as is the perception that the company lied about maintaining production just a few weeks prior. The 1967 steel report outlines that “Sydney can be expected to continue to supply ingots and billets to Contrecoeur for many years *provided it is economic to do so* [emphasis added].”⁶¹

Unlike in Scotland during the 1980s, the party committing the transgression against the moral economy in Sydney was not the state, but the private employer. In this context, members of the political class also felt betrayed by the transgression. During a special session of the Nova Scotia Legislature on December 5, 1967, Dosco’s “immorality” is explicitly discussed. The following encounter between MLA G.H. Fitzgerald and Arthur Pattillo, Senior Council to Dosco, refers both to the proposed closure and the company’s plan to raid an employee contribution fund for unemployment or layoff insurance:

Fitzgerald: Now we come to the question of legal and moral obligation. Do you think that there is any moral obligation, on the part of Dosco, to refund to the employees or transfer the account, to whatever succeeds you, for the purposes for which the fund was set up?

Pattillo: And that question I can’t propose to answer – morals are objective things. As I see our society today, they are changing overnight. What my morals may be tomorrow, I wouldn’t like to say. [Laughter].⁶²

Although politicians used the language of moral outrage to castigate the architects of Black Friday and inform the political response, residents of Sydney, the steelworkers’

⁶⁰ Various articles in the local newspaper the day after Black Friday used language indicative of a violation of the moral economy. The company was “farcical,” accused one writer, while others called the decision “the biggest double-cross in Cape Breton history,” a “terrible hoax,” and a “cruel and callous decision.” See *Cape Breton Post*, October 14, 1967.

⁶¹ Nova Scotia Information Service, press release 3 October 1967, Dosco National Committee, n.d., 1957-1969, C-13107, United Steelworkers of America Fonds, MG28 i268, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON.

⁶² Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, December 5, 1967: 153.

union, and the local business class expressed their rage in the streets. This blossomed into a moment of community protest and upheaval that continues to anchor historical memory of the event: the Parade of Concern.

A Community Problem: The Parade of Concern and Cape Breton Identity

The political response is generally downplayed in popular recollections of Black Friday. Rather, a narrative has emerged in which united resistance, grassroots protest, and the Parade of Concern were successful in singlehandedly forcing the state to take action. In contrast to workers' campaigns in central Canada, the "Save Our Steel" protesters in Sydney did not wrap themselves in nationalistic sentiment. Instead, the movement was rooted in the same type of "struggle between capital and community" that Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison describe in *The Deindustrialization of America*.⁶³ Community, in this context, was broadly imagined; within Sydney, Black Friday was perceived as a death blow to the city. Local organizers also stressed the importance of the mill to the entire island – appealing to a shared identity as Cape Bretoners to inform the response. Others appealed to alternative identities; labour leaders, for example, described the event as a bellwether for the Maritimes or Atlantic Canada as a whole, while politicians focused on the place of the Sydney Works in the industrial economy of Nova Scotia.

Two days after Black Friday, with the city still reeling from the news, priests and ministers across Cape Breton took to their pulpits to decry the announcement. Anglican Rev. J.W. Young of Saint Alban's Church in Whitney Pier told his congregation that the plant must remain open at all costs. He went further than the politicians in his call for ownership of the steel plant to exist fully under the control of Cape Breton workers. George Topshee, a Catholic priest and the Director of the St. Francis Xavier University Extension Department urged parishioners to demand some form of nationalization.⁶⁴

⁶³ Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982): 19.

⁶⁴ "By Clergymen, Local Control is Advocated," *Cape Breton Post*, October 16, 1967.

Another Catholic priest, Andrew Hogan, would later publish a Teach-In for those seeking information on the Steel Crisis. He writes:

I am sometimes asked if I was building a new steel plant today and was trying to make the best profit would I put it in Sydney. My answer of course is no. But there is a basic steel plant there already sustaining a large community. It has made profit in the Post War period (not comparable to its competitors but a profit nonetheless [sic]) right up to and including 1966. It can be done again with modernization, good management, and the cooperation of the Union and employees.⁶⁵

That evening, religious leaders met in Whitney Pier with nearly 600 concerned workers and residents to discuss the first steps towards an organized and united response.

The following week was punctuated with similar meetings, youth protests outside the gates of the plant, and a small protest of 300 Xavier College students in the city's downtown.⁶⁶ Children in local elementary schools organized a letter-writing campaign to Prime Minister Lester Pearson; Helena, a grade five student from Constantine School, writes, "I want you to know how many jobs will be lost and how many people will go hungry. So you think about it!"⁶⁷ On Tuesday, District 26 of the UMWA officially declared their support. District president and local labour leader William "Bull" Marsh offered solidarity to the steelworkers' union, "We know the threat of closure and the effect it has on the morale and the outlook of the workers and their families [...] whatever the steel union wants us to do, they need only let us know."⁶⁸ In each of these examples,

⁶⁵ Andrew Hogan, *Teach-In: The Sydney Steel Crisis* (Halifax: King's University, 1967), 2-3.

⁶⁶ "Students Demonstrate," *Cape Breton Post*, October 18, 1967; Andy Parnaby, "Growing Up Even More Uncertain: Children and Youth Confront Industrial Ruin in Sydney, Nova Scotia, 1967," in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places*, eds. Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

⁶⁷ Helena to Lester Pearson, 5 November 1967, PMO Correspondence, 1965-1968, Volume 46, File 217.31, Lester B. Pearson Fonds, MG 26-N4, LAC.

⁶⁸ Support was also offered by the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, the Sydney Garage Workers' Union, the Cape Breton Real Estate Board, and the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers. See "U.M.W. Backs Steelworkers," *Cape Breton Post*, October 18, 1967.

the perceptions and opinions of white working and middle class men are foregrounded. Women's thoughts on the crisis, when they were included in the media, were firmly anchored in the concerns of the home. Helen Muise, a woman interviewed in the *Post* on October 18, 1967, was asked about the closure in the context of the family's future, the household budget, and mortgage payments.⁶⁹

Local 1064 and the national office of the United Steelworkers' of America were involved in the crisis from the beginning. It was union officials who first spoke publicly not only of nationalizing the plant, but also of going further to expropriate Dosco holdings and regulate the national steel market. Merner supported calls for nationalization, but stopped short of supporting expropriation. William Mahoney, the Canadian Director, issued a recommendation that "not only in Sydney, but the outlets for Sydney steel in Nova Scotia and Quebec be placed under immediate public control [...] recompense to Hawker-Siddeley must be tied to acceptance of steel deliveries, not paid over in advance or without strings attached."⁷⁰ This message appealed to residents in Sydney, some of who had called for Hawker Siddeley to be "banned" from Canada as punishment for their actions.

Politically, expropriation was never an option that was seriously considered. In addition to mid-century concerns regarding "socialism," this solution did not fit within the Third Way paradigm of regional development that was promoted by the Smith and Stanfield regimes. Had expropriation occurred, the provincial government would almost certainly have had to commit to a long-term plan of operations. Nonetheless, the option was popular enough in Sydney that Smith felt he had to address it in the legislature. On December 1, the Premier outlined the case against expropriation. The Dosco finishing mills at Contrecoeur, Quebec were the major purchaser of product from the Sydney Works; therefore, Smith concluded, to expropriate the mill would remove its largest

⁶⁹ "Like a nagging pain, wife says," *Cape Breton Post*, October 18, 1967.

⁷⁰ William Mahoney, 25 October 1967, Nova Scotia Correspondence and Reports, C-13112, USWA Fonds, LAC.

source of demand.⁷¹ The more radical calls for action declined as the province moved ahead with a purchase agreement.

The union almost immediately began working alongside a “Citizen’s Steering Committee” to plan the Parade. This included representatives from Sydney’s religious community, union leaders, journalists, lawyers, and private citizens. Fr. William Roach – one of the committee members - later recalled, “The idea, right off the bat, was to take it away from the Steelworkers’ Union [...] because we had them. [...] It wasn’t like trying to put them down. [...] What we needed was broad community support.”⁷² This group soon settled upon November 19 as the date for the Parade, and it was expected that huge numbers of Cape Bretoners would come out to show their support for the steel plant and its employees.

The city bustled with activity on the morning of the Parade. By noon, busses were arriving in the downtown to bring citizens from the nearby coal towns. In New Waterford, transportation was organized for all high school students and residents were encouraged not to go to Sydney without a full carload of protestors.⁷³ The march officially began at 12:30 p.m., starting outside of the plant and heading towards the city’s horse racetrack. Roach later described concerns over the proposed route:

We never had a crowd like that before, so we had no experience [...] We were hoping for no trouble. And people had told us there might be trouble. Because there was anger [...] And we intentionally, and this was no accident, we put that starting point [...] over at the beginning of the steel plant. Rather than Victoria Park [in the city’s north end]. So we wouldn’t have to come through the business district. And we went right down Inglis Street, out [...] And then we got to the Sports Centre [...] There was no parking – it was just the inside of a big field.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Nova Scotia, Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, December 1, 1967.

⁷² “Parade of Concern for Sydney Steel, A Conversation with Fr. William Roach about the 1967 March,” *Cape Breton’s Magazine* 58 (1991): 41.

⁷³ “Parade of Concern Plans: Expect 20,000,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 15, 1967.

⁷⁴ “Parade of Concern for Sydney Steel,” *Cape Breton’s Magazine*, 51.

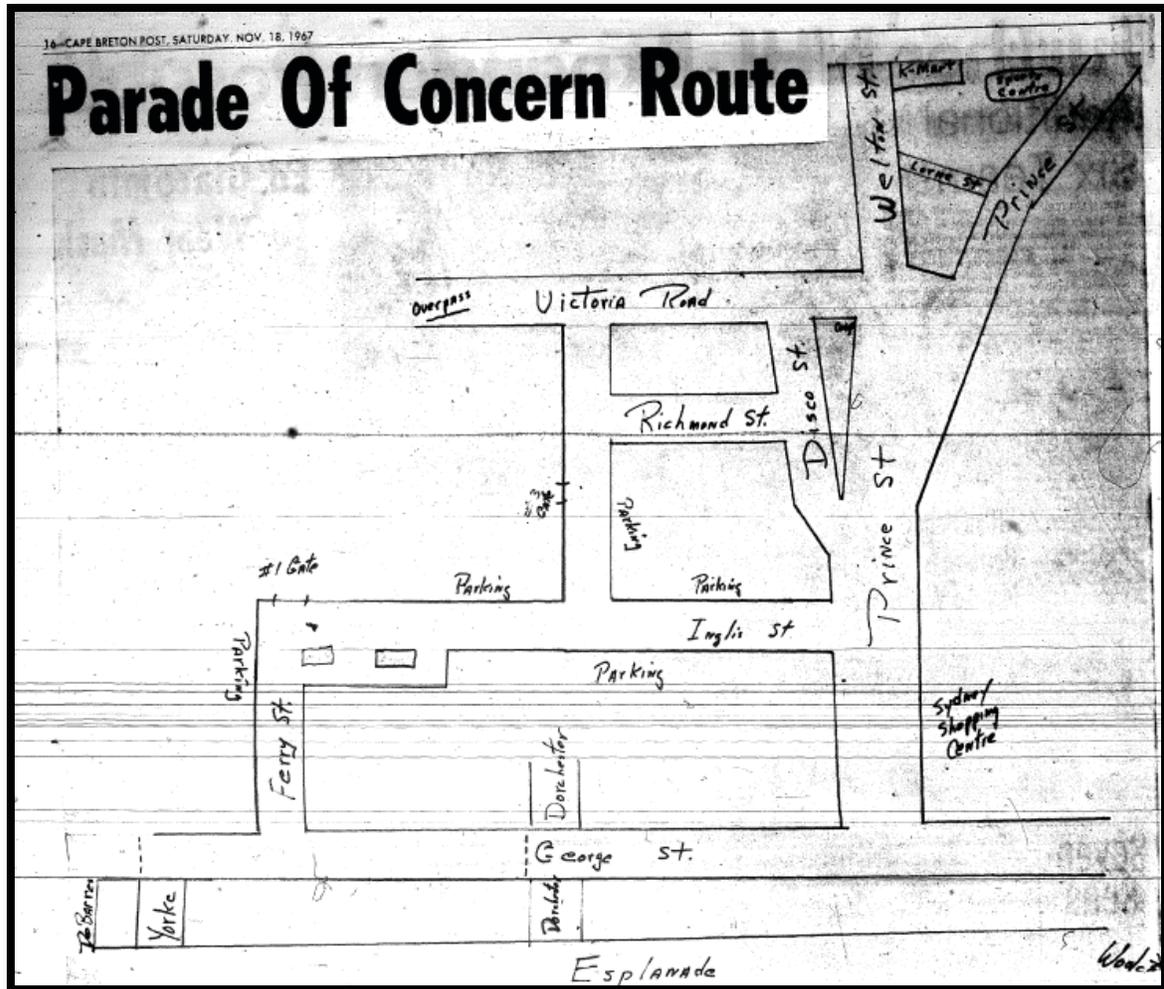


Figure 3.2: Parade of Concern, Route
 Source: *Cape Breton Post*, November 18, 1967

Upon reaching the sports grounds, “The marchers assembled in the infield of the harness racing track as their ranks grew. More than an hour after the first marchers appeared, people still were filing into the huge park.”⁷⁵ After an opening prayer by archbishop W.W. Davis, Roach addressed the crowd. Drawing upon a collective sense of working-class identity in industrial Cape Breton, he called for significant government intervention, declaring:

⁷⁵ “Talks to Resume Today,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 20, 1967.

The Sydney Steel Crisis is not an isolated thing. It is part of a much bigger problem. When we start talking about the future of Cape Breton, we must talk about more things than steel [...] We have to speed up our approach to new secondary industries [...] First of all, we must see to it that the Sydney steel industry continues. We must see to it that Cape Breton gets an industrial development program on a massive scale [...] The machinery for action is already there, the government of Canada and of nova scotia have already enacted legislation creating such bodies as the Atlantic Development Board, the new Cape Breton Development Corporation, the ARDA program, Industrial Estates Limited, and many others. There is nothing new or startling in this approach to regional industrial development [...] There are hundreds of precedents for government encouragement of industrial development ranging all the way from the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the last century, to the financing of Expo '67 this year.⁷⁶

Roach frames the issue as a crisis for the entire island, and outlines how solutions that had been enacted elsewhere in Canada might effectively be utilized. Identifying several examples of state intervention, he positions nationalization as a sensible course of action. It “is not revolutionary,” he says, to ask that government step in to take control of the situation.

The next speaker, Andy Andreas from the Canadian Labour Congress, placed the demands of the Parade within a regional and national context, expressing:

It is not only a question of Sydney, it is not only a matter of Cape Breton Island, what is at stake here is the future of this part of Canada and, by inference, for Canada as a whole. Because we cannot tolerate for a moment a situation where the Maritimes are relegated to a state of economic stagnation and depopulation. If this is to be part of Canada, if Canada is to be a united nation, than we cannot afford the closure of Dosco, we cannot afford the destruction of Sydney.⁷⁷

Andreas was followed by Allen MacEachen, who committed his own efforts and those of the federal government to offer “direction and assistance” to Cape Bretoners in their time of need.

The final speaker of the day was the premier, G.I. Smith, who highlighted the “special resolve” of all Cape Bretoners – singling out the steelworkers and the

⁷⁶ “CBC Radio, “Parade of Concern,” Audio-Visual holdings, T-0069, Side 1, 00:26:50, BI.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 00:33:13.

steelworkers' union for their efforts. He described the Sydney crisis as a matter of provincial and national concern, revealed that he had been in constant communication with members of the federal government since October 13, and re-doubled his promise: "I said that anything within the ability of the province to do would be done. And this I say again."⁷⁸

The speeches during the Parade of Concern reveal the different collectivities invoked by groups within the campaign. Locals drew upon island identity in their calls to action; the exodus of Dosco was perceived as just another step in a history of exploitation by off-island capital. Having long existed at the margins of a Canadian economy that would, as Acheson writes, "devour its children" promoted a more insular response than would later erupt in the nationalist protests in central Canada.⁷⁹ For residents, whether the decision had been made in Montreal or London was immaterial, its impact would be the same in either case. Other speakers considered the issue in different ways. Government officials viewed the Steel Crisis as a provincial and regional issue. Roach obviously recognized these distinctions; in his speech, he cleverly avoids foreign examples of nationalization, such as industrial nationalization within the U.K., focusing instead on actions already taken by provincial and federal governments within Canada.

The next day, the headline of the *Post* declared the Parade "a huge success." Although the day was overcast and cool, the final estimated number of participants were somewhere between 20 and 30 thousand.⁸⁰ One cultural production that emerged from the Parade, Charlie MacKinnon's song "Let's Save Our Industry," retains a great deal of popular cachet in Sydney.⁸¹ The song was initially broadcast live on CJCB radio. It was

⁷⁸ CBC Radio, "Parade of Concern," Audio-Visual holdings, T-0069, Side 2, 00:01: 10, BI.

⁷⁹ T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910," *Acadiensis* 1, 2 (Spring 1972): 28.

⁸⁰ "Parade of Concern is Huge Success," *Cape Breton Post*, November 20, 1967.

⁸¹ No relation to author.

written the night prior, on the urging of Martin Merner.⁸² MacKinnon's daughter later recalled:

He was so wrapped up in the moment [...] that when he tried to stop, his hands and his knuckles and his fingers were almost freezing from the cold. And it was an effort to play that guitar. But the people just wanted more and more, and they were carrying on the song and consequently he had to keep going.⁸³

In oral history interviews, respondents often referred to the song, or even began to hum or sing the chorus to illustrate popular sentiment at the time: "Let's save our industry (x3), The industry we need." The song also refers to other examples of Canadian state intervention to highlight the necessity of such a response in Sydney:

It brought us joy and brought us tears
It's been here more than sixty years
It built our homes and stilled our fears
And made this island what it is.

We need the help of Ottawa
We are also part of Canada
They can subsidize Ontario
Expo and the seaway, too!

Three days after the Parade, the agreement organized by Emmert and Smith on November 15 was officially signed. The province would become owner-operators of the Sydney Works as of New Years Day, 1968. Popular perception of these events, however, is that the Parade had a direct causative relationship with the decision to nationalize the plant. This is also visible in oral accounts. Leon Colford, a welder at the plant in the 1960s, recalled in 1990:

Leon: October of '67: Black Friday [...] We put on quite a demonstration, well organized, and the whole of Cape Breton Island turned out for that. We were successful in maintaining a Steel Plant in Sydney.

Michael: Yes. Do you think it was the pressure the people put on in the political demonstrations and so on like that, that made the provincial government do something about it?

⁸² CJCB – Parade of Concern, 19 November 1967, MP3 audio file, Audio-Visual holdings, T-70, BI.

⁸³ "Parade of Concern for Sydney Steel," *Cape Breton's Magazine*, 50.

Leon: Definitely, definitely.⁸⁴

The two events are interconnected to such an extent in the collective memory of the community that their meanings are sometimes transposed. When asked about “Black Friday,” another former employee responds:

Black Friday. The day of the parade. I was working that day. I think I sneaked home [to attend the parade] because I felt kind of embarrassed.⁸⁵

As storytellers, we each order our accounts of the past to correspond with the conditions of the present. Alistair Thomson calls this process “Composure;” the composition of memory occurs through two processes. The first deals with the mechanisms by which memories are selected, stored, and related. Thomson writes, “Only a selection of an individuals myriad experiences are recorded in memory, and for each of these there are a range of ways in which the experience might be articulated.”⁸⁶ In the second sense, narrative “composure” is used to explain the present in a satisfactory way – to provide a comfortable explanation for our lives and identities. The conflation of Black Friday and the Parade of Concern reveals these aspects of composure; it provides a comfortable and empowering sense of successful, community-based activism. It allows Cape Bretoners to have singlehandedly saved their own steel mill.

Stories lauding the success of community fightback efforts are understandable. As Pamela Sugiman describes in another context, Composition allows for restoration of personal or collective dignity after trauma.⁸⁷ After all, a narrative in which residents’ protests were of secondary concern to political preferences does not restore the perceived

⁸⁴ Leon Colford, interview by Michael Earle, September 18, 1990, Steel Project, MG 14, 206, Box 6, File 12, transcript, BI.

⁸⁵ Russell Cameron, interview by Michael Earle, February 7, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 5, transcript, BI.

⁸⁶ Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (2013 repr.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 11-12.

⁸⁷ Pamela Sugiman, “‘Life is Sweet’: Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, 1 (Winter 2009): 203.

power of the community after it was disrupted on Black Friday. We, as oral historians, must pay close attention to how “community” is considered in these recollections. Elizabeth Faue writes, “Focusing on how labour and working class mobilisations straddled both workplace and community means understanding and critiquing the tendency of many labour and social historians to endow ‘class’ and ‘community’ with the same nostalgic character that Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim did a century ago.”⁸⁸ It is clear that there are also groups whose voices can be excluded from collective Compositions. The positions of women, indigenous peoples, and residents who may have politically opposed the continued operations of the Sydney Works after Black Friday, for instance, are generally ignored.

Despite the popular trope of unity and cross-class solidarity, there were residents in industrial Cape Breton who did not support the continued operation of the Sydney steel plant. A letter, posted from North Sydney on November 1, arrived at the office of G.I. Smith. Without a return address and signed as “a disgruntled Cape Bretoner,” the letter outlines the local case against saving the Sydney mill:

Other than Sydney proper (Pop. 34,000) the steel crisis DOES NOT effect [sic] the surrounding districts [...] There is too much propaganda by a half dozen or more selfish interests. Who do not give a damn about the perpetual TAX PAYER [...] Cape Bretoners have become some sort of professional criers or mourners. ALWAYS making a mountain out of molehills. I was born here and do love the island, but the inhabitants are or have become a lot of PROFESSIONAL BEGGARS.⁸⁹

Opposition to the “Save Our Steel” sentiment – when mentioned – is most often attributed either to undefined residents of “the mainland” or “the government.” As the above letter reveals, there was some minor local opposition to the nationalization of the plant. This opposition was never mentioned in interviews about Black Friday, and I have not identified any locals who had publicly argued against the decision in 1967. The reason for “disgruntled Cape Bretoner’s” anonymity is likely the fear of recriminations. After a closure announcement in Kenosha Wisconsin in 1988, for instance, local

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Faue, “Community, Class, and Comparison in Labour History and Local History,” *Labour History* 78 (May 2000): 156.

⁸⁹ “J.N. A Disgruntled Cape Bretoner,” 1 November 1967, Premier’s Correspondence, Volume 39, File 8, Office of the Premier Fonds, NSARM.

oppositionists had their homes fired upon, death threats were sent to local politicians, and violence nearly erupted at a town meeting.⁹⁰

Accounts of Black Friday and the Parade of Concern also frame women within particular roles in the working-class city. Notably, they are often left out of discussions relating to the immediate political impact of the closure, but are drawn into the narrative to describe the “community” orientation of the Parade. Lucy Taksa writes:

Community can be ‘viewed as a vehicle for the reproduction and perpetuation of ‘traditional’ gendered social roles’ and particularly women’s subsidiary role in male dominated society. This has been particularly the case in working-class communities, which have excluded women ‘from the principal forms of public activity’ that underpinned collective action.⁹¹

Media coverage in the immediate aftermath of Black Friday reflects this truth. The *Post* interviewed several women for their thoughts on the crisis. In contrast to the interviews conducted with men, who were asked about the possibility of nationalization, their thoughts on Smith’s capabilities, and the impact on local businesses, the women were asked to comment on domestic affairs.⁹² In one article featuring women’s responses, children, the household budget, and the possible negative impacts of uprooting large families are main subjects of concern.⁹³ Although the Sydney Works did employ women in the offices, the impact of looming layoffs is explored solely in reference to an assumed male breadwinner ideal.

These gendered accounts reflect a predominantly masculine, working-class “place identity” that was hegemonic in many industrial cities. Geographer Doreen Massey describes place identity as a construction based upon the interaction of existing social

⁹⁰ Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 26.

⁹¹ Lucy Taksa, “Like a Bicycle, Forever Teetering between Individualism and Collectivism: Considering Community in Relation to Labour History,” *Labour History* 78 (May 2000): 10.

⁹² “Street Reaction,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 14, 1967; “Unreasonable and Wrong,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 18, 1967.

⁹³ “Like a nagging pain, wife says,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 18, 1967.

relations. These identities are not frozen or static, but constantly shifting as the result of different imaginings of place that exist within distinct groups.⁹⁴ Despite the gendered presentation of men and women's roles in response to the crisis, historians must – as Joy Parr reminds us – “problematize and unmake the chain of binary oppositions [...] and rethink the categoricism that cantonizes gender, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality, so as to see past the conceptual signage.”⁹⁵ While the process of industrial loss can certainly prompt significant changes in place identity, popular narratives surrounding Black Friday among those who were involved in the event can be uncritical in their reflection of the gender relations endemic within the city in 1967.⁹⁶

There is also a form of racial exclusion present within popular re-imaginings of the community response to Black Friday. While women's voices are sometimes included in narratives of resistance, if only in gendered references to the home, the reactions of Mi'kmaq residents in the nearby community of Membertou are entirely absent from collective memory of the event. This is reflective of what Steven High has termed “mill colonialism;” race and exclusion in the Sydney steel mill conforms with the circumstances in Northern Ontario, aptly described by High, wherein “aboriginal people were employed at the margins of these extractive industries and relatively few found employment in the mines or mills themselves.”⁹⁷

Although First Nations peoples were infrequently employed in the steel mill, Mi'kmaq families were closely interconnected with the development of industry in Cape

⁹⁴ Doreen Massey, “Places and their Pasts,” *History Workshop Journal* 39 (1995): 188.

⁹⁵ Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990), 8.

⁹⁶ For another Canadian discussion of changes in place-identity prompted by deindustrialization, see Steven High, “Placing the Displaced Worker: Narrating Place in Deindustrializing Sturgeon Falls, Ontario,” in *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada*, eds. James Opp and John C. Walsh (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2010): 159-86.

⁹⁷ Steven High, “Deindustrialization on the Industrial Frontier: The Rise and Fall of Mill Colonialism in Northern Ontario,” in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places*, eds. Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

Breton. In 1882, two and a half acres of land was formally reserved as the “King’s Road Reserve” for the Sydney Mi’kmaq population. This reservation grew as the city developed; European and American immigrants seeking work at the plant in the 1910s created demand for Mi’kmaq wares and were sometimes a source of odd jobs for pay. William Wicken writes, “The transient character of the reserves population meant it was a busy place and was sometimes overcrowded [...] it may also have been a noisy place.”⁹⁸ After a series of legal complaints by lawyer and King’s Road landowner J.H. Gillies, the federal government resolved to move the reservation. One proposed location for a new reserve was within walking distance of the Coke Ovens, but the Mi’kmaq rejected this plan. In 1926, the Department of Indian Affairs relocated the King’s Road Reservation to a 65-acre lot away from the harbour.⁹⁹

Despite the proximity of Membertou to the plant and its working-class neighbourhoods, only a single article in the *Post*, dated November 20, 1967, refers to a “Group of Indians” in attendance at the Parade. The article celebrates the diversity found within the march:

Some sights were particularly significant. The number of women there, a nun who carried a sign ‘People Matter;’ a group of Indians in traditional dress; a child being pushed in a baby carriage; a girl in a wheelchair; and above all the spirit of optimism.¹⁰⁰

Groups found on the peripheries of a white, masculine industrial place identities can be enlisted into community resistance when that sense of place is explicitly under attack. The absence of these groups in more recent accounts of Black Friday and the Parade of Concern, however, reflect that the place identity being recalled can sometimes leave gender and racial hierarchies intact and unchallenged.

Conclusion

⁹⁸ William C. Wicken, *The Colonization of Mi’kmaw Memory and History, 1794-1928: The King v. Gabriel Syliboy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 214.

⁹⁹ Wicken, *The Colonization of Mi’kmaw Memory and History*, 226.

¹⁰⁰ “We were there,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 20, 1967.

The 1967 Sydney Steel Crisis is remembered as a community of Cape Bretoners rallying under the united banner of “Save Our Steel” to combat the predatory destruction of international capital. Nationalism, when visible at all, is far less prominent than in other Canadian anti-shutdown campaigns. At first glance, the successful combination of community protest and state efforts to nationalize the mill appears to run counter to what has been termed the “High thesis:” that Canadian workers relied upon strong unionism and a developed nationalist sentiment to combat the destructive aspects of so-called “creative destruction.”¹⁰¹ Without the opportunity to employ such tactics, American fightback campaigns in places like Youngstown, Ohio were met with abject failure. In Sydney, the community response emerged at a time when the provincial government was more amenable to targeted interventionist models of regional economic development. Were this not the case, and barring the appropriation of nationalist rhetoric that would later enliven closure campaigns in Ontario, it is hard to imagine that circumstances in Sydney would have differed substantially from those in deindustrializing Rust Belt cities in the U.S.

While the overwhelming support for nationalization within Cape Breton helped to provide the necessary social capital, the notion that the Save Our Steel campaign represents a singlehanded victory of community over capital is largely a myth. These stories, however, are useful. They reveal a continuing source of working-class pride. So, too, does the repetition of this story serve to underscore a particular place-identity; Sydney, in popular stories of Black Friday and the Parade of Concern, is a ‘working-man’s town.’ Although sometimes visible as symbols of community diversity, women and aboriginal peoples are firmly located on the margins of this fond vision of past social relations.

On New Years’ Day, 1968, plant employees officially began working under their new employer – the Sydney Steel Corporation. Although Dosco would continue managerial operations at the plant until April, new directors sought to disentangle the mill

¹⁰¹ See Ian McKay, review of Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt, 1969-1984*, H-Canada, H-Net Reviews (April 2005): <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10458>.

from the company's influence as quickly as possible.¹⁰² Sysco's new board of directors began exploring options for a private sale, while the Chairman of the Board and President, R.B. Cameron, sought to expand production to prove the facility viable. Operations remained largely unchanged on the first day under new management, but the coming weeks and years witnessed modernization attempts, new production techniques, and countless managerial changes. The departure of private industry from Sydney represented the end of an era, but on January 1 the city awoke with the perception that a major battle had been won – the future, perhaps, could once again be hopeful.

¹⁰² "Dosco, Sysco Talks are Scheduled," *Cape Breton Post*, January 1, 1968.

Chapter Four

Decades in Transition: Modernization and Restructuring on the Shop Floor, 1968-1989

From 1967 to 1989 . . . If you wanted to say that the steel company owed the worker something, indeed they did. That's my own personal opinion. The workers were out of this world when they brought that plant back in 1967 [...] But it's like you say, the cutting still never stopped. It was always, "You must cut, you must cut." That's a nasty word in the union and it's a nasty word with supervisors. As a supervisor I don't like to see cutbacks. You're making it very hard for me to maintain my production when you're continually wanting to cut people.

- Garfield Ross, Finishing Mill Supervisor, 1990¹

An optimistic attitude invigorated many Sydney residents during the early months of 1968. Fresh from the successful effort to keep the plant open, workers turned their attention towards increasing production and ensuring the continued viability of the operation. Sydney Steel now appeared well positioned in the Canadian steel market, which was organized around four dominant firms. In addition to Sysco, there were Dominion Foundries and Steel Limited (Dofasco), Algoma, and the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco).²

Despite the optimism, Sysco faced serious problems in its first months under provincial ownership. Decades of underinvestment by the Dominion Steel and Coal Company meant that equipment and operations would have to be overhauled should the plant remain viable in the longer term. The province, intending to find a buyer for the mill, was not immediately willing to provide such extensive capital investments. A 1968 consultants' report reveals the need for substantial capitalization. The blast furnaces, according to this report, were losing heat as the result of age. The consulting firm

¹ Garfield Ross, interview by Michael Earle, March 19, 1990, Steel Project MG 14, 206, Box 6, File 70, transcript, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS.

² Voluntary Economic Planning Board, *Sydney Steelmaking Study* (Halifax: Queen's Printers, 1968).

concluded that there was “no solution to the problems involved other than by means of sizable capital outlays for modernization.”³

New management tackled these problems head-on. Robert Burns “R.B.” Cameron, a Pictou County businessman and President of Deuterium Canada, was appointed as CEO of the new crown corporation. Just months after Sysco took over, Cameron hired Derek Haysom – a South African engineer – as his right-hand man and Executive Vice President of Sydney Steel.⁴ Haysom became President of Sysco in 1970. These men had a mandate to re-organize the company so that the private sector might be enticed into purchasing the mill. Although changes were not immediately apparent, over the next years the plant would be re-structured from “Fordist” towards “post-Fordist” production. This resulted in significant changes between 1968 and 1989, when the plant transitioned from an integrated steelmaking operation to an electric arc furnace mini-mill. The methods by which these changes occurred, their relation to capitalist re-structuring, and the resulting changes in workers’ daily routines are the focus of this chapter.

Industrial sociologist Bob Russell describes Fordism as “a unique combination of *Taylorism* in the workplace, *Wagnerism* in the sphere of industrial relations, and *Keynesianism* in the labour market.”⁵ The scientific management of work forms the basis for Taylorism, which was popularized in the late 19th century by Frederick Winslow Taylor. Harry Braverman argues that scientific management remained key to managerial control into the mid-20th century. He quotes extensively from Peter Drucker, a management consultant from the 1950s, to describe the contemporary understanding of this process: “Its core is the organized study of work, the analysis of work into its simplest elements and the systematic improvement of the workers’ performance of each

³ Arthur McKee and Company of Canada, “Preliminary Review of Operations, Sydney Steel Corporation, Sydney, Nova Scotia,” 1968, Box 21, B(i) k File 4, Dominion Steel and Coal Company Papers, MG 14, 26, BI.

⁴ Sydney Steel Corporation, “Notice: To All Department Heads,” 19 August 1968, Box 117, File 13, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁵ Bob Russell, *More With Less: Reorganization in the Canadian Mining Industry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 14.

of these elements.”⁶ The 1962 Proudfoot study conducted at the Sydney Works is one clear aspect of Fordist control mechanisms; far from having disappeared after the 1930s, Braverman writes, Fordism was “‘outmoded’ or ‘superseded’ only in the sense that a sect which has become generalized and broadly accepted disappears as a sect.”⁷

The organization of production at the Sydney Steel Corporation is explored in the first section of this chapter. Workers’ accounts reveal the skills developed through work in an integrated plant, how managerial turnover sometimes resulted in occupational knowledge being undervalued, and methods by which steelworkers’ could contest work-control. The second section reveals flawed attempts at modernization and re-structuring during the 1970s. Money and time was wasted as several sections of the mill were closed, an experimental method of steelmaking was implemented and abandoned, and the failure to modernize resulted in deep financial losses. The perceived wastage of taxpayer money during this period contributed to a growing sense, clearly felt by the late 1970s and early 1980s, that the mill had become a “political football” and an economic albatross around the neck of the province. Workers’ responses to these challenges, including a renewed fight to Save Sysco, are examined in the final section, as is the final transition to a “post-Fordist” operation.

Meet the New Boss: Making Steel at Sysco, 1968-1970

The Sysco Coke Ovens Department is where the first stages of the steelmaking process occurred. Two large coke oven batteries were used in pre-production. The first, constructed in 1949, contained 53 ovens; the second, constructed in 1951, held 61 ovens. Raw coal burned too quickly for it to be used in ironmaking. Coke was necessary for the production process to begin. Under Dosco, coal from the Cape Breton mines was transported to the steel plant by rail and held in large stockpiles. The coal was fed through a pulverizing machine until it became small enough so that the majority could be sluiced through a 6” mesh screen. Coal baked in the coke ovens, along with oil and water,

⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York, 1954), cited in Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

⁷ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 87-88.

to form the brittle, porous substance known as “coke.”⁸ While this process continued after the creation of Sysco, the Coke Ovens Department was transferred to the authority of the Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco) – until it returned to the control of Sysco in 1974.⁹



Figure 4.1 – Aerial View, SYSCO, ca. 1970

Source: Photograph by the Nova Scotia Information Service, Reference 90-678-20110, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

⁸ Technical description of Sydney Steel Works, c. 1960, Box 32, File 12, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁹ R.B. Cameron to Gerald Blackmore, 23 February 1968, Box 117, File 13, Dosco Papers, BI.

The first step in the steelmaking process at the mill occurs in the Blast Furnace Department. Iron ore, coke, and limestone are fed into a large cylindrical tower – the blast furnace – through the top of the structure.¹⁰ Clarence Butler, who worked on these furnaces, describes the loading process: “You kept going around, as there was eight buckets to a charge. Three [iron] ore, two limestone, and three coke . . . you went by weight.”¹¹ Once these ingredients are added, hot air is blown through the bottom of the furnace. The burning coke consumes the oxygen from the ore, and the melting limestone forms a by-product known as “slag.” The slag floats to the top of the iron and absorbs some of the impurities from the iron ore.

John Campbell recalled these processes with great clarity in 2014: “The blast furnace was the heart and soul of the steelmaking process . . . The metallic iron drips down . . . and collects in the bottom of the furnace. Slag, which is also molten, is much lower density so it sticks on top of the iron. So periodically, you punch a hole in the bottom of the blast furnace, drain the iron out, and watch until the slag comes and then divert the slag into another area . . . and it becomes the big pile of slag that we see over at the steel plant [site] today.”¹² Not only is slag still visible around the landscape of the former plant, but it has also been used in the construction of dozens of houses throughout Ashby and Whitney Pier. In this sense, these by-products of steelmaking remain a physical presence in the homes of many Sydney residents.¹³

¹⁰ In the 1960s, Sysco acquired iron ore from the Wabana iron field on Bell Island as well as pelletized iron ore from operations at Carol Lake, Labrador. Limestone stocks were drawn from Port au Port, Newfoundland, as well as from a quarry located about 50 km from Sydney in Irish Cove, Nova Scotia. See Sydney Steel Corporation, “Ore and Stone Book,” 1966-1970, Box 63, File 10, Dosco Papers, BI.

¹¹ Clarence Butler, interview by Michael Earle, February 13, 1990, Steel Project, Box 6, File 2, transcript, BI.

¹² John Campbell, interview with author, September 6, 2014.

¹³ Elizabeth Beaton, “Slag Houses in a Steel City,” *Material Culture Review* 44 (Fall 1996): 64-78.

Sysco employees produced hot metal from two blast furnaces and ran on a three-shift system round the clock.¹⁴ The first ran from 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., the second shift was 4:00 p.m. – 12:00 a.m., and last shift was 12:00 a.m. – 8:00 a.m. Life in the city, during the 1960s, revolved around these rhythms. People visiting might comment that “rush hour” began at strange times; it was not unusual for the streets to fill with traffic between 11pm and 1am, as workers changed shift. On each blast furnace, a stove tender, furnace blower, keeper, slagman, first keeper helper, craneman, and second keeper helper worked to maintain production.¹⁵ These men were tasked with producing the supply of metallic iron, which would be transported to the next stage of the steelmaking process at the Open Hearth Department.

Adrian Murphy started working in the general yard as a young man, where labourers were assigned to different sections of the plant on a per-day basis. “You didn’t know where you were going, you didn’t know how to dress, if you went in with an overcoat on they’d send you to the open hearth furnace, if you had a light coat on they’d send you out on the high piers or somewhere like that where you’d freeze to death.”¹⁶ After gaining some experience, Adrian was sent full-time into the Open Hearth Department – where his father also worked.

He arrived to find a 938 ft. long building enclosing a 700-ton hot metal mixer and five large furnaces. Each was approximately 92 ft. long and 25 ft. wide, and there was also an additional 10-tonne electric furnace used for small tonnages of specialty steels.¹⁷ Here, pig iron from the blast furnace was combined with scrap metal, limestone, and alloys before being periodically exposed to superheated air. This air supports the

¹⁴ The No. 1 blast furnace had a hearth diameter of 20’6”, while the No. 3 furnace is listed as 21’6”. See Technical description of Sydney Steel Works, BI.

¹⁵ R.B. Cameron, organizational charts, 1969, Box 114, File 1, Dosco Papers, BI.

¹⁶ Adrian Murphy, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

¹⁷ Introducing Sydney Steel Corporation to the Engineering Student (1968) and Sydney Railroad Rails, (1968), Box 32, Dosco Papers, BI.

combustion of an oil flame, which supplies direct heat to melt the charged material.¹⁸

Labour was divided into five main sections: the furnaces, stock and labour, scrap preparation, mechanical, and carpentry. Adrian recalls his work:

You put in your stone for the bottom, then you put in – depending on what you were making – if it was a rail . . . everything had to be right. You had to have cleans, the fosse had to be good, the iron coming up couldn't be dirty – high in iron and fosse – but the fosse had to be down about 15, and you had to have the sulphur set. So then you put in scrap. Certain percentage of scrap depending on your supply of iron. If the iron was good you'd put in 100,000 of scrap and then the rest was iron and you'd make steel easy that way. If you had a really good supply of iron, and good clean iron, it was great, she was rolling right along.¹⁹

Once molten steel was created, crane operators transferred the hot metal into steel ladles, which poured into six-tonne ingot moulds. Adrian worked as a crane operator in the late 1960s. “We started off on what they called the metal crane . . . and they'd bring up 50 tonnes of molten iron, and all the guys were working on the bottom . . . and you had to stick-handle, you had to be like Bobby Orr . . . You wouldn't dare go over anybody's head or near anybody's head.”²⁰ The temperature of each ingot was standardized in soaking pits before workers would forward the material on to the rolling mills.

The Sysco rolling mills were organized into three sections: the roll shops, the heavy mills, and the light mills. Within these, there were the blooming or “breakdown” mill, the billet mill, the rail mill and the rail-finishing mill. At this time, Sysco also included a rod and bar mill and a nail mill.²¹ Ingots created at the open hearth were subjected to the first stage of rolling, which would transform the ingots into semi-finished steel products such as blooms or billets. Blooms intended for the rail mill typically measured 8.5” cross-sectioned, while those destined for the billet mill were generally

¹⁸ Voluntary Economic Planning Board, *Sydney Steelmaking Study* (Halifax: Queen's Printers, 1968); John Campbell, interview with author, September 6, 2014.

¹⁹ Mickey Campbell and Adrian Murphy, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ R.B. Cameron, organizational charts, 1969; Sydney Steel Corporation, “Steelmaking at Sydney,” 1968, Box 32, File 12, Dosco Papers, BI.

approximately 6” x 5”. Blooms and billets could be sold as semi-finished steel, which comprised a majority of Sysco sales in the late 1960s, or directed into the light mills to continue the process of creating finished steel products.²²

The strict hierarchy of rolling mill jobs mirrored the processes of steelmaking, according to machinist Owen Bonnell. “When you first went in the shop, you worked on the billet rolls for the billet mill.”²³ These included jobs such as billet pusher, catcher, and helper; these men were responsible for overseeing the shaping of the metal.²⁴ Dave Ervin began working at the “mechanical screw” machine in the rolling mills on July 9, 1968. He recalls working on the final roller, which placed grooves in rebar: “as soon as they would get it in the roller, I’d jam down the lever on the mechanical screw and it would run through. And I remember being in the lunch shack and some of the guys were taking off their shirts and showing where the bars had gone through their sides or singed their sides.”²⁵

Other finished steel products, such as nails, wire, or steel rail, required shaped billets. As John Campbell explains, “a rod mill would make a rod that was, well, various sizes, but something that was the diameter of a pencil or a pen. And that, in turn, could be taken to the wire mill and that rod would be drawn down to successive steps to get wire of a certain size . . . and there would be specific composition for that kind of product. That would be taken into a nail machine, to make roofing nails or, ordinary nails, all kinds of specialized nails and so on.”²⁶ At the time of the provincial takeover, Sysco’s production capabilities were divided: 22 percent rails and rail accessories, such as tie plates and reinforcing bars, 70 percent semi-finished steel, such as ingots, billets, or

²² Voluntary Economic Planning Board, *Sydney Steelmaking Study* (Halifax: Queen’s Printers, 1968).

²³ Owen Bonnell, interview by Michael Earle, March 28, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 2, transcript, BI.

²⁴ R.B. Cameron, organizational charts, 1969.

²⁵ David Ervin, interview with author, August 8, 2013.

²⁶ John Campbell, interview with author, September 6, 2014.

blooms, and 8 percent of production was rods, nails, wire, and other finished steel.²⁷ Not only would the plant's production line fail to diversify further after nationalization, within only a few years productive areas of the mill would suffer cuts and downsizing.

Total production numbers were the measure upon which R.B. Cameron staked his success. Speaking to the Empire Club in Toronto on April 30, 1970, he describes, "In 1967, [production had shrunk to less than 618,000 tons. In our first year of operation, we produced 870,000 ingot tons [...] in 1968, Sydney Steel Corporation had an operating profit of nearly three millions dollars [...] and in 1969, we broke the million-ton mark."²⁸ Fabian Smith had a different perspective on the claimed million tonnes:

That phantom million tons of steel . . . we were digging up rails that were so darn rusty you could hardly see the marks on them, you know. But he wanted that as his legacy . . . I mean, we did roll a lot of steel. But it wasn't a million tons. And we all got a billet with our names on them, engraved [...] We were drawing out inventory that never existed!²⁹

Workers, while largely supportive of this goal, were willing to fight to protect their own interests. On March 10, 1969, steelworkers in Sydney showed that they were not cowed by the events of Black Friday. The majority of the 1,200 day-shift employees walked out over the contracting-out of plant work. Martin Merner appealed to the rank and file to return to work, as he had in the wildcat wave of the early 1960s. To a chorus of jeers, he addressed the striking workers, "regardless of the boos, return to your jobs immediately."³⁰ Steelworkers went back to the plant the following day, and one unidentified employee told the *Cape Breton Post*: "Our point was well demonstrated, I think we should go back to work and let our executive work it out with management."³¹

²⁷ Sysco Submission to the Parliamentary Committee on Regional Transportation, 1967: 2, Box 86, File 2, Dosco Papers, BI.

²⁸ R.B. Cameron, "Speech to the Empire Club of Canada," *The Empire Club of Canada Addresses* (Toronto: 1970), 423-432.

²⁹ Fabian Smith, interview with author, September 7, 2014.

³⁰ "Work is Resumed at Steel Plant," *Cape Breton Post*, March 12, 1969.

³¹ *Ibid.*



Figure 4.2: 1,000,000th ton presentation, Open Hearth, SYSCO, 1969

Pictured from the left: SYSCO Chairman R.B. Cameron, Premier G.I. Smith, 1064
President Martin Merner, and company President D.R. Haysom

Source: Photographer unknown, Reference 90-1377-20809,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

In August, the province announced the closure of the wire and nail mill. Implicit within this decision, Joan Bishop writes, was the closure of the rod mill – as rods were the semi-finished steel from which nails were produced.³² Non-competitive production

³² Joan Bishop, “Sydney Steel: Public Ownership and the Welfare State, 1967-1975,” in *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton history 1713-1990*, ed. Kenneth Donovan (Acadiensis Press and UCCB Press: Fredericton and Sydney, 1990), 171.

costs was the reason given, although management assured the *Post* that “the absorption of the mills’ personnel into other functions of the steel plant can be carried out in a manner whereby the abilities of the [more than 100] individuals concerned are taken into consideration.”³³ According to Bishop, this decision was hardly based on sound economic reasoning. “First, the province and management knew from the time [Sysco] was taken over that it suffered a cost disadvantage [...] Second, it was unsound to analyze each part of Sysco’s operations separately [...] Finally, management had argued that modernization of the nail mill was not justified because the Maritime market was too small to absorb the output. Again, the province knew at the time of the takeover that this was true of Sysco’s entire production line.”³⁴ The wire and nail mill closed on October 31 and, although these jobs were re-absorbed, this was the first major reduction of Sysco’s product line following nationalization.³⁵

Another wildcat occurred just two days before the scheduled closure. Nearly 200 maintenance workers left their jobs, when “11 carpenters refused to abide by a management work-schedule change.”³⁶ Employees from the mechanical and blast furnace departments soon joined in, and management feared that these protests would spread to the entire plant.³⁷ Representatives from 1064 met with management the following day and Winston Ruck – the local vice president - asked all striking workers to return for their next scheduled shift. The steelworkers respected Ruck, who would go on to become the first black president of Local 1064. He had the reputation of a more radical unionist, who had supported the rank-and-file in the intra-union conflicts of the 1950s. He was also known to conflict with the South African-born Derek Haysom, whose racism created a frosty atmosphere between the two men. Employees once again returned to the mill, and

³³ “Plant’s Nail Mill to Close Oct. 31,” *Cape Breton Post*, August 12, 1969.

³⁴ Bishop, “Sydney Steel,” 171.

³⁵ “Wire, nail mill will close today,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 31, 1969.

³⁶ “Wildcat Strike Hits Steel Plant,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 30, 1969.

³⁷ “Wildcat Strike: Furnaces To Be Banked?” *Cape Breton Post*, October 31, 1969.

although problems remained – production drew closer to Cameron’s goal – the much-discussed million tonnes of steel.³⁸



Figure 4.3: Winston Ruck, United Steelworkers of America Presentation, 1970
Source: Photograph by Abbass Studios Ltd, Reference C-3310,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

Returning to Russell’s definition of Fordism - Taylorism on the shop floor, Wagnerism in industrial relations, and Keynesianism in the labour market - it is clear that Sysco, in the first years of production, fits within this framework. The Proudfoot study, discussed in Chapter Two, reveals the Taylorist order of production. The second characteristic, Wagnerism, is described by Eric Tucker as “a specific model of collective labour rights” that includes the institutionalization of trade unionism, the establishment of

³⁸ “Between the Lines: Brinkmanship,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 1, 1969.

penalty clauses within contracts, and clear bargaining and organizational guidelines.³⁹ As part of the bureaucratization of labour relations that occurred during the postwar period, the Co-operative Wage Study (CWS) was introduced.⁴⁰ Robert Storey writes:

Under this programme, jobs were graded and ranked according to 12 ‘factor requirements:’ Pre-Employment Training; Employment Training and Experience; Mental Skill; Manual Skill; Responsibility for Materials; Responsibility for Tools; Responsibility for Operations; Responsibility for the Health and Safety of Others; Mental Effort; Physical Effort; Surroundings; and Hazards. In turn, each of these factors was assigned a range of ‘point values’ [...] To determine the level of classification, the point values were simply added together.⁴¹

Thirdly, Sydney Steel existed firmly within the ideational and economic landscape of postwar Keynesianism. The nationalization of the Sydney Works is an entirely Keynesian approach to industry; state actors believed that targeted intervention could promote development and help to stabilize the business cycle.⁴²

Skill and work control are central aspects of the Fordist paradigm. In examining these factors, we must – as Christine Wall and John Kirk caution – pay close attention to the subjective assessments of skill and quality of work that emerge from the people who are most directly implicated – workers on the shop floor.⁴³ The notion of skilled work is complex. Braverman writes:

For the worker, the concept of skill is traditionally bound up with craft mastery – that is to say, the combination of knowledge of materials and processes with the practices manual dexterities required to carry on a specific branch of production.

³⁹ Eric Tucker, “Should Wagnerism have no dominion?” *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society* 21 (Spring 2014): 3-4.

⁴⁰ Co-operative Wage Study Manual for Job Description, Classification and Wage Administration,” 6 May 1957, Box 133, File 15, Dosco Papers, BI.

⁴¹ Robert Storey, “The Struggle for Job Ownership in the Canadian Steel Industry: An Historical Analysis,” *Labour / Le Travail* 33 (Spring 1994): 86.

⁴² See Craig Heron and Robert Storey, “On the Job in Canada,” in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, eds. Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1986), 19.

⁴³ John Kirk and Christine Wall, *Work and Identity: Historical and Cultural Contexts* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), 7.

The breakup of craft skills and the reconstruction of production as a collective or social process have destroyed this traditional concept of skill and opened up only one way for mastery over labor processes to develop: in and through scientific, technical, and engineering knowledge.⁴⁴

This definition of skill has been critiqued; Wall and Kirk, for example, write that it defines work skill specifically through the output of individual workers, which can result in the exclusion of work traditionally associated with femininity.⁴⁵ Craig Heron challenges the notion of uniform deskilling in the Canadian steel industry during the early 20th century; “the assumption that mechanization inevitably means deskilling is too glib,” he writes before exploring the emergence of new skills as the result of mechanization.⁴⁶

There is some common understanding among Sydney steelworkers that the nature of “skilled work” is not defined within job classifications and collective agreements, but in the ways that workers frame their knowledge of the shop floor and their position within production. Heron describes a 1903 newspaper article from Sydney wherein blast furnace workers express frustrations regarding the importation of professionally trained, skilled chemists. They felt that these men lacked the practical experience of the Sydney Works shop floor that defines truly skilled work.⁴⁷ This concept has remained in evidence through oral history accounts of work at Sysco throughout the 20th century. Charles Anderson describes an interaction in the Open Hearth Department:

We had a fellow right out of college . . . he was a chemist, and he went in and told the fellow that the heat was wrong. The old fellow called his friend and he said, “Don’t you tell me how to make steel.” He says, “I’m telling you, that’s not right” [. . .] The fellow says, “Okay, we’ll listen to you.” We’ll make it the way you want it.” So the old gentleman did. He went over to the furnace, and he’s firing this in and firing that in. “Is that what you want? That’s what you got. You come back in

⁴⁴ Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 443.

⁴⁵ Wall and Kirk, *Work and Identity*, 42.

⁴⁶ Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), 54.

⁴⁷ Heron, *Working in Steel*, 56-57.

four hours time and we'll have it poured for you" [...] They poured the heat, and when they went to roll it, it was way off specifications. It wasn't right at all!⁴⁸

Adrian Murphy also refers to this type of specialized skilled knowledge. He says:

The only thing we found after the government took over, there was an awful lot of, I don't know what you'd call it, people were parachuted in here and there and they kind of didn't know. They didn't know how to run the thing. And they didn't have faith in the men . . . even if you had the metallurgical . . . you don't have the moxie of how this is run. And all of the sudden, you come over and there's a guy mounting on the furnace for the last 25 years, and you decide to say 'oh no Joe, we're going to do it this way.' Well it won't work this way on this furnace.⁴⁹

Through the examination of this type of testimony, we might imagine another more inclusive definition of skill. This could include not only technical proficiency, but also the ways that work is characterized within life-story narratives. Such an approach would appeal to groups who have been marginalized by narrower considerations of the term, while also revealing how work-identities shift in correspondence with broader social and economic trends. It might be useful to imagine skill in terms of its psychological value among those who consider themselves capable and skilled workers within an internalized narrative, rather than as an individual attribute of labour power within production.

Alongside Fordist managerialism, workers at Sysco engaged in traditional forms of resistance. But official grievances and walk-outs could only go so far; in the next section, we see how Local 1064 sought assurances from the provincial government that production would be maintained and the workforce stabilized. Here, a tension exists between the desire for continued operations and a growing awareness that some forms of modernization would result in significant downsizing. Meanwhile, early attempts at restructuring represented a threat to employees through the expansion of managerial control and the reduction of product lines. Resistance to some of these actions was less formal. On the job misbehaviour, such as drinking or playing pranks, can be considered both

⁴⁸ Charles Anderson, interview by Michael Earle, May 18, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 1, transcript, BI.

⁴⁹ Adrian Murphy, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

forms of resistance and expressions of work identity.⁵⁰ This is important to keep in mind as we examine the changing work-processes at the plant, the importation of new technological and productive capabilities, and the significant cuts to employment after 1989.

Managerial Missteps: Planning for Modernization in the 1970s

Sydney Steel posted more than \$35 million in profit during its first three years of operations. This was the combined result of the frantic pace of production, local tax breaks, and the subsidized cost of Devco coal. In February 1970, G.I. Smith announced \$84 million in upgrades to the mill. He assured provincial taxpayers that public funds would not be required; rather, between Sysco's profits and predicted growth, Smith believed that the company could fund its own modernization. Facility upgrades included new vacuum degassing facilities and an upgraded rail mill (Phase I) coupled with two basic oxygen furnaces (BOF) to replace the aging open hearth furnaces (Phase II).⁵¹ The BOF process was the heart of this re-development. With these furnaces, the time required for the conversion of iron to steel could be significantly reduced.⁵² Although Smith was voted out of office on October 13, 1970, the incoming Liberal premier - Gerald Regan - re-iterated support for the modernization.⁵³

Cracks were beginning to show in this plan by the fall of 1972, when Regan revealed that \$35 million of Sysco profits had already been allocated to other budget items associated with operating the mill. This meant that between 1971 and 1973 – rather

⁵⁰ Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson, *Organizational Misbehaviour* (London: Sage, 1999), 49.

⁵¹ “Modernization Planned in Two Phases; No Major Government Aid,” *Cape Breton Post*, February 20, 1970.

⁵² D.W.R. Haysom to the General Manager, V.O.E.S.T. Linz Austria, 11 October 1968, Box 114, File 1, Dosco Papers, BI; See also Federal government involvement with Sysco, 1978, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Vol. 5370, File 4052-03-05 pt. 3, Department of Finance Fonds, RG 19, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON.

⁵³ Bishop, “Sydney Steel,” 176.

than posting any further profits – the company had borrowed more than \$11 million.⁵⁴ This ballooned into \$12.7 million in losses by May 1973. Any further modernization would require extensive borrowing – backed by federal and provincial loan guarantees.⁵⁵ Complicating this picture was the depreciation of existing facilities. In 1972, the No. 1 blast furnace suffered a breakdown that required a \$50 million replacement, bringing the full cost of the planned upgrades to approximately \$144 million – to be assumed by Sysco in the form of debt.⁵⁶

In this midst of Phase I of the modernization, management suddenly pivoted to another set of organizational principles. Haysom announced in June 1972 that the BOF upgrades had been scrapped. Instead, bewilderingly, Sysco would adopt a brand new technology to increase productivity in the Open Hearth Department. R.P. Nicholson, the development officer at Sydney Steel, describes this decision:

Original plans had called for a conventional BOF shop [...] Early in 1970 [...] a new steelmaking technique was brought to SYSCO's attention. Called the Oxygen Bottom Metallurgy process (OBM), it differed from the BOF in that the oxygen was delivered through the bottom of the vessel directly into the bath [...] SYSCO was sufficiently impressed with the potential of the new process to initiate research to test the system [...] and subsequently, to change plans, substituting OBM for BOF.

While initial engineering work was being done [...] SYSCO was experimenting further. The German tuyeres were placed in the bottom of the open hearth furnace and the effects were astounding. Production time was drastically reduced, oxygen efficiency was increased, and furnace yields went up [...] Dubbed the 'Submerged Injection Process' (SIP) the technique [...] has recently been acclaimed in steelmaking journals and financial papers as the 'saviour of the open hearth.'

⁵⁴ Bishop, "Sydney Steel," 176-77.

⁵⁵ A federal loan guarantee authority of \$70 million was put into place in 1973 when the Coke Ovens Department was transferred back into the control of Sysco from Devco, who had operated the coke ovens since 1973. See Robillard Report on Sydney Steel, 1977, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Department of Finance Fonds, LAC.

⁵⁶ Sysco adjustment program, 1978, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Department of Finance Fonds, LAC.

When the open hearths are fully modified [...] one furnace will theoretically be able to produce as many as much as the five former ones. SYSCO will effectively triple its production capacity for only a fraction of the capital cost required for an equivalent BOF.⁵⁷

The SIP would provide more than \$12 million in savings over the BOF model – an attractive option for the indebted mill. Nicholson does not mention, however, that Sysco President Haysom and Vice President, William Wells, held the North American patent for this new technology.⁵⁸

This decision, a crossroads in the early history of Sysco, is remarkable for its lack of oversight. Historian Joan Bishop remarks on the strangeness of this decision:

It is striking that a marginal operation like SYSCO felt qualified to break new ground in steel-making technology. The decision to abandon the proven [BOF] technology was based on a short period of experimentation. There is no evidence that the province demanded any independent evaluation of the new technique. The Regan government left management free to spend the modernization funds as they wished.⁵⁹

Harry Collins, a former steelworker, describes the immediate failure of this process:

Everything would burn up, it would drive everyone crazy . . . we were at that a good six or nine months [...] [Haysom] said it worked in other places, in Germany and others, but it certainly didn't work for us. It was the worst damn thing there ever was!⁶⁰

Not only did SIP not work, its adoption meant that other portions of the planned modernization were now untenable and the money that had gone into its implementation had simply been wasted.

⁵⁷ R.P. Nicholson, Sysco Operations, 1973, Box 32, Dosco Papers, MG 14, 26, BI.

⁵⁸ Derek Haysom and William Wells, inventors, "Method of Operating an Open Hearth Furnace," Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, Assignee: Sydney Steel Corporation, Filed: Oct. 30, 1972, App. No.: 301,809, <http://www.google.ca/patents/US3859078>.

⁵⁹ Bishop, "Sydney Steel," 180.

⁶⁰ Harry Collins, interview by Michael Earle, February 5, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 8, transcript, BI.

Drawing further condemnation from steelworkers were attempts to streamline production. The Sysco nail mill had been sold to Sivaco Wire and Nail Company and moved to Dartmouth in 1971, and on July 12, 1972, Haysom announced that the bar mill would also be sold.⁶¹ Nearly 2,700 of the plant's 3,411 employees walked out two days later. Winston Ruck – now 1064 president - demanded that Premier Regan reverse the decision.⁶² The province promised to keep these departments open for at least 90 days while other options were explored.⁶³

The bar mill remained, but the steelworkers' soon found themselves in another conflict. Contract negotiations were going badly. On September 20, 1972, Local 1064 called the first legal plant-wide strike since 1946.⁶⁴ The bungling of the plant's modernization was a major issue. Ruck told the *Post*, "Too much money is wasted on a plant administration, over-loaded with individuals describable as anything but steelmen [...] Ridding the plant of these incompetents is almost as important as the wage questions."⁶⁵ The community soon got involved. On October 13 – five years to the day after Black Friday – citizens marched in another protest, this time calling on the government to fast-track modernization in the best interests of the city.⁶⁶ Although

⁶¹ "Bar Mill to Close This Summer: Low Productivity Chief Reason," *Cape Breton Post*, June 13, 1972.

⁶² "Disappointing Decision," *Cape Breton Post*, July 14, 1972; "Steelworkers' Stage Walkout: Protest Plan to Close Bar Mill," *Cape Breton Post*, July 15, 1972. The number of plant employees does not include those working at the coke ovens, which was still under Devco control at the time of the walkout. Winston Ruck was elected as Union President in the summer of 1970.

⁶³ "Resume Full Production at Steel Plant Today," *Cape Breton Post*, June 19, 1972.

⁶⁴ Ron Crawley, "Conflict Within the Union: Struggles Among Sydney Steel Workers, 1936-1972" (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 1995), 328.

⁶⁵ "Union Blames Government For Three-Week Old Strike," *Cape Breton Post*, October 10, 1972.

⁶⁶ "Sydney Residents to March Today as They Did in 1967," *Cape Breton Post*, October 13, 1972.

steelworkers' voted to approve a new contract on October 23 – after more than a month on strike – issues surrounding the modernization went unresolved.⁶⁷

Robert Storey argues that Canadian steelworkers developed a sense of “job ownership” between 1945 and the 1970s. He writes, “A complete picture of this relationship must encompass the understanding that job ownership originates not only in the defensive desire of workers to end forms of employer discrimination, but is at once an affirmative right that informs and sparks various types of worker resistance – from the formation of unions to their unwillingness to support technological change or larger and different forms of work organization.”⁶⁸ Emboldened by the achievement of public ownership in 1967 and the “Sydney miracle” of profitability in 1968 and 1969, steelworkers sought not only to achieve wage parity, but also to challenge the perceived mishandling of modernization. Walkouts occurred in response to restrictions on the product line, even when this would not come at a cost to employment figures. Workers began to consider workplace rights not only in terms of shop floor production, but also in reference to decision-making within the firm. Such a notion defies the basis of capitalist production, and it – along with job ownership – was soon under attack.

Sysco was in crisis by the mid-1970s. BOF funds had been allocated elsewhere, the product line was quickly diminishing, and the company remained unprofitable. Backed by loan guarantees, Sydney Steel was now more than \$150 million in debt. In 1974, the Canadian government unilaterally embarked upon a study, working closely with Stelco management, to examine the viability of a new finished steel mill in Cape Breton.⁶⁹ The CANSTEL proposal considered the establishment of a mill in Gabarus – just over 40 km from Sydney – through a series of tariff and tax breaks to entice private

⁶⁷ “Steelworkers Approve Contract; Men Ready Plant for Production,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 23, 1972; Crawley, “Conflict Within the Union,” 329.

⁶⁸ Storey, “The Struggle for Job Ownership in the Canadian Steel Industry,” 79.

⁶⁹ Economic Development Division, *CANSTEL*, EDD – Regional Development, Atlantic Canstel Study, Volume 6190, File 1, July 1974, Department of Finance Fonds, LAC.

investment.⁷⁰ The Regan administration, searching for an option to escape responsibility for the ballooning Sysco debt, saw this as an opportunity to provide jobs in Cape Breton without the further investment necessary to complete the modernizations at Sydney Steel. CANSTEEL, a provincial crown corporation, was created in 1975 to further explore this option.⁷¹

Concurrently, the province examined the possibility of closing Sydney Steel should the CANSTEL plan find success. A series of confidential reports reveal the options: the first explores an immediate cessation of all activities at the Sysco plant, the second details a slow shutdown coming to a conclusion by 1984, while the third option would leave the majority of the Sysco mill in operation until 1983, when the CANSTEL proposal called for the beginning of operations.⁷² Any hopes that CANSTEL or CANSTEEL would be implemented were dashed in late 1976, when a significant downturn in world steel markets effectively destroyed any possibility that private firms would be interested in such a scheme. PC and NDP opposition within Nova Scotia, who had called upon Regan to offer a concise timeline for modernization, were proven correct. The CANSTEL interlude had been a waste of time, and Sysco was no closer to modernization – let alone profitability. In February 1977, Regan announced a renewed commitment to the Sysco modernization. Steelworkers again lauded this decision, as they recognized the strain placed on aging equipment by continued operations.⁷³

⁷⁰ Steel Company of Canada, *CANSTEL Preliminary Report*, 1974, Bras d'Or Collection, 1251, Cape Breton University Library, Sydney, NS; Steel Company of Canada, *Canstel Project: Site Selection Report*, April 1974, Bras d'Or Collection, 2805, Cape Breton University Library.

⁷¹ Cansteel Corporation, Annual Report, 31 March 1976, Bras d'Or Collection, 2067, Cape Breton University Library.

⁷² Analysis of closure options 'A,' 'B,' and 'C' 1976, Sydney Steel Corporation Records, Box 1992-229-002, Files 18-20, Office of Economic Development Funds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM), Halifax, NS.

⁷³ Robillard Report on Sydney Steel, 1977, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Department of Finance Fonds, LAC.

Tom Kent, a Liberal party stalwart and former advisor to Lester Pearson, was appointed as President of Sydney Steel in August 1977. It was hoped that Kent's federal connections would prove an asset, and he immediately announced intentions for a wholesale re-organization of operations.⁷⁴ Despite receiving \$20.4 million from the federal government in December for business planning and a capital works program, the turnaround failed to materialize in 1978.⁷⁵ By 1979, with Sysco losses now approaching \$1 million per week, the Nova Scotia Department of Development starkly warned:

“Sysco is, in effect, bankrupt [...] A primary government objective should be to transfer ownership and management of Sysco to non-government hands [and] all thought of building Sysco into a major steel plant [...] should be abandoned.”⁷⁶

Another recommendation, which would have been met with considerable protest had it been made public, was for Sydney Steel to reduce the workforce to approximately 950 personnel by 1982.⁷⁷ These were not simply local hardships; throughout the 1970s, firms throughout Canada, the U.S., and Europe suffered from the impact of low-cost, high-quality steel from Japan, South Korea, and Brazil.⁷⁸

Save Sysco: Lean Production and Labour Flexibility, 1980-1989

The highest levels of management downplayed the full impact of the steel slump, although Kent resigned in August 1979 and R.B. Cameron was re-appointed as interim Chairman of the Board. In December, Cameron announced that production had increased

⁷⁴ “New Life at Sydney Steel,” *Ottawa Journal*, August 23, 1977.

⁷⁵ DREE Briefing File, “Sydney Steel Corporation Post-Private Sector Era,” August 1978, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Department of Finance Fonds, LAC.

⁷⁶ “Kent sees increased sales in coming year,” *Chronicle Herald*, December 30, 1977; Nova Scotia Department of Development, “Problems Related to the Sydney Steel Corporation,” 11 September 1979, Sysco Records, Box 1992-229-003, File 48, Office of Economic Development Fonds, NSARM.

⁷⁷ Department of Development, “Problems Related to Sydney Steel,” 6.

⁷⁸ Storey, “The Struggle for Job Ownership in the Canadian Steel Industry,” 91.

by 15 percent and the monthly operating loss had been halved.⁷⁹ This time, the problems facing Sysco could not be stemmed by increases in production. The mill's debt-load was approaching \$300 million when Cameron announced a program of layoffs in July 1980. In terms of total employment, the workforce at Sysco would have been reduced from just over 3,000 workers to approximately 2,150.⁸⁰

The community responded with anger; letters to the editor of the *Post* called for a renewed Save Sysco campaign in the days following the announcement.⁸¹ One employee placed responsibility with R.B. Cameron:

Let's ask ourselves a few questions. Who closed the rolling mill? Who closed the wire and nail mill? Who tried to close the bar mill? Who has shut down the bar mill? Who put the plant on strike in 1972? Who hired D.W.C. Haysom? Who scrapped plans for a BOF when the money was allowed for it and wasted money instead on the SIP process? [...] Who has decided to lay off over 900 workers? [...] May I suggest that everyone in this area knows who made those decisions.⁸²

Cameron, a blustery man with a penchant for cigars, was an unsympathetic character for many in Sydney. Living in a Spanish-styled villa on Kings Road, just yards from where Arthur Moxham had built his mansion in the early 1900s, he cut the figure of a stereotypical capitalist. Many blamed him for the decision. At a two-hour community rally on August 19, one young woman told the crowd:

I'm not anyone important. Just a steelworkers' wife [...] My man wants to work, not raise a family on \$147 a week unemployment [...] Why [should we leave]? Why should we have to raise our kids somewhere where they'll never know their grandparents or their aunts and uncles?"⁸³

⁷⁹ "Sysco Production Up; Losses Cut," *Cape Breton Post*, December 21, 1979.

⁸⁰ "Buchanan Says Sysco Layoffs Unfortunate, Regrettable; Sydney Mayor Seeks Answers," *Cape Breton Post*, 26 July 1980; "Layoffs Discouraging – Ruck," *Cape Breton Post*, July 26, 1980.

⁸¹ "A Heavy Blow," *Cape Breton Post*, July 28, 1980.

⁸² Charles MacDonald, Letter to the Editor, *Cape Breton Post*, August 5, 1980.

⁸³ "Steelworkers Union Given Support at Emotional Two-Hour Rally," *Cape Breton Post*, August 20, 1980.

Others drew historical comparisons; “I lived through Black Friday and I’ll live through this. They can’t close her, they can’t get rid of us all.”⁸⁴ The provincial government, now under PC Premier John Buchanan, responded by replacing Cameron with two new officials, John McCarthy as President and Michael Cochrane as Chairman. These men doubled down on the layoff, arguing that it was necessary for the firm to become competitive.⁸⁵

A federal and provincial cost-sharing agreement ignited hopes that modernization would finally be achieved in June 1981, when \$96.25 million was announced for the revitalization and stabilization of the Sydney plant. Phase I involved costly repairs to one of the blast furnaces and the aging coke ovens.⁸⁶ This decision conforms largely to the Sysco business plan developed in 1980 between management, the Nova Scotia Department of Development, and the federal Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE). Designed to “secure basic operations, reduce operating costs, and improve productivity,” Phase II outlined the implementation BOF steelmaking and the use of an idle continuous caster that had been added in 1975. This strategy recognized the need for economic diversification. Modernization should be developed towards “forward integration into additional finished products” - but the plan ultimately concluded that, should this occur, it would be too far into the future to make any specific recommendations.⁸⁷

Although these reforms were initially welcomed, they also reflect the movement towards post-Fordism at Sysco. Corresponding with similar transitions throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe, workers were asked to accept the implementation

⁸⁴ “Workers Agree Sysco Has Problems But ‘She Won’t Close,’” *Cape Breton Post*, August 23, 1980.

⁸⁵ “Appointments to Top Sysco Posts Announced by Premier,” *Cape Breton Post*, September 3, 1980.

⁸⁶ “Sysco Chairman Welcomes Signing of Agreement; ‘Now We Can Start With Plant’s Modernization,’” *Cape Breton Post*, June 3, 1981.

⁸⁷ Sysco, DREE, N.S. Department of Development, confidential – proposed Sysco business plan,” 6 October 1980, Sysco Records, Box 1992-229-003, File 49, Office of Economic Development Funds, NSARM.

of lean production, flexibility in job classification, and even job losses in order to remain competitive in the “new” global economy. If Fordism comprises Taylorism, Wagnerism, and Keynesianism, then post-Fordism is the process of challenging and removing these structures. According to David Harvey, this transition is characterized by the emergence of flexible accumulation, which relies on “flexibility with respects to the labour process, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption . . . [and] above all greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological and organizational innovation.”⁸⁸ The language of one 1979 Sysco managerial information systems study reveals the early shape of this transition. The report recommends greater attention to time-study, characteristic of Fordism, but it also highlights the importance of improving performance based on predicted market needs and re-training a team of on-site craftsmen to take on new inter-departmental planning responsibilities.⁸⁹

The renewed federal and provincial commitment to modernization led workers to believe that greater bargaining leverage was also a possibility. This was a miscalculation. Storey writes:

Unlike the case during the 1950s and early 1960s, the new technologies and processes now being put in place [across the Canadian steel industry] were not intended to add to productive capacity. Instead of output, the focus shifted to ‘competitiveness’ – a goal which has as its primary management objective the reshaping and reclaiming of jobs from their workforces.⁹⁰

As a result, with just \$700,000 separating the positions of management and the steelworkers’ union, an agreement over wages could not be reached and the union declared another strike in April 1982. More than 2,000 steelworkers walked off the job, leaving a skeleton crew of a few hundred to bank the blast furnaces and maintain the coke

⁸⁸ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 147.

⁸⁹ Stevenson and Kellogg, “Sysco Management Information Systems Analysis Study,” 27 April 1979, Sysco Records, Box 1992-229-001, File 1, Office of Economic Development Fonds, NSARM.

⁹⁰ Storey, “The Struggle for Job Ownership in the Canadian Steel Industry,” 93.

ovens.⁹¹ “We’re not trying to catch up [to other Canadian firms],” said union president Paul Grezel, “but the men are entitled to a living.”⁹² Just hours after a new contract was signed on May 7, 1982, management notified Local 1064 that the plant would not reopen to capacity and 1,270 union members would be laid-off as of the following Sunday. Management blamed the union, the union believed workers were being punished for the strike, and the provincial government placed the blame on “the sick Canadian economy.”⁹³ In the following days, nearly 1,500 steelworkers, office employees, and tradespeople put in for unemployment.⁹⁴

With the majority of staff laid-off, attention turned to a prospective order from Canada National Railways (CN). The company was expected to announce a major purchase, which would allow the mill to re-open. Throughout the late 1970s, Allen J. MacEachen worked closely with management of CN to ensure orders for Sysco rails.⁹⁵ The 1982 order was no different; in June, Premier Buchanan confirmed that a substantial rail order had been received.⁹⁶ Forty workers were recalled on August 2. The majority of the 1,500 workers were not recalled until September – after nearly four months on EI. Local 1064 also acquiesced to austerity measures; executive pay was cut, and the workload of the union secretary was reduced to only two days per week.⁹⁷

⁹¹ “Strike Starts; Sysco on Shaky Ground,” *Cape Breton Post*, April 28, 1982.

⁹² “Union President Says Steelworkers Can’t Give Anymore In Wage Demands,” *Cape Breton Post*, April 28, 1982.

⁹³ “1,270 Union Layoffs Effective Sunday,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 8, 1982.

⁹⁴ “1,402 Plant Workers Register For UIC Benefits on Tuesday,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 10, 1982.

⁹⁵ Allen J. MacEachen to Otto Lang, 23 November 1977, Department of Transport Minister’s Correspondence, Volume 3907, File 2-11-41, Department of Transport Fonds, RG 12, LAC.

⁹⁶ “CN Rail Order ‘Great News’ Says MacLellan,” *Cape Breton Post*, June 12, 1982.

⁹⁷ “Operations to Resume Over Next Two Weeks,” *Cape Breton Post*, August 3, 1982; “Grezel Returns to Plant Work,” *Cape Breton Post*, August 4, 1982.

Precarity increased between 1982 and 1986 as work was scaled to market demand. In February 1983, another major layoff was narrowly averted when CN renewed their order.⁹⁸ This corresponded with a number of cost-saving actions, described by Cochrane as improved man-hour control, restrictions on purchasing supplies, inventory reductions, and energy conservation.⁹⁹ Sysco was once again phased-down for the summer months and operating at only half-capacity with approximately 700 workers on the job.¹⁰⁰ Even after the plant returned to full capacity, management announced that the coke ovens would be temporarily shut down. Sixty-six employees were laid-off until coking facilities were re-opened in November 1985.¹⁰¹

Facilities had now been through two major attempts at modernization. By 1985, some significant changes had taken place. The No. 3 blast furnace was entirely re-built in 1984, although its heightened capacity could not be put to use until the open hearths were upgraded.¹⁰² BOF steelmaking had still not been put into practice, and the older open hearth furnaces remained in operation. The product line now consisted of ingots, rolled blooms, cast blooms, slabs, rails, and tie-plate – although rails were the firm’s primary product.¹⁰³

Just three days after Christmas in 1985, Buchanan and federal minister of industrial expansion, Sinclair Stevens, called a press conference in Sydney. “Good news for Sydney,” is how they described a new agreement reached between the federal and

⁹⁸ “Plant Close Down Plan Scrapped; Rail Order Obtained by Premier,” *Cape Breton Post*, February 12, 1983.

⁹⁹ “Sysco Shaves Operating Losses despite Depressed Steel Markets,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 21, 1983.

¹⁰⁰ “Phasedown at Sysco Set For Late July,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 21, 1983. Summer phase-downs became a regular occurrence over the next years at Sysco.

¹⁰¹ “Sysco’s Decision to Suspend Coke-Making Under Heavy Fire,” *Cape Breton Post*, August 18, 1983; “Coke Ovens Will Re-Open: Premier,” November 6, 1985.

¹⁰² A gas-cleaning plant was also added to the site in 1984.

¹⁰³ Sydney Steel Corporation, “A Description of the Facilities and Operations of Sydney Steel Corporation,” November 1985, Box 32, File 7, Dosco Papers, BI.

provincial governments. Phase II of modernization negotiations were underway, and it was expected that an agreement would be signed regarding another \$150 million upgrade to Sysco facilities.¹⁰⁴ Although one newspaper editorial remarked that the Premier was curiously “soft on Sysco workforce size,” Local 1064 President John Callaghan “was confident that the widely predicted slashing of the workforce could be avoided with cheaper steel production and the new product lines that will be possible.”¹⁰⁵ The plan again scrapped the notion of BOF production – instead recommending a new electric arc furnace operation.¹⁰⁶

Electric arc furnaces use a mix of iron and scrap to produce hot metal. In a fully electric operation, this replaces the need for blast furnaces. Adrian describes the process:

They had a 100 ton electric arc furnace, they make the steel in that, bring it up, pour it into this casting moulds, and by the time that heat finished they’d have another one going up. They’d keep it continuous. Of course, that was the name of it, continuous, and if they had have got it working properly, it probably was a good thing. But I mean, it eliminated the blast furnace, it eliminated all the blooming mills, you know? So, it eliminated all the open hearth from six furnaces to one. So you could imagine the downsizing that was done there.¹⁰⁷

There were fears that this would eliminate more jobs at the plant, but the province assured the union and the community that the plan was to use both electric arc and blast furnaces to produce hot metal – even though this was not the recommendation that had been offered by the province’s steel consultants.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ “Sysco, tar pond projects announced,” *Cape Breton Post*, December 28, 1985.

¹⁰⁵ “Sysco president optimistic, union boss relieved with plant modernization plan,” *Cape Breton Post*, December 28, 1985.

¹⁰⁶ “MacLean has mixed feelings over SYSCO modernization plan,” *Cape Breton Post*, December 31, 1985; Hatch Associates, “Sysco Phase II Study,” 1983, Sysco Records, Box 1992-244-002, File 106, Office of Economic Development Fonds, NSARM; Philip Peapell to James D. McNiven, 20 October 1983, Sysco Records, Box 1991-244-002, File 107, NSARM.

¹⁰⁷ Adrian Murphy, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

¹⁰⁸ “Electric Arc Furnace,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 6, 1986.

In 1986 and 1987, some provincial politicians began calling for a re-assessment of the commitment to Sysco. Although the modernization agreement had been signed, Nova Scotia finance minister Greg Kerr spoke to newspapers in October of 1986 and called into question the efficacy of the Sysco deal.¹⁰⁹ The plant's debt was of major concern, and he feared that modernization would not render the mill profitable. In the following months, a public relations battle began to take shape. Members of the provincial business class spoke out against the nationalized mill. Sydney mayor, Manning MacDonald, was vocal in his support of Sysco and the steelworkers; in 2015, MacDonald recalled that his opposition to planned shutdowns was based upon economic value. If Sysco were to disappear, he believed, Cape Bretoners would be left worse off.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, Tippins Incorporated, an American company based in Pittsburgh, was awarded the contract for Phase II. The company would supply expertise in the installation of an electric arc furnace, bloom-casting facility, ladle-refining station, upgraded rolling mill facilities, and a universal mill. The universal mill would broaden the product line of Sysco to include "mine arch bars."¹¹¹ According to steel engineers Fumio Tomizawa and Edward C. Howard, electric arc furnace production – the keystone piece of this portion of the Sysco modernization – allows for significant improvements in productivity while "reducing labor cost by use of labor saving equipment."¹¹² Dravo Automation Services of Pittsburgh were subcontracted by Tippins to explore the automation of production at Sysco through the introduction of specialty computer software, which would allow for greater "flexibility" among both steelworkers and salaried employees.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ "Greg Kerr slammed over Sysco comment," *Cape Breton Post*, October 4, 1986.

¹¹⁰ Manning MacDonald, interview with author, July 27, 2015; "Sysco's survival 'essential' says mayor," *Cape Breton Post*, November 19, 1986.

¹¹¹ Tippins Inc., Sysco modernization plans, 15 September 1987, Box 159, File (i) v 1, Dosco Papers, BI.

¹¹² Fumio Tomizawa and Edward C. Howard, "Arc Furnace productivity in the 1980's," *Iron and Steel Engineer* 62, 5 (May 1985): 34-37.

¹¹³ Dravo Automation Sciences Inc., "Tippins Incorporated – Automation System for Sydney Steel," February 1988, Box 159, E1.iv.b.) File 1, Dosco Papers, BI.

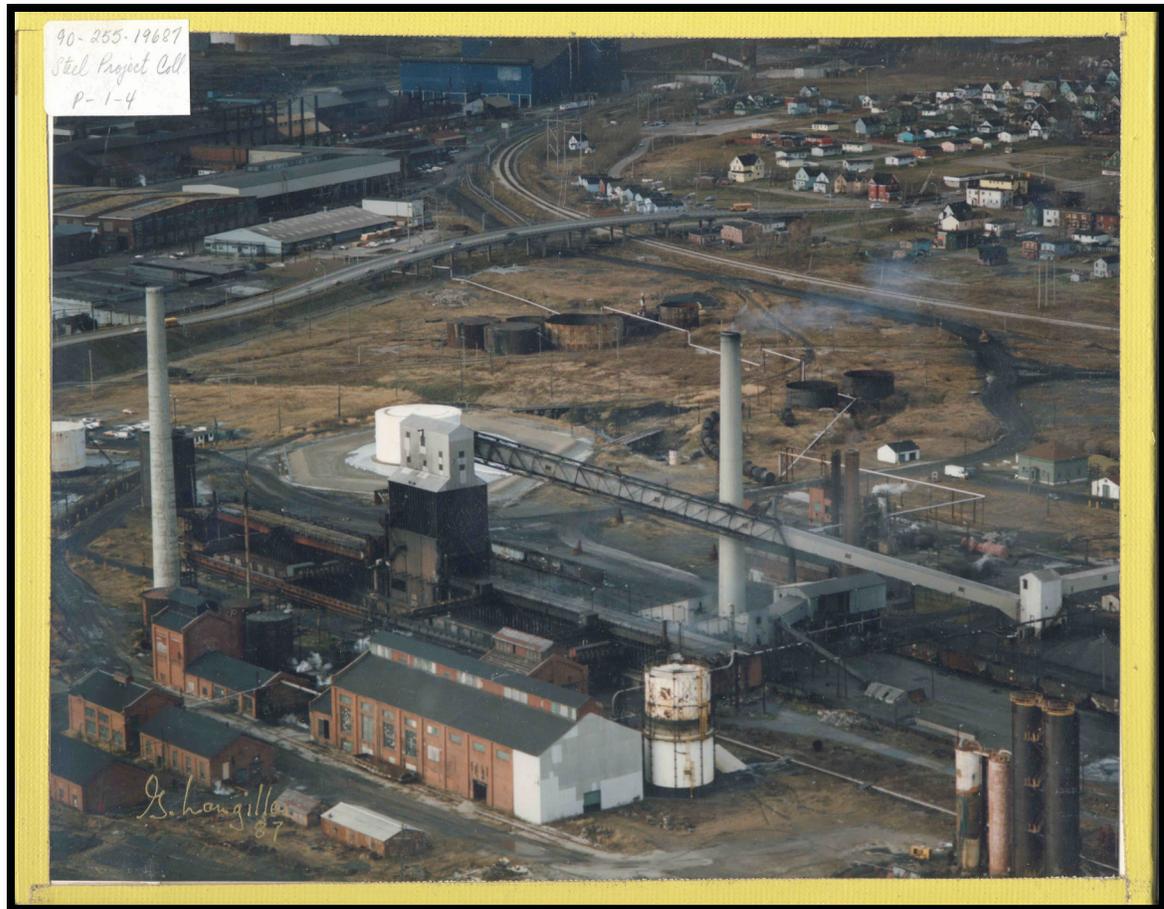


Figure 4.4: Coke Ovens, SYSCO, 1987
Source: Photograph by Gerry Langille, Reference 90-255-19687,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

In the midst of contract negotiations in February 1988, Sydney steelworkers again announced a plant-wide strike. At issue were wages, compensation for coke ovens employees, and improved retirement plans for any workers laid-off as the result of the modernization process. Callaghan remarked that the steelworkers were not seeking wage parity with other Canadian steel concerns, but that a wage increase of 65¢ per year would prevent Sysco workers from falling even further behind.¹¹⁴ Conflict over wage-rates is revealed in the collective agreements; between 1976 and 1984, each contract included: “The Company recognizes the principle of the parity of wages within the Steel Industry

¹¹⁴ “Steelworkers Strike,” *Cape Breton Post*, February 1, 1988.

and will attempt to achieve this [...] The Company intends to embark upon a complete modernization of the whole plant which it is expected will achieve an economic base comparable to competitive companies. When such productivity is achieved, such wage increases can be contemplated.”¹¹⁵ After 1984, Sysco contracts no longer included this language.

Breaking from common practice during other strikes, coke ovens workers walked off the job in 1988 and refused to provide a skeleton crew. Callaghan told the press, “The coke ovens workers feel that they’ve been led down the garden path. They’ve told the executive, don’t ask us to go in because we’re not going.”¹¹⁶ These employees did not only feel alienated from management, but also from Local 1064 - as is further examined in Chapter Five. On February 5, Sysco management announced that the coke ovens would not re-open. More than 120 workers were left unemployed, and although a contract agreement was soon reached, demolition of the coke ovens was scheduled to begin immediately.¹¹⁷

Closing the coke ovens was a major indicator that the new mill would not be an integrated plant in any respect. Promises of a dual electric-arc/blast furnace operation would require coking facilities, and many viewed this closure as an early indication of a major layoff.¹¹⁸ It was only one year later that PC cabinet minister Donald Cameron announced a 100 percent electric arc operation at Sydney Steel.¹¹⁹ The blast furnaces and open hearth were scheduled for closure and more than 800 employees received layoff

¹¹⁵ Collective agreements between Sysco and USWA Local 1064: 1974-76, 1976-78, 1979-81, 1981-83, Box 120, Files 14-18, Dosco Papers, BI.

¹¹⁶ “Management needs union help in maintaining coke battery,” *Cape Breton Post*, February 3, 1988.

¹¹⁷ “Heavy voter turnout wants back to work,” *Cape Breton Post*, March 17, 1988.

¹¹⁸ Don Macpherson, interview by Michael Earle, June 20, 1990.

¹¹⁹ Cameron took over from interim premier Roger Bacon in February 1991, after Buchanan left for a position in the Canadian senate.

notices.¹²⁰ This “upgrade” was completed in 1989, and by 1991 there were only approximately 700 employees remaining at Sysco.



Figure 4.5 Steelworkers, 1989
Source: Photograph by Owen Fitzgerald, Reference 5-26.36,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University.

Consecutive PC and Liberal governments oversaw an uneven modernization campaign that placed Sysco hundreds of millions of dollars in debt with little to show for it until 1989. With compound interest, the debt figure was approximately \$785 million by 1991, and decades of unprofitability had firmly positioned the mill as an “industrial dinosaur” in the minds of many provincial voters. In 1991, ostensibly offering Sysco an opportunity to bounce back after the extensive modernization, Premier Donald Cameron announced that the province would forgive the entire Sysco debt. Steelworkers celebrated, as many believed it signalled a fresh start.¹²¹ But the announcement did not symbolize a

¹²⁰ “Black Friday again at Sysco,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 1, 1989.

¹²¹ George Hess, “Getting Sydney Steel Back on Track,” *Iron Age* (December 1991): 16.

renewed commitment to public ownership – it preceded a plan to privatize the mill, which was revealed by Cameron on January 24, 1992. He described:

Over the last few years, real progress has been made. Today, in Sydney Steel, Nova Scotians have a world-class mill with the potential to produce a range of speciality products at competitive process. But the Government and Board of Directors of SYSCO are convinced that now is the best time to sell Sydney Steel. We believe that the private sector can manage this facility better than the government can.¹²²

When the Liberal Party once again regained control of the Nova Scotia Legislature in June 1993, they retained this policy position. Between 1993 and 1999, several private firms were courted in the attempt to unload the modernized mill. Manning MacDonald, a Liberal MLA during the 1990s, describes these years as a sort of *status quo ante bellum*. The Liberals agreed to support the plant until such time that a private buyer could be found. This state of affairs collapsed in 1999, when the Tories again came into power with a mandate to close the mill if privatization was not an immediate option.

Epilogue: Post-Fordism at the Electric Arc Mill

Operations at Sysco were significantly different during the 1990s. In electric arc production, scrap metal is fed into the furnace and a high-voltage electrical current is applied to melt down the raw material. This creates hot metal that can be re-worked to production requirements. Limestone is used in this process, and serves a similar purpose as in an integrated mill– to absorb some of the impurities of the melted steel and form a thick slag to be sloughed off during transfer. According to a Sysco skills adjustment study, “There are very few men working on the furnace while the heat is being made [...] The operators of the electric arc furnace sit in a cab or pulpit above the furnace and constantly monitor computer displays. Adjustments, if not automatic, are done through inputs to the computerized controls.¹²³ The hot metal is fed through the continuous caster to create blooms, before proceeding to the universal mill.

¹²² Donald Cameron, “The Privatization of Sydney Steel,” 24 January 1992, Progressive Conservative Party Records, John Leefe Papers, MG 2, 1701, NSARM.

¹²³ Final Report: Skills Adjustment Study Sydney Steel, Submitted to Labour Canada Technology Impact Program, 30 September 1991, Box 3, File 1, Steel Project, BI.

At the universal mill, the steel blooms are rolled into rails. They are re-heated using the reheat furnace before being moved through the rolling furnaces. The main process at the universal mill occurs while the rough blooms are transformed into rails; this required two “universal roughing passes,” two “edging passes,” and one “semi-universal finishing pass.” This process shapes the rail to the size and specifications dictated by the production order. Unlike the electric arc furnace employees, workers at the universal mill have jobs that correspond to their former employment in the rolling mills. The skill study notes, “The big transformation of the production work here [...] has been the introduction of computer control [...] if the technology is working according to design, operations are mostly automated.”¹²⁴ The automation of production, with workers employed largely in a maintenance and organizational role, was central to modernized operations at Sydney Steel.

“It’s a new start with a product that will be a lot lower priced. We’ll be leaner,” promised Sysco President John Strasser in a 1989 interview with *Atlantic Business Magazine*.¹²⁵ In the words of one magazine editor, “There’s a new attitude that exists [at Sysco], and the new ‘buzzword’ is *profit!*”¹²⁶ Along with a new process of work based upon automation and computerized production, workers at Sydney Steel had to come to terms with an entirely new organizational structure. Full production was forecast at 219,000 tons of steel, with an operational workforce of 709 employees.¹²⁷ With the transition in the labour process came a firming up of managerial commitment to post-Fordist organizational strategies; Dave Ervin recalls the attempted merger of job classifications after modernization:

Unfortunately, like I say some of the problem’s with the union, but unfortunately some of the jobs on the steel plant . . . they’re so, bound up in history. Like, okay, if I’m an electrician, I need an electrician helper to help me do a job. No matter how simple the job is. The helper goes with me. Same with the millwrights, same

¹²⁴ Final Report: Skills Adjustment Study, Steel Project, BI.

¹²⁵ Michael Redmond, “Casting its Future,” *Atlantic Business* (May/June 1989), 8.

¹²⁶ Barry Sonmor, “Publisher’s Statement: Steel!” *Trade: Cape Breton’s Business Magazine* (December 1989), 2.

¹²⁷ “Sysco gearing up for full production,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 10, 1990.

with the plumbers [...] I took a course on this at Dal (Dalhousie University). CLC, Canadian Labour Congress, put on this course, on basically combining jobs. The modern workforce [...] They were just too – caught up in history. And history changes. And a lot of them couldn't realize that. And that's the main reason the plant closed. That last contract they signed could have solved a lot of those problems . . . going from 22 pay rates down to about, 5 or 6 . . . but a lot of the guys there were against it.

In the new configuration, production could quickly be started or halted to correspond with global steel markets. As with other post-Fordist firms, this would involve employing only a small core of full-time maintenance workers, while a larger number of flexible employees could be hired on or laid off as dictated by demand. While this transition came at a cost of more than 800 jobs, the adjustment study notes: “For those who will be continuing to work at the plant, technological changes have mean [sic] that much of the knowledge and skills accumulated over the years will no longer be of direct practical use, and new skills and expertise have had to be acquired by a group of mostly middle-aged workers.”¹²⁸

These changes required re-training. Employees had the option of signing up for evening courses, while the company sent another small group to Germany to experience production in a modern plant. New automatic systems, computerized controls, and methods of steelmaking created a situation where generations of skill and knowledge were suddenly out-dated.¹²⁹ While Braverman postulates that Fordism strips workers of both craft skills and workplace control, the development of post-Fordism and flexible or lean production has led to a further re-thinking of skill in the modern workplace. Bennett Harrison describes a new economic world, characterized by contingent employment, stagnant wages, and the threat of capital flight.¹³⁰ Yuko Aoyama and Manuel Castells take a different approach, arguing that the “new economy” reflects an up-skilling of the labour market to correspond with the developments of an information

¹²⁸ Final Report: Skills Adjustment Study, Steel Project, BI.

¹²⁹ John Murphy, interview with author, September 2015.

¹³⁰ Bennett Harrison, *Lean and Mean: Why Large Corporations Continue to Dominate the Global Economy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 258-259.

and knowledge-based economy.¹³¹ Oral history testimony allows us to move beyond this debate to reveal workers subjective experiences of shifts in skill and identity that occurred alongside the changing labour process.

Workers' accounts of Sysco between 1967 and 1989 refer extensively to the active characteristics of work. Workers from the blast furnaces, open hearth, and rolling mills explain production in sense-based and active terms. From freezing on the high cranes to sweating in the open hearth or stick-handling a crane overtop of a crowded shop-floor, work was dialectically produced and felt by workers' bodies. On the job practice is viewed as essential for the development of the skills and know-how that were required, and workers' often questioned the applicability of outside training to the specific work process at the mill. Leslie MacCuish, a Sysco employee who was re-trained after the modernization, spoke unfavourably about the transition:

Us fellows should have been taken when the furnace was being built, the furnace guys go with the furnace guys, and the L.R.F. fellows and caster fellows. We should have been taken and put on them jobs where they were building the furnace. Different parts of the furnace. We'd know where to go if there was trouble. We'd know what to do. We got computers there, sure. Stuff like that. Half of us guys don't know anything about computers.¹³²

Others reflected on the new skills required:

John Murphy: This new mill is all computerized and where we used to go up with wrenches and bars and hammers and work our butts off to make these tolerances, they just press a button and the computer does it now.¹³³

Barry Brocklehurst: It's more efficient, I think and it's good quality steel product. That's about it, I guess [...] You have to watch out, watch the water supply, make sure no alarms come off. You have to make sure you can get them back on right quick, before losing your steel or breakouts or something like that [...] It's every

¹³¹ Yuko Aoyama and Manuel Castells, "An empirical assessment of the informational society: Employment and occupational structures of G-7 countries, 1920-2000," *International Labour Review* 141, 1-2 (Spring 2000): 123-59.

¹³² Leslie MacCuish, interview by Michael Earle, April 6, 1990, Steel Project, Box 6, File 38, transcript, BI.

¹³³ John Murphy, interview by Michael Earle, January 10, 1990, Steel Project, Box 7, File 57, transcript, BI.

man for himself, now. There is no carrying on or anything like that. Very little of it. Everybody is scared of everybody else, cutting each other's throat.¹³⁴

Labour Process Theory has traditionally focused on skill and control as reflections of organizational structures; Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars argue that post-Fordism has masked the continuation of deskilling and increased managerial control endemic within the capitalist mode of production, while the liberal position views work in the new economy in terms of flexibility, teamwork, and efficiency. Duncan Gallie charts a middle ground in his study of work in Britain. Drawing upon K.I. Spenner's definition of skill as "the substantive complexity of job tasks in terms of the level, scope and integration of mental, manipulative, and interpersonal tasks," Gallie argues that the British labour market since the 1990s has witnessed a broad trend of upskilling along with a corresponding loss of workers' control over the labour process.¹³⁵ If we accept this definition, the same conclusion broadly holds in the analysis of work processes at Sysco through the late 20th century. Steelworkers were re-trained after 1989 to develop skills associated with a technical modern steel facility. Despite this, the threat of deindustrialization and job losses contributed to a sense of lost control over the process of production.

Oral histories of work at the plant reveal how such a narrow definition of skill and control cannot be fully applied to workers' subjective understandings of changing work process. Workers' accounts reveal a deeply held belief that the new labour process represented a fundamental break from the skills and sentiments associated with steelmaking at an integrated plant. This does not simply mean the decline of physical labour or "bull work," but the perceived end of active participation in production. As E.P. Thompson wrote, "It is quite possible for statistical averages and human experiences to run in opposite directions."¹³⁶ Although shop floor employees at Sysco were re-trained in

¹³⁴ Barry Brocklehurst, interview by Diane Chisholm, November 5, 1990, Steel Project, Box 6, File 2, transcript, BI.

¹³⁵ Duncan Gallie, "Skills, Job Control, and the Quality of Work: The Evidence from Britain," *The Economic and Social Review* 43, 3 (Autumn 2012): 334.

¹³⁶ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1976), 211.

work methods more appropriate to the so-called flexibility of the new economy, the loss of traditional practices of work, training and older forms of camaraderie – to borrow again from Thompson – felt like an immiseration.

In identifying the disjuncture in labour processes and understandings of skill and control at Sydney Steel, this chapter does not seek to contribute to an idealistic or nostalgic representation of Fordist production or a “Golden Age” of capitalism. Sysco employees also remember industrial employment as dangerous, sometimes unhealthy, and oftentimes unpleasant. It should also be noted that oral history testimony in this chapter is drawn from interviews conducted in both 1990 and 2014; interviews conducted in 1990 occurred at a moment of profound trauma at Sysco, with the massive shift in work processes having resulted in hundreds of lost jobs. Although many of those who were interviewed in more recent years continued to view the final modernization as moment of profound disconnection, those who remained employed at the plant after 1989 spoke of steelwork as a shared experience that continued to hold meaning.¹³⁷ As Tim Strangleman argues, scholarly claims regarding the “end of work” and the de-centring of employment from identity have been greatly exaggerated.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Tommy McCarron and Gerry McCarron, interview with author, August 7, 2013.

¹³⁸ Tim Strangleman, “The nostalgia for permanence at work? The end of work and its commentators,” *The Sociological Review* 55, 1 (2007): 100.

Chapter Five

Labour Environmentalism: Fighting for Compensation at the Sydney Coke Ovens, 1986-1990

From the ‘re-born’ environmentally conscious politicians to the tourist dollar oriented civic administrators – to the sterile medical community. To the ivory tower of the academic community and the comfortable pews of the clergy, the men, women and children cry out for justice – Who will answer? Who will answer?¹

- Don MacPherson, Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice

The plumes of smoke that billowed from the local steelworks have been woven into the collective memory of steelmaking in Sydney. Former coke ovens employee Joe Legge recalls, “It was part of your everyday living. People that lived [in the working-class neighbourhood surrounding the plant], depending on which way the wind was blowing didn’t hang their wash up on certain days. Because they knew it would either come in red from the blast furnace or black from the coke ovens. And this was a regular thing . . . people lived their lives like that.”² The smell, described as sulphurous – similar to rotten eggs – is another frequent sensory recollection of those who worked at the provincially owned Sydney Steel Corporation. Residents of Ashby and Whitney Pier, the two neighbourhoods immediately adjacent to the plant, remember closing their windows when the wind changed direction; this was to prevent the smoke from leaving ashy deposits on floors and countertops.³

The multi-coloured smoke, present in oral narratives of Sydney’s former life as a steel town, is often positioned as a character in its own right. It plays many roles; sometimes it is framed as a silent killer, bringing carcinogenic dustfall to the unwitting community surrounding the plant, while in others it is a nuisance – something to be put

¹ Don MacPherson, “What will it take to shake complacency over plight of former coke workers?” *Chronicle Herald*, April 29, 1989.

² Joe Legge, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

³ “*Making Steel*,” directed by Elizabeth Beaton (Sydney, NS: Beaton Institute Archives and the National Film Board of Canada, 1992), DVD; “*Heart of Steel*,” directed by Peter Giffen (Sydney, NS: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2012), DVD.

up with for the sake of jobs and the local economy.⁴ However the smoke is represented, in each case it arrives to signal a description of the way things used to be; Sydney, in these stories, was a very different place in the years prior to the plant's modernization in the late 1980s and final closure in 2001. Although the dirty air of the steelmaking past is often contrasted with the community green space that now rests on the Sysco site, several interviewees remarked upon the continued relevance of industrial pollutants to life in the city. Sysco's smoke has not soiled residents' laundry for decades, but its material effects continue to loom large over concerns about environmental justice, workers' compensation and the public health impact of deindustrialization in the city.

As early as the mid-1960s, researchers began examining the effects of industrial dustfall in Sydney. In 1965, a report commissioned by the Canadian Department of National Health and Welfare found that air pollution levels in the neighbourhoods surrounding the plant were significantly higher than normal, and that the levels of fine particulate matter could possibly result in respiratory problems for residents.⁵ These findings were replicated in the 1970s, when further studies on air pollutants found that the half-mile surrounding the coke ovens tested especially high for dustfall.⁶ The Nova Scotia government restricted public access to many of these early reports until the late 1980s, when a group known as the Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice challenged the province, their union, and management on the issue of workers' compensation for occupational illness. Their resistance, and their insistence upon the damaging effects of shop-floor exposure to coke ovens emissions, would result in an overhaul of

⁴ Maude Barlow and Elizabeth May, *Frederick Street: Life and Death on Canada's Love Canal* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000); Lorraine Deveaux, interview with author, December 9, 2014; Tommy and Gerry McCarron, interview with author, August 7, 2013.

⁵ M. Katz and R.D. McKay, *Report on Dustfall Studies at Sydney, N.S.: Analysis and Distribution of Dustfall in the Sydney Area During the Period February 1958 through September 1959* (Ottawa: Department of National Health and Welfare Canada, 1959); M. Katz, H.P. Sanderson, and R.D. McKay, *Evaluation of air pollution levels in relation to steel manufacturing and coal combustion in Sydney, Nova Scotia* (Ottawa: Department of National Health and Welfare Canada, 1965).

⁶ E.J. Kilotat and H.J. Wilson, *An Evaluation of Air Pollution Levels in Sydney, Nova Scotia* (Ottawa: Department of National Health Directorate, Air Pollution Control Division, 1970).

compensation practices relating to workplace illness in Nova Scotia. So, too, did their efforts inform public attempts to find accountability for the environmental aftermath of deindustrialization.



Figure 5.1: Pollution from the Sydney Steel Plant, 1955
Source: Photographer unknown, Reference 97-439-28287,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

**An Emerging Consensus:
Hazardous Working Conditions in North American Coking Facilities**

While the early scientific research focused on possible links between respiratory illness and fine particulate matter resulting from steel production in Sydney, elsewhere researchers began to take note of heightened rates of certain cancers among coke ovens employees who were exposed to airborne toxins within the workplace. In 1970, an occupational health study of 58,828 American steelworkers conducted between 1953 and 1961 found that coke ovens employees suffered from heightened risk of “malignant

neoplasm of the respiratory system” – lung cancer. This was especially pronounced for those workers employed on top of the battery, where exposure to gas and coke fumes was more frequent. Such a finding, the authors’ conclude, “[is likely] due to factors in the coke plant environment.”⁷ Studies of this nature were conducted in steel-producing regions of the world throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and each noted the correlation between occupational exposure to coke ovens emissions and bodily illness.⁸

In Ontario, the nascent Injured Workers Movement challenged the provincial government on issues of workplace illness and compensation as early as 1974.⁹ The Elliot Lake uranium workers’ wildcat strike in that year, largely over issues surrounding compensation and occupational disease, prompted the provincial government to appoint a Royal Commission to explore the ongoing health crisis.¹⁰ The result of these struggles was the 1978 passage of *Bill C70: An Act Respecting the Occupational Health and Safety of Ontario Workers*. Robert Storey writes, “For the first time, Ontario workers had the statutory right to know about the substances they worked with, could help promote and ensure safe and healthy workplaces through their participation in joint health and safety committees, and had the right to refuse work they believed was unsafe.”¹¹

⁷ J. William Lloyd, Frank E. Lundin, Jr., Carol K. Redmond, and Patricia B. Geiser, “Long Term Mortality Study of Steelworkers: IV Mortality by Work Area,” *Journal of Occupational Medicine* 12, 5 (1970): 157.

⁸ G.M. Davies, “A mortality study of coke oven workers in two South Wales integrated steelworks,” *British Journal of Industrial Medicine* 34 (1977): 291-97; J.P. Bertrand et al., “Mortality due to respiratory cancers in the coke oven plants of the Lorraine coalmining industry (Houillières du Bassin du Lorraine),” *British Journal of Industrial Medicine* 44, 8 (1987): 559-65.

⁹ Robert Storey, “Social Assistance or a Worker’s Right? Workmen’s Compensation and the Struggle of Injured Workers in Ontario, 1970-1985,” *Studies in Political Economy* 78 (2006): 67-91.

¹⁰ Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “The Elliot Lake Uranium Miners’ Battle to Gain Occupational Health and Safety Improvements, 1950-1980,” *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 91-118.

¹¹ Robert Storey, “From the Environment to the Workplace . . . And Back Again? Occupational Health and Safety Activism in Ontario, 1970s-2000,” *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 41, 4 (2004): 425.

Members of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) started to recognize occupational illness resulting from coke ovens work in the United States even earlier, by the late 1960s in some cases. Dan Hannan, an employee at the Clairton Works in Pittsburgh, was instrumental creating this awareness. Coming from a steelworking family, Hannan's older brother was a labour activist who had been involved in the struggle to organize Clairton for the USWA.¹² Hannan was a coke ovens worker and served as president of his union local; in 1967, U.S. Steel began a series of modernizations to his workplace. Hannan helped to put together a list of colleagues who had become seriously ill or died as the result of issues with lung capacity or cancers, which would later be presented to federal regulatory agencies. Recognizing an apparent connection between employment in the coke ovens and occupational illness, he formed a Steelworkers Air Pollution and Black Lung Committee and started lobbying politicians and union leaders for a solution. Following the passage of the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1970, he testified before the OSHA Standards Advisory Committee on Coke Ovens Emissions. Hannan's speech is compelling, and foreshadows many of the arguments later put forward by the Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice in Sydney:

Each name there identifies a man who worked at a hard job, in the heat of the coke ovens, in the valley of the Monongahela River. Their labor made possible the steel we have used as automobiles or refrigerators, or pins and needles, or brides, or nails to hold our houses together. When we bought our cars we thought nothing of paying an extra \$10 or \$15 to have a cigarette lighter on the dashboard – but we didn't pay the extra one or two dollars per car it would have cost to clean up the coke ovens and save some of these men's lives.

These men are not statistics. They were human beings, like you and me. And as they worked they, too, had their dreams – perhaps of retirement to enjoy the fruits of their labor. They had wives, and families and homes. They had friends to visit with, and children to advise, and grandchildren to spoil – and no doubt they looked forward to devoting their later years to such pleasures.

[Through OSHA] the American people have spoken. We, the people, are no longer willing to be accomplices to industrial murder.¹³

¹² “Star profile, Dan Hannan, Cokeworker,” *Philadelphia Star*, September 8, 1977.

¹³ Dan Hannan, testimony to the Advisory Standards Committee, OSHA, 4 March 1975, Safety and Health Department Records, HCLA 1966, Box 23, United Steelworkers of

After this testimony, OSHA released an upgraded set of health and safety standards for American coking plants. These included a series of engineering controls on older plants, designed to reduce emissions and create a safer, healthier workplace. Jack Sheehan, a spokesman for the USWA, said that the union was pleased with the result.¹⁴

The international union was quite willing to share information back and forth with Canadian locals. In 1976, representatives from Local 1005 at the Steel Company of Canada (Stelco) contacted the union international offices for information on American compensation claims for occupational illness among coke ovens workers. The Hamilton union sought compensation for the widow of a coke ovens worker, “L. Skuranec,” who passed away from cancers of the rectum, lungs, and bone.¹⁵ Her claim had been denied in Ontario; the provincial Workers’ Compensation Board writes that, despite 37 years working on top of the coke ovens batteries, “Mr. Skuranec’s death resulted from non-industrial condition and was not related to nor characteristic to the type of work he performed while in the employment of Stelco.”¹⁶ The union provided Lennie with information drawn from the research of William Lloyd - an epidemiologist who worked closely with the union on coke ovens claims – as well as American guidelines for coke ovens compensation, USWA health and safety statistics, and articles detailing the emerging health concerns stateside.¹⁷ Newspapers in Hamilton soon picked up the story,

America Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, Pennsylvania State University (PSU), State College, PA.

¹⁴ David McCaffrey, *OSHA and the Politics of Health Regulation* (New York: Plenum Press, 1982), 90.

¹⁵ John A. Lennie, request, 24 August 1976, District 6 correspondence – coke ovens, Box 17, Health and Safety Department Records, USWA Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, PSU.

¹⁶ WCB Ontario, Summary of information, Claim #D10349210, 25 May 1976, District 6 correspondence, Health and Safety Department Records, USWA Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, PSU.

¹⁷ Response to John Lennie, June 1976, District 6 correspondence – coke ovens, Box 17, Health and Safety Department Records, USWA Fonds, Eberly Family Special Collections Library, PSU.

with headlines in *The Spectator* proclaiming, “Killer Coke Ovens” and “Coke Oven Death Alarm Ignored.”¹⁸

These events did not immediately prompt a reaction in Nova Scotia, although a 1976 op-ed piece in the *Cape Breton Post* laments, “sadly . . . the information appears to have made no noticeable impact on those who should be concerned about it here: Sysco itself, Local 1064 of the United Steelworkers Union, and the Nova Scotia Workmen’s Compensation Board.”¹⁹ Concern surrounding occupational and community exposure to steelmaking emissions continued to grow as more local reports were released. In 1977, the “Report of the Sydney Respiratory Health Survey” revealed that coke ovens emissions exceed the “maximum desirable level of . . . sulphur dioxide over one hour” by more than 45 percent, and the maximum level of “suspended particulate matter” by 97 percent. The authors of this survey concluded that these statistics were likely to “[have] some measurable negative effect on respiratory function for the residents of Whitney Pier and Ashby” – not to mention those employed on top of the coke ovens batteries.²⁰

The reluctance among some members of Local 1064 to challenge the province and company on issues of environmental justice was related to the precarious situation at Sysco during the early 1980s. The union had taken some steps to bring issues of health and safety to the attention of management in 1979, when officials presented a document to Sysco asking “that the Coke Ovens Department Management take a closer look at Safety in the Department regarding [...] emissions.” The document also describes the heightened rates of cancer found within coke ovens employees, but remarks “We realize that with a plant as old as ours it is very hard to implement engineering a pollution machinery right away, but we feel there are some areas where improvements can be made

¹⁸ “The Killer Coke Ovens,” *Spectator*, January 15, 1977; “Coke oven death alarm ignored,” *Spectator*, January 15, 1977.

¹⁹ “Coke Ovens and Cancer,” *Cape Breton Post*, August 5, 1976.

²⁰ *Report of the Sydney Respiratory Health Survey* (Ottawa: Minister of National Health and Welfare, 1977), 50-51.

immediately.”²¹ With the importation of new technologies and the industry-wide turn towards lean and flexible production, labour relations were strained even before the wildcats and strikes of the 1980s.



Figure 5.2: Whitney Pier, 1989
Source: Photograph by Owen Fitzgerald, Reference 5-26.31,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

Following the 1982 strike, Sydney union leaders sought to stabilize the continued operations of the plant before focusing on issues of occupational illness and compensation. A two-year shutdown of the coke ovens between 1983 and 1985 caused some to worry about the future of that department. In this climate, it was difficult for workers who were concerned about the health impacts of the coke ovens to have their voices heard. Several employees grew concerned with the apparent higher probability of cancer or other illnesses developing among current and former coke ovens workers, and tried to bring the issue to the attention of union officials and plant management. Dan

²¹ Dave MacLeod, 26 February 1979, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, MG, 206, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS.

Yakimchuk, a former steelworker and city councillor in Sydney, describes accessing two restricted provincial studies relating to industrial pollution:

- D. Yakimchuk: I mean the worst of course was the studies done [in 1973 and 1974] on pollution [...] I got a hold of a study that was sent to the union office. It was supposed to be passed around the membership and it was never done. On the effects of pollution, the coke ovens pollution particularly.
- M. Earle: But the union, just to go back to that, the union had this, had got hold of this but they never distributed it to the members.
- D. Yakimchuk: No. It was in the officers' office. And I got it, I think it was Gramps Kiley [a former union president], when he was in there, he passed it along to me, because him and I were very good friends [...] He just passed me a copy, "Don't say where you got it," type of thing. Before that I started wondering why guys were dying, you know . . . I mean to me it didn't make sense. I mean how come the teachers when they retired didn't die two or three months later? And I seemed to be a voice in the wilderness, because everybody, not everybody, but my members of council, didn't even know what I was talking about [...] Because people were really scared of their jobs.²²

According to Yakimchuk, the ability of Sydney steelworkers to challenge the provincial government on issues of workplace health – specifically on the subject of occupational illness in the coke ovens – was stymied by the constant threat of job loss and unemployment.

Meanwhile, scientific studies were undertaken to ascertain the health impacts of coke ovens emissions on employees and residents of industrial communities. Between 1982 and 1985, three federal research studies examined the public health impact of carcinogenic “polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons” (PAH) produced during the coking process in Sydney. These reports all made explicit reference to increased levels of PAH found adjacent to the coke ovens site; Lawrence Hildebrand, writing in 1982, concluded

²² Dan Yakimchuk, interview by Michael Earle, April 20, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 7, transcript, BI.

that “the plant does not have environmental controls that meet today’s standards.”²³ The health impact of these findings were described in 1984, when Atwell et. al. confirm:

Epidemiological findings among coke oven workers [in the United States] show that coke ovens emissions can also lead to the development of non-malignant respiratory disease such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema . . . workers exposed to relatively high levels of coke oven emissions develop cancer, especially of the respiratory tract, at rates significantly higher than those reported for other workers.²⁴

The most controversial of these three reports was released in August 1985, when J.R. Hickman argued in a federal study that the continued operation of the Sydney coke ovens – barring the implementation of an emission-reduction scheme – would result in heightened levels of cancer among workers and the general public.²⁵ In addition to this report, Hickman penned a letter to the Attorney General of Nova Scotia to illustrate his concerns regarding public and occupational health and the Sydney coke ovens. The attorney general admitted receiving this letter during the discovery portion of an ongoing lawsuit relating to Sysco’s environmental impact, but denied that Hickman’s findings could be extrapolated to the residents in areas surrounding the plant. “Whether an actual risk exists depends on the degree of exposure,” he writes, “Hickman admitted that there were no PAH environmental guidelines at the time. It was not known what exposure levels to PAH ‘s were considered acceptable.”²⁶

‘We’ll Go Down Fighting or We’ll Win’: Sysco Workers’ Battle for Compensation

²³ Lawrence P. Hildebrand, *Environmental Quality in Sydney and Northeast Industrial Cape Breton, Nova Scotia* (Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1982).

²⁴ This report also notes that the Sydney coke ovens were only producing at 50% of total capability during the period of study, and so actual levels of PAH production were likely even higher than those reported. L. Atwell et. al., *Ambient Air Polynuclear Aromatic Hydrocarbons Study, Sydney, Nova Scotia* (Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1984).

²⁵ J.R. Hickman, *Health Hazards Due to Coke Emissions* (Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada, 30 August 1985).

²⁶ Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, “Notice of Defense, Hfx. No. 218010,” (20 March 2013).

Prior to the release of the Hickman report, with the Coke Ovens Department scheduled to re-open in December 1985, the public was becoming more aware of the environmental and possible public health impacts of coke production at Sysco. In May, provincial epidemiologist Pierre Lavigne attempted to assuage concerns during an interview with Betsy Chambers of the *Cape Breton Post*. Lavigne admitted that coke emissions contained heightened levels of PAH, and that the areas surrounding the plant did have much higher rates of lung and stomach cancer; any link between these two facts, he cautioned, was “highly speculative.” He also pointed to high rates of smoking among workers in Cape Breton; “the fact that it’s an industrial area might not have anything to do [with the cancer rates],” Lavigne argued, though he did recommend the implementation of cautionary emission controls upon the re-commissioning of the ovens.²⁷

Only a few weeks before the re-opening, several articles in the Sydney newspaper began questioning the decision. “Sysco ignoring studies, will reopen coke oven,” read the *Post* headline on November 4; “this . . . will expose workers and nearby residents to carcinogenic chemicals at levels which scientists have concluded are dangerous.” Company officials refused to comment, aside from reminding the public that the start up “would create about 50 new jobs at the plant itself, as well as badly needed jobs in Cape Breton coal mines.”²⁸ The new president of Local 1064, John Callaghan, and the Liberal leader of the provincial opposition, Vince MacLean, each released statements supporting the company’s decision to re-open the ovens. MacLean remarked that the complete closure of the ovens would amount to “putting a gun to the head” of unemployed steelworkers, while Callaghan cryptically mused on a possible “conspiracy by someone to try and stop the second phase of the Sydney Steel modernization plan.”²⁹

²⁷ “More Study Needed: Industry Links to Cancer Rates Not Established, Says Lavigne,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 22, 1985.

²⁸ “Sysco ignoring studies; will reopen coke oven,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 4, 1985.

²⁹ “Lack of Evidence cited in support of coke restart,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 6, 1985.

The plant's existence as a public corporation fed into the notion, expressed by Callaghan, that there were powerful political forces aligned against continued operations by the late 1980s – both provincially and nationally. This idea remains visible in oral history testimony, and is perhaps not without merit; as General Office manager Fred James reflects, mainland voters in the province were tired of supporting Sydney Steel debts with their tax dollars.³⁰ This idea was further cemented in 1999, when John Hamm – a Pictou County MLA – was elected as premier. Several informants recall the 'Sysco postcard' released by the Hamm campaign; this is described as an image of the plant marked "closed", juxtaposed with a series of empty hospital beds marked "open."³¹ As a result, this idea is much more firmly asserted in interviews conducted since the closure of the plant; while Callaghan hints at a conspiracy, former employees interviewed in recent years are much more explicit about perceived back-room efforts to close Sysco.

These suspicions, and the tensions they created between workers, their union, the corporation, and the provincial government are also reflected in the testimony related to the release of confidential emissions studies during the 1980s. Yakimchuk describes the clandestine retrieval of documents revealing the extent of pollution at Sysco; according to Yakimchuk, the union was in full knowledge of this material but kept it from the rank and file.³² Charlie MacDonald, a member of the union executive, believes that the company had access to these scientific reports but kept the information from the union until the end of the decade.³³ Don MacPherson, an electrician at the plant and later a founding member of the Coke Ovens Workers United For Justice, described being passed the documents from an anonymous source.³⁴ In each case, the retrieval of these reports is

³⁰ Fred James, interview with author, August 16, 2013.

³¹ Charles MacDonald, interview with author, March 3, 2015; David Ervin, interview with author, August 8, 2013; Fabian Smith, interview with author, September 7, 2014.

³² Dan Yakimchuk, interview by Michael Earle, April 20, 1990.

³³ Charles MacDonald, interview with author, March 3, 2014.

³⁴ Don MacPherson, interview by Michael Earle, January 1990, Steel Project, T-2590, transcript, BI.

presented as a ‘eureka’ moment’ when the full extent of coke ovens illness and risk finally became clear. Indeed, Steven High writes that stories of “liberating” documents from recalcitrant corporations can also represent “an act of defiance in the face of [...] erasure.”³⁵

While the secreting of confidential documents out of the plant under the watchful eyes of security and management presents an interesting narrative structure for the emergence of resistance among the coke ovens workers, it is likely that this resistance sprang from the material processes of industrial decline. As Arthur McIvor argues, worklessness and deindustrialization each have a direct impact on workers’ bodily health.³⁶ In these instances, deindustrialization is a visible agent in the unfolding contradictions of capitalism. David Harvey describes how workers’ bodies dialectically exist both as active agents within, and bodily receptacles of, productive forces.³⁷ Industrial capitalism demands healthy bodies for production, but produces unhealthy bodies. In Sydney, emerging understandings surrounding the physical impact of industrial pollution combined with local knowledge of the health effects of the shop floor – as expressed by Yakimchuk above – to result in bottom-up resistance from outside of the traditional institutional structures of the workplace.

These pressures were not new. Workers have long agitated for protection in the industrial workplace, and for good reason. More than 300 men have been killed at Sysco during its century of production. Workplace accidents, explosions, mistakes, and unsafe conditions continue to prompt countless injuries and traumas across Canada. These often result in drawn-out applications, rejected claims, and labyrinthian application processes.

³⁵ Steven High, Placing the Displaced Worker: Narrating Place in Deindustrializing Sturgeon Falls, Ontario,” in *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada*, eds. James Opp and John C. Walsh (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 173.

³⁶ Arthur McIvor, “Deindustrialization Embodied: Work, Health and Disability in the U.K. since c. 1950,” in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places*, eds. Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

³⁷ David Harvey, “The Body as Accumulation Strategy,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 16, 4 (August 1998): 401-21.

Robert Storey writes that these workers “have taken on the task of constructing the passageway even as they move through it.”³⁸ In Sydney, many attribute a gas explosion that occurred in the coke ovens on August 25, 1977 as a key event that inspired a renewed focus on health and safety within the department in later years.³⁹



Figure 5.3: Joe Legge, 2015
Source: Photograph by Steve Wadden, Sydney, NS

³⁸ Robert Storey, “Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: Engaging with the ‘Testimony’ of Injured Workers,” in *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*, ed. Steven High (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 57.

³⁹ Blair Lewis, interview by Diane Chisholm, March 6, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 33, transcript, BI; Joe Keller, interview by Michael Earle, May 16, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 29, transcript, BI; William Ferguson, interview by Michael Earle, February 22, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 18, transcript, BI.

This explosion is recalled clearly by Joe Legge. When we met at his home on Rockdale Avenue in Sydney, it was obvious that he had thought extensively about the circumstances surrounding the accident. Tommy McCarron gave me Joe's name; he told me that Joe had been involved in an accident on the Sysco site, and that he had – in the years since – worked extensively with occupational health and safety. I later learned that Joe often speaks to Work Safe Nova Scotia and to patients at the IWK children's burn unit in Halifax about his experience. On August 25 1977, at 29 years of age, Joe was burned on 65 percent of his body in the Sydney coke ovens. He describes:

They were changing a valve in the gas main that took the vaporized gas away from the coking process [...] The safety process at the time called for a back pressure of steam six times greater than the flow rate of the gas [...] So they put the steam on, the gas was shut off, and the safety people took their tests – no gas in the area. But the valve that they were replacing was being taken out and cleaned up because tar had gotten into the key-way [...] But what they didn't know was that the shut-off valve that was supposed to be directing the gas the other way had the same problem. [...] So it's August 25th, 80 degrees, you're in a room about the size of this, sweating bullets. Somebody says, "Shut the steam off a little bit" . . . Next thing you know, the steam was shut off [...] The maintenance guys take their bolts out, they just opened the top up [...] So it sucks in 80 degree air, hits 2,200 degree gas in the pipe. [claps hands]. Just that quick.

I was standing with one hand on the chain hoist, that was supporting this valve, and there was two mechanics taking the bolts out [...] And I heard [snaps fingers]. And that was the ignition point within the pipe. Within seconds the flame came up through the top [...] I was standing right above it. It hit me in the chest and tossed me about 15 feet through the air. And the flame went straight up, and hit the roof, and came back down – so the initial concussion – there was 17 people there – the initial concussion knocked everybody down. So when the flame came back down [...] most of them got burnt on the back of their neck, the backs of their arms, the backs of the ears.

With the exception of me. Who got, right in the chest. I got the full blast of it. I landed in the middle of the doorway. So sixteen guys, in panic, ran right over top of me in their efforts to get out. And, uh, I . . . managed to get myself out by myself. [...] And Ray Drohan, the electrical foreman at the time, had his car nearby. He had just bought a brand new Buick, with leather upholstery, and he grabbed me by the arm and he said, "Joe, get in the car." And I opened the door and I said, "I'm going to ruin all your upholstery!" Because, you know, I had skin all hanging off me everywhere. And he said, "Get the . . . in the car!"

I got in the car and he drove me up to the hospital [...] He pulled up to the ambulance entrance, there were two double doors, and I pushed them open. And

stepped inside and there was a Doctor and two nurses who were standing there, they had charts in their hands, and when I pushed open the door the three of them looked at me, and made a run for me. And after that I remember waking up two weeks later in the burn unit in Halifax [...] There was eight of us, eight of the seventeen, up to Halifax [...] Wish I could forget [...]

Thirty-seven years ago. I'd like to forget it. Unfortunately, that's never going to happen. The good thing is that I have very few nightmares anymore. For the longest time, I'd wake up two or three o'clock in the morning, going through the whole thing over again. Seeing that ball of fire coming at me. And [pause]. It upsets the whole household. I mean, nobody's going to sleep after that you start screaming. That went on for the longest time. Now, if I'm caught off guard – like I don't watch movies that have explosions or things like that. And sometimes, it's only every now and then you get caught not being aware of something and all of the sudden Bang-o, it's there and you're, 'Oh, shit,' you know? Your subconscious starts working and the next thing you know, there's a nightmare coming.⁴⁰

Joe went back to work at the plant five years later, and stayed with Sysco until the final closure. Although his case was quickly adjudicated by workers' compensation, as he explains, "there was no way they were going to look at me and say, 'you're faking this,'" legislation at the time covered only physical disabilities that would prevent someone from working. He received 18 percent disability. One of the maintenance men injured in the same accident had burns on his arms; he received 35 percent disability. While Joe's scars are more visible than those that remain with workers suffering from occupational illness, both experiences reveal the shortcomings in the Nova Scotia compensation system during the late 1970s and 1980s.

In December 1985, the Coke Ovens Department re-opened after a two-year furlough, but by the end of the month the future of the integrated mill was once more in question. Alongside an announcement of significant modernization funding (Phase II), John Buchanan and Sinclair Stevens revealed plans to clean the Sydney "tar ponds" site – located next to the steel mill.⁴¹ The circumstances of these clean up efforts are discussed

⁴⁰ Joe Legge, interview with author, September 1, 2014.

⁴¹ "Sysco, tar pond projects announced," *Cape Breton Post*, December 28, 1985; "Sysco president optimistic, union boss relieved with plant modernization plan," *Cape Breton Post*, December 28, 1985; "MacLean has mixed feelings over SYSCO modernization plan," *Cape Breton Post*, December 31, 1985.

in Chapter Six, but emerging environmental concerns, coupled with the possibility of an electric arc operation that would negate the need for coking facilities, meant that employees were again plunged into uncertainty.

By the summer of 1986, workers' fears were beginning to be realized. On August 31, Premier John Buchanan and federal Environment Minister Tom McMillan announced that work on the tar ponds clean up would begin immediately, but also that the coke ovens would be closed down in July 1988. The department was quickly becoming linked, in the minds of the public, with ongoing issues of pollution and environmental damage to the lands surrounding the mill. The government promised the union that nearly 200 jobs would be created, to offset the 120 positions lost at the coke ovens, and that coke plant workers would have the right of first refusal to these positions.⁴² Workers were immediately sceptical of this; Don MacPherson explains his position in an open letter to Premier Buchanan:

The general view of most steelworkers is that we are in the final throes of a complete phase-down, if not indeed a phase-out of steel operations at Sysco [...] Now we face, under the pretext of the tar ponds clean up, closure of the Sysco coke ovens [...] Steelworkers would consider continuous iron production without a coking plant laughable, were it not so tragic [...] Mr. Premier, a policy of "keep them in the dark on a diet of horse manure" is fine for growing mushrooms but it does nothing to alleviate the spectre of further mass unemployment at Sydney Steel.⁴³

Local 1064 accepted the plan with cautious optimism. On July 24, Buchanan promised Callaghan a feasibility study on the construction of a new coke ovens operation. Such an operation would implement necessary emissions controls and offset concerns over lost jobs.⁴⁴ The proposed closure of the coke ovens and the union's tacit acceptance of the plan lead to the creation of the Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice – a "vigilante

⁴² "Tar Pond Clean Up to Begin Immediately," *Cape Breton Post*, July 2, 1986.

⁴³ "Early Retirement Program Urged for Sysco Workers," *Cape Breton Post*, September 27, 1986

⁴⁴ "Workers assured of tar ponds jobs and universal mill," *Cape Breton Post*, July 26, 1986.

committee” composed of steelworkers Don MacPherson, David MacLeod, John Rocket, and Bernie Sharp.⁴⁵

Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice emerged as the result of three concurrent issues related to the coke ovens closure. Firstly, workers did not believe claims that the modernization and tar ponds remediation would create enough quality jobs for former coke plant employees. Secondly, there were a number of issues relating to seniority among coke ovens workers that would have to be resolved for the purposes of workers’ pensions.⁴⁶ The issue that garnered the majority of the committee’s attention, however, was related to workers’ compensation for current and former coke ovens employees. The Nova Scotia Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) did not designate the coke ovens as a hazardous workplace, despite decades of evidence, and the system for illness compensation was largely dedicated to dealing with pneumoconiosis – black lung – among the island’s coal miners.⁴⁷

Deindustrialization provoked a set of circumstances wherein a longstanding “high threshold culture” in the Coke Ovens Department was subverted by bottom-up protest.

Arthur McIvor, writing of British asbestos workers, describes:

Men were habituated to undertaking dangerous work, to accepting a high-risk threshold, and to being part of a fiercely independent working class culture that frowned upon anyone who complained or ‘made a fuss.’ A dominant (or

⁴⁵ “Covering Up Death at Sysco,” *Canadian Tribune*, May 1, 1989; Don MacPherson, interview by Michael Earle, June 20, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 43, transcript, BI.

⁴⁶ The department had operated under the federal government’s Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco) between the years 1968 and 1974, and employees working in the department at this time were not going to receive Sysco seniority for these years. R.B. Cameron to Gerald Blackmore, 23 February 1968, Box 117, File 13, Dominion Steel and Coal Company Papers, BI; For the terms of this arrangement, see Robillard Report on Sydney Steel, 1977, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Volume 5370, File 4052-03-05 pt. 3, Department of Finance Fonds, RG 19, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON.

⁴⁷ Don MacPherson, interview by Michael Earle, June 20, 1990; “Public Campaign, Private Grief: Steelworkers’ Battle for Coke Ovens Workers,” *Steellabour* 53, 2 (1990): 22-23.

hegemonic) form of ‘hard man’ masculinity was forged in such heavy industry workplaces.⁴⁸

Facing the possible closure of the coke ovens and the spectre of occupational disease, the men in Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice stepped beyond the bounds of industrial masculinity to demand recognition. Local 1064, wary of economic instability wrought by job losses, were slower to act. Some on the executive felt that MacPherson and the others were acting out of turn, and that compensation for the coke ovens workers was one of many issues facing the Sydney steelworkers. Nonetheless, trade unionists did eventually come to challenge the high-risk work culture at the mill. By 1988, Local 1064 had joined forces with the coke ovens activists to challenge the province on workplace health and occupational illness.

In his keynote speech at the Deindustrialization and Its Aftermath conference in 2014, Robert Storey spoke of workers’ compensation in Ontario “starting from no.” This was also the *modus operandi* of the Nova Scotia WCB in relation to claims of occupational disease. In 1986, a Sysco employee named Joseph Louis Assoun applied to the WCB for industrial bronchitis. In a letter from W.J. Penney of Sysco Personnel Services to the WCB, Assoun’s work history is described: 14 years at the coke screening plant and “around the battery operations,” with an additional year labouring in other departments before returning to the coke plant. Nonetheless, Penney writes, “We are not aware of any hazardous environmental exposure Mr. Assoun would have been in contact with.”⁴⁹ Assoun’s claim was denied. “It was felt that his long history of smoking was the main etiological factor,” explained R.J. Allen of the WCB, “his industrial exposure did not significantly contribute to his particular medical problem.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Arthur McIvor, “Economic Violence, Occupational Disability, and Death: Oral Narratives of the Impact of Asbestos-Related Diseases in Britain,” in *Beyond Testimony and Trauma: Oral History in the Aftermath of Mass Violence*, ed. Steven High (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), e-book.

⁴⁹ W.J. Penney to Workers Compensation Board of Nova Scotia, 14 November 1986, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

⁵⁰ R.J. Allen, to Paul McEwan, 10 November 1987, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice organized a concerted letter-writing and media campaign surrounding the compensation issue in 1987. As the result of this pressure, Cape Breton Liberal Member of Parliament Dave Dingwall became involved in the discussion. In a letter to Sysco President Ernie Boutilier, Dingwall cautions Sysco to act as a good corporate citizen and behave in the best interests of the community it serves. “Furthermore,” he writes, “could you also indicate to me as to why the Sydney Steel Corporation is repudiating statements made by some of the workers who have been affected negatively by the emissions coming from the Coke Ovens?”⁵¹

Political attention from local MLA’s and MP’s made both the company and union officials uncomfortable. Boutilier explained that the company was “concerned for the welfare of all . . . employees,” and that they were exploring assistance options for coke ovens workers. Any changes to the pension structure for former employees was related to negotiations with the steelworkers’ union and, according to Boutilier, could not be discussed publicly. He also writes that the WCB denial of coke ovens workers’ compensation claims was the result of “a medical examination, and a review of medical evidence, not on the basis of any statement by the company.”⁵² Such a claim is at odds with the content of W.J. Penney’s 1986 letter to the WCB in the Assoun case. Charlie MacDonald largely supports Boutilier’s position on the pension issue; in a 2015 interview, he describes how MacPherson and the Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice were unaware of ongoing negotiations between Local 1064 and Sysco management.⁵³

The existence of an ad-hoc, extra-union committee organizing around issues of workers’ health and compensation was unpopular among some of the other members of Local 1064. Many felt, as MacDonald did, that the union was already addressing these grievances through the proper channels and that MacPherson’s efforts were simply playing into efforts to smear Sysco. The actions of Coke Ovens Workers United for

⁵¹ David Dingwall to Ernie Boutilier, 7 December 1987, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

⁵² Ernie Boutilier to Dave Dingwall, 23 December 1987, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

⁵³ Charles MacDonald, interview with author, March 3, 2015.

Justice did have some other tangible effects; in April 1988, a letter on behalf of the committee was cited in the Assoun appeal to the WCB. The board found that industrial exposure did likely play a role in Assoun's illness; they awarded him "a 10% partial disability" payment.⁵⁴ By the summer of 1988 MacPherson and MacLeod were asked to join the Compensation, Health and Safety Committee of Local 1064 to add their expertise regarding the coke ovens issue. The men were asked to study employee records held in the steelworkers' hall to find evidence of occupational illness among coke ovens workers.⁵⁵

The convergence of Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice and Local 1064 was a partial response to the sudden closure of the coke ovens in the winter of 1988 – six months prior to the scheduled end of operations. The union announced a plant-wide strike in early February over wages and retirement packages; contrary to common practise in earlier strikes, however, coke ovens workers left work *en masse* and refused to provide the coking plant with a skeleton crew.⁵⁶ During this strike, the province announced that the coke ovens would not re-open – and that 125 workers would be laid-off. Although the bitter strike ended five weeks later, by the end of March only 22 coke ovens workers had been re-hired in other sections of the plant – far fewer than the promised 95 percent of those who were without work.⁵⁷ With these workers displaced, it became imperative that the union produce the names of employees who might appeal for an early pension or workers' compensation based on industrial exposure to hazardous materials.

MacPherson and MacLeod created a cursory list of coke ovens workers who had passed away during the 25 years prior by September 1988. With similarities to Hannan's

⁵⁴ Memorandum, John O'Brien, Workers' Compensation Board of Nova Scotia, 21 April 1988, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

⁵⁵ Harvey MacLeod to William MacNeil, June 14, 1990, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI; Don MacPherson, interview by Michael Earle, June 20, 1990; Charles MacDonald, interview with author, March 3, 2015.

⁵⁶ "Steelworkers Strike," *Cape Breton Post*, February 1, 1988; "Management needs union help in maintaining coke battery," *Cape Breton Post*, February 3, 1988.

⁵⁷ "Heavy voter turnout wants back to work," *Cape Breton Post*, March 17, 1988; Don MacPherson to Dave Dingwall, March 25, 1988, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

efforts in Pennsylvania years earlier, these did not include employees killed as the result of industrial accidents, automobile deaths, or surgical deaths of a non-occupational nature. Eighty-five names are listed; of these, 48 are marked as having passed away as the result of cancer.⁵⁸ With these numbers in hand, MacPherson and the union felt empowered to

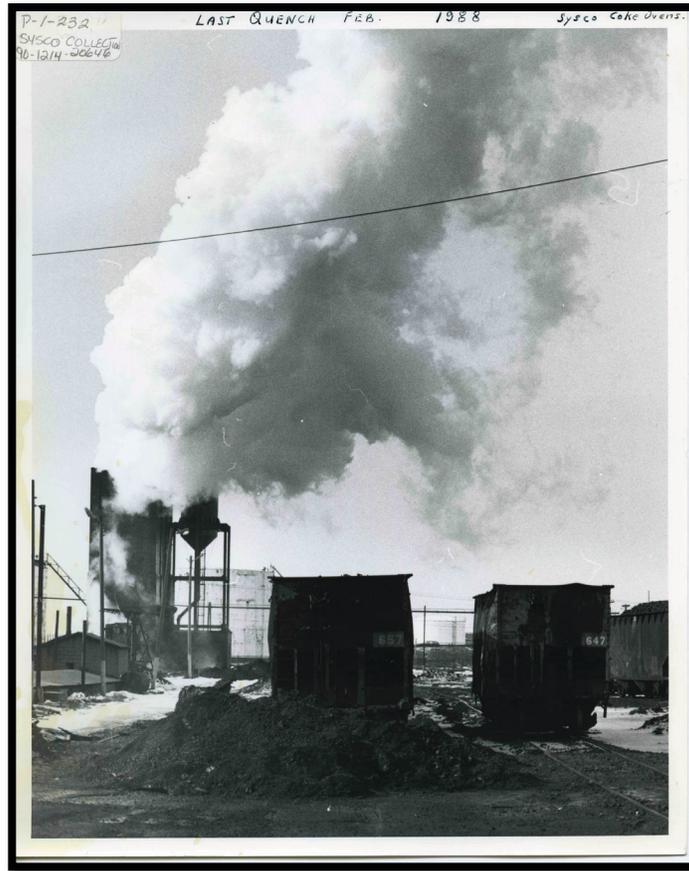


Figure 5.4: Last quench at the Coke Ovens, SYSCO, 1988
Source: Photograph by Henry Lalondais, Reference 90-1214-20646,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

bring the issue to the attention of the federal government. In a letter dated October 3, 1988, MacPherson writes to the federal Minister of the Environment, Tom MacMillan:

⁵⁸ Occupation, Health and Safety Committee, Local 1064, “Coke Ovens Workers and Retired Employees Who Have Died During the Past 25 Years,” 16 September 1988, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

A preliminary survey [...] show[s] a 60% cancer mortality rate, or four times the national average [...] One might ponder the reaction of the New York Times, Washington Post, and World Health Organization when they receive copies of the documentation. The inability of [...] Sysco, the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, the Federal and Provincial Departments of the Environment, to come to grips with this disaster, leave us no choice but to take the issue to a National and International level.⁵⁹

Over the next three months, members of the union sent letters to national and provincial politicians in an attempt to draw attention to the plight of the coke ovens workers. Federal and provincial NDP leaders Ed Broadbent and Alexa McDonough were supportive of the steelworkers' efforts, pledging to broach the issue with the respective ministers, while the federal Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources Jake Epp reminded MacPherson that the issues at hand were provincial responsibilities.⁶⁰

On March 15, 1989, Nova Scotia Minister of Labour Ron Russell announced several possible reforms to the Workers' Compensation Act; these included reformulating the benefit calculation from 75 percent of gross salary to 90 percent of net salary, although workers' groups believed that this could result in fewer payments overall. Russell also implied that the government might make it easier for workers to apply for compensation as the result of lung cancer, but not other types of occupational illness related to coke ovens employment.⁶¹ MacPherson immediately released a statement proclaiming that the proposed changes were a "lukewarm" effort at drawing attention from the ongoing coke ovens workers' dispute. Local 1064 reiterated their demands:

We're demanding full, comprehensive coverage for all affected coke ovens workers, provisions that would exceed coverage granted to ovens workers in Ontario [...] We don't think that the workers here should have to suffer because of government inaction that borders on criminal negligence.⁶²

⁵⁹ Don MacPherson to Tom MacMillan, 3 October 1988, Box 3, Files 7-8 Steel Project, BI.

⁶⁰ Ed Broadbent to Don MacPherson, 14 February 1989; Alexa McDonough to Don MacPherson, 8 July 1988. Jake Epp to Don MacPherson, 17 January 1989, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

⁶¹ "Workers March on House," *Chronicle Herald*, March 17, 1989.

⁶² "Covering Up Death at Sysco," *Canadian Tribune*, May 1, 1989.

The proposed changes would do little for those on the union rolls of coke ovens claimants, which by July had reached 32 claims by bereaved family members and 335 claims by living workers.⁶³ It also appeared that Russell was preparing Sysco workers for disappointment, cautioning petitioning workers, “What’s fair to me may not be fair to you. Unfortunately that’s the way the world works.”⁶⁴ Nonetheless, two coke ovens widows – only named in the local newspaper as “the widows of Wilfred Piercy and Joe Magee” - received approval for their compensation claims in November. This decision was hailed as a possible test case for the majority of workers’ claims, as the women’s husbands were not employed on top of the coke battery, but in other sections of the coking plant.⁶⁵

The coke ovens workers won a series of small victories early in 1990. On January 2, the front page of the provincial newspaper – the Halifax *Chronicle Herald* – announced that the WCB had upheld the decision in the Piercy / Magee cases. This decision recognized that all major sections of the coking plant could be considered a “hazardous workplace,” not simply the top of the batteries.⁶⁶ Although the WCB quickly asserted that these decisions did not set a precedent for the cases still under review, MacPherson was buoyed by the terms of the finding - though he remarked that of the 100 claims already processed, only 25 had received partial disability awards.⁶⁷

It was also in January that MacPherson was contacted by producers of CBC’s television program, *The Fifth Estate*. They were interested in producing an episode devoted to the workers’ fight for compensation at Sysco. Only a week before the episode

⁶³ Don MacPherson to Marion Ferguson, 17 July 1989, Box 3, Files 7-8, Steel Project, BI.

⁶⁴ “Minister is Committed to ‘Fair’ Compensation System,” *Cape Breton Post*, July 20, 1989.

⁶⁵ “Widows’ benefits ‘good omen’ for coke ovens workers,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 18, 1989.

⁶⁶ “Sysco Widows Compensated,” *Chronicle Herald*, January 2, 1990.

⁶⁷ “Sysco widows’ compensation not precedent – board official,” *Chronicle Herald*, January 3, 1990.

went to air, the WCB crafted another press release; the board had been waiting for employment records from Sysco before adjudicating cases, but as of March 14 they decided to move ahead with claims processing.⁶⁸ In addition, the labour minister invited those workers who had already been denied – numbering around 70 – to reapply. The WCB would now be applying “the benefit of the doubt,” meaning, “if the factors in favour of a worker’s claim are just as likely as the factors against, the matter is resolved in the worker’s favour. MLA Paul McEwan pointed out that this was nothing to celebrate; the benefit of the doubt was already supposed to have been applied to every application.⁶⁹

By April, the steelworkers’ union and former members of the Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice had obtained a series of important concessions from the reluctant Nova Scotia government. Aside from announcing the re-examination of formerly denied applications, Russell had also agreed that the WCB would not only be compensating workers suffering from lung cancer, but also from other diseases associated with coke ovens employment. These included industrial bronchitis, lung collapse, chronic respiratory ailments, and non-cancerous disease.⁷⁰

Although Local 1064 and Don MacPherson would never achieve their goal of “full, comprehensive coverage for all affected coke ovens workers,” they did make gains on behalf of workers and families suffering from industrial disease in Sydney. Further, their fight for compensation had a lasting impact within the community; the popularization of a public discourse surrounding issues of ill-health and industrial loss would result in the emergence of localized protest and collective action through the next decades. The coke ovens workers’ response to deindustrialization provided a platform for resistance that was eventually adopted by other residents in the city.

Epilogue: Rejecting the “Health or Jobs” Dichotomy

⁶⁸ “Sysco log jam no longer stopping WCB,” *Cape Breton Post*, March 15, 1990.

⁶⁹ “Sysco’s Ovens Workers Get Second Chance,” *Cape Breton Post*, April 11, 1990.

⁷⁰ “Coke Ovens Crusader Hails Province’s Stand,” *Cape Breton Post*, April 11, 1990.

[The coke ovens were] pretty good to me . . . I brought up a family there. Bought a home, bought cars, so I guess I can't complain . . . but by the looks it might be pretty ugly for me, too.⁷¹

- Joe Keller, Sysco Coke Ovens Worker, 1990

In 1995, amidst an ongoing epidemiological study in Sydney, Nancy Robb published an article on the health impact of the Sysco coke ovens in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. “Were jobs more important than health in Sydney,” was her organizing question; yes, essentially, was her conclusion.⁷² This question, often considered fundamental in public discourse surrounding deindustrialization and public health, obscures more than it reveals. As McIvor has noted elsewhere, to offer the notion of a binary opposition between “jobs” on the one hand and “health” on the other presents a false dilemma – it ignores the power differentials that exist between workers, government, and corporations.⁷³

To present “jobs” and “health” in a dichotomous relationship overlooks the long history of working-class environmentalism that sprouted from shop-floor experiences since the 19th century. Chad Montrie has effectively dismantled the notion that the environmental movement only found purchase after Rachael Carson’s 1962 *Silent Spring*; rather, he skillfully describes workers’ efforts to challenge environmental degradation from the earliest days of industrialization in the United States.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, as Andrew Hurley notes in his study of environmental inequalities in Gary, Indiana, there was a fundamental shift in the American popular perception of environmentalism dating to the mid-20th century. At that point, he argues, three competing strands of environmentalism emerged: middle class suburban, urban workplace oriented, and urban African

⁷¹ Joe Keller, interview by Michael Earle, 16 May 1990.

⁷² Nancy Robb, “Were Jobs More Important Than Health in Sydney?” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 152, 6 (15 March 1995): 919-23.

⁷³ Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 166.

⁷⁴ Chad Montrie, *A People’s History of Environmentalism in the United States* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

American.⁷⁵ As a result, industrial workers and middle-class environmentalists are often perceived among the general public as possessing uniquely disparate goals and objectives; such a view is sometimes underscored by workers' attempts to challenge industrial flight and the material dispossession of deindustrialization.

The Environmental Justice Movement, a term coined by Robert Bullard in the early 1990s, began exploring the intersections between environmental degradation and the social conditions experienced by subaltern populations as early as 1982.⁷⁶ In the United States, this often meant exploring issues of environmental racism and the marginalization of working-class African American neighbourhoods facing issues relating to pollution or environmental decline.⁷⁷ Internationally, there has been attention paid to the class dimensions of environmental activism; notably, Joan Martinez-Alier explores grassroots resistance to environmental exploitation in impoverished areas of the global south in her book, *The Environmentalism of the Poor*.⁷⁸ Rarely do these international studies examine shop-floor environmentalism; more often, they position ecological activism as a community-based social response to the immiseration and exploitation of global capitalism.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

⁷⁶ Robert D. Bullard, "Environmental Justice in the Twenty-first Century," in *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005), 19-42.

⁷⁷ Olga Pomar, "Toxic Racism on the New Jersey Waterfront," in *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2005), 125-41; Dorceta E. Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁷⁸ Joan Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002).

⁷⁹ Isabelle Anguelovski and Joan Martinez-Alier, "The 'Environmentalism of the Poor' revisited: Territory and place in disconnected global struggles," *Ecological Economics* 102 (June 2014): 167-176.

Canadian research into environmental justice often focuses on the layers of racial peripheralization that are experienced by indigenous peoples and First Nations groups as the result of ecological destruction.⁸⁰ When environmentalism in industrial communities is explored, shop-floor experiences are often ignored for community-based perspectives. In S. Harris Ali's discussion of political economy and toxic pollution in Sydney, for example, environmental remediation efforts are only considered to have begun in 1991 with the emergence of the provincial Crown corporation "The Sydney Tar Ponds Clean up Inc."⁸¹ Working-class environmentalism must be incorporated into the study of environmental justice through an intersectional framework; the efforts of the Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice and Local 1064 were directed explicitly towards resisting both deindustrialization and bodily harm resulting from industrial pollution. Their resistance continued beyond the loss of the workplace to directly inform an emergent community-based environmental movement in the 1990s, which is the focus of the next chapter. With cases remaining before the courts in 2016, the organization of Sydney's coke ovens workers against economic erasure and ill-health remains an important part of deindustrialization's "aftermath" in the former steel capital of Atlantic Canada.

⁸⁰ Deborah McGregor, "Honouring Our Relations: An Anishnaabe Perspective on Environmental Justice;" Bonita Lawrence, "Reclaiming Ktaqamkuk: Land and Mi'kmaq Identity in Newfoundland;" Pat O'Reilly and Peter Cole, "Coyote and Raven talk about environmental justice," in *Speaking for Ourselves: Environmental Justice in Canada*, eds. Julian Agyeman, Peter Cole, Randolph Haluza-DeLay and Pat O'Reilly (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009).

⁸¹ S. Harris Ali, "The Political economy of Environmental Inequality: The Social Distribution of Risk as an Environmental Injustice," in *Speaking for Ourselves: Environmental Justice in Canada*, eds. Julian Agyeman, Peter Cole, Randolph Haluza-DeLay and Pat O'Reilly (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 104.

Chapter Six

Bury it, Burn it, or Truck it Away: Remediation and the Toxic Legacy, 1986-1999

Cancer
Ocean pollution
Killing
Enormously terrible

Outstandingly awful
Vicious
Evil
Nasty

- Protest Sign, Sydney. 1999¹

The smoky air of the integrated mill was only a memory when the city turned its attention to another by-product of its primary industry – this time, emerging from underneath the feet of its residents. In late April 1999, dark orange ooze was found seeping into the basements of homes along Frederick Street in Whitney Pier – just a few hundred yards from the site of the former coke ovens and the Cape Breton Regional Municipality landfill.² Two weeks later, after receiving news that the material had tested positive for nearly 50 parts-per-million (ppm) of arsenic, four families of the 17 on the street were asked to leave their homes and given the option of staying at the Delta Hotel “until more appropriate accommodations could be arranged.”³ When three more families left the following day, packing what little they could, locals could not help but draw comparisons

¹ Photo in Maude Barlow and Elizabeth May, *Frederick Street: Life and Death on Canada's Love Canal* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000), 132-3.

² “Pier Residents expect goo results today,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 7, 1999.

³ “Families forced from homes,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 14, 1999.

to the incident at Love Canal, New York in 1978 when hundreds of families were relocated as the result of toxic pollution.⁴

The Frederick Street re-location – and the eventual demolition of homes - was the culmination of more than a decade of community concern and protest relating to the contamination of Muggah Creek, known locally as the tar ponds, which flowed alongside the Sysco site into Sydney Harbour. State-funded “remediation” efforts began in the mid-1980s, but the failure of consecutive clean up plans and a growing literature documenting the health impacts of pollutants found within the site provoked a crisis within the community.



Figure 6.1: Juanita McKenzie holds a photograph of her home on Frederick Street
Source: Photograph by Steven Wadden, 2014

⁴ “Province moves three more families out of Pier homes,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 15, 1999; Thomas H. Fletcher, *From Love Canal to Environmental Justice: The Politics of Hazardous Waste on the Canada-U.S. Border* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 16.

Corresponding with the coke ovens workers' fight for compensation during the late 1980s, public awareness began to build relating to a possible threat – invisible but deadly – emanating from the grounds of the former coking plant and the adjacent tar ponds. As Katrin MacPhee writes of labour environmentalism in Canada, “working class concerns about industrial pollution bled into a wider environmental consciousness outside the bounds of the workplace.”⁵ Despite the working-class basis for local environmentalism, the notion that the Sydney steel plant could be characterized wholly by its “toxic legacy” also began to gain traction. Elizabeth May and Maude Barlowe give voice to this perception in their book *Frederick Street: Life and Death on Canada's Love Canal*. They write:

For 66 years the plant had polluted the 500 acres it had been given. It had indiscriminately dumped huge amounts of toxic waste on the entire community and any area downwind. Owners and acronyms had come and gone – from DISCO and DOMCO to BESCO and DOSCO [...] but the pollution remained [...] In 1968, the steel plant should have closed. If each worker had received a million dollars in compensation, the cost would have been less than the subsidies poured in to keep the mill afloat. More important, many lives would have been spared. But this was a steel mill that would not die, even if it killed everything around it.⁶

The concept of a toxic legacy, remaining long after the direct causes of pollution have disappeared, reveals another iteration of the city's identity - one that is correlated with the uncertainties triggered by deindustrialization. By the mid-1990s, the illusion of industrial permanency had begun to slip; rather than “the steel city of Atlantic Canada,” Sydney became synonymous with the health and environmental aftermaths of industrial production – home to “the worst toxic waste site in Canada:” the Sydney tar ponds.

This shift, and the public health crisis that it revealed, produced an acute sense of fear among residents living alongside the tar ponds and former coke ovens. People began to feel unsafe in their own homes as they became more aware of the possible threat of pollution; the sense that unseen toxins were impacting the bodies of residents and their

⁵ Katrin MacPhee, “Canadian Working-Class Environmentalism, 1965-1985,” *Labour/Le Travail* 74 (Fall 2014): 129.

⁶ Barlow and May, *Frederick Street*, 18-9.

families preyed upon the mental – as well as the physical – health of community members. One former resident of Frederick Street describes:

The “Fear” I speak of began in the spring of 1998, as [planned remediation] began on the coke ovens site [...] I remember it being around the first week of April. I woke up not feeling so well [...] I had a severe headache, felt nauseated, and was a little dizzy. Shortly after, my mouth began to feel really dry, my eyes were burning and my whole body was aching. [...] I gathered enough energy to leave my home to run some errands [...] Upon returning home [...] I began feeling all the symptoms again.⁷

After the provincial election in 1999, when the PCs were elected under a promise to close or sell Sydney Steel, many also feared an abdication of governmental responsibility. This reflects a common anxiety within post-industrial communities; when private corporations depart, sometimes being split-up and made into subsidiaries of other, larger companies, whose responsibility is the environmental damage that remains?

The relationship between these fears, the deindustrialization of Sydney Steel, and proposed remediation options for areas of the former integrated plant and the tar ponds are the focus of this chapter. The first section examines a provincial plan to incinerate tar ponds contaminants between 1986 and 1996. Although many steelworkers were supportive of a clean up effort, occupational knowledge revealed the likely existence of additional undetected contaminants that would prove a logistical problem for the proposal. This knowledge was not taken into consideration, and by 1996 – with the project over time and nearly \$15 million over budget – the incineration plan was abandoned.

When locals rejected another top-down remediation option – encapsulation of the contaminants – the federal and provincial governments created a mandate for a community-based organization to consider options and offer proposals. The disparate interests at play within this organization, the Joint Action Group (JAG), reveal the challenges of maintaining cross-class environmental activism, made more visible by provincial attempts to privatize Sysco during the 1990s.

In the final section, oral history accounts of two women who were re-located from Frederick Street in 1999 provides stark evidence of the continuing costs of industrial production and de-industrial remediation. Debbie Ouellette and Juanita McKenzie, who

⁷ Debbie Ouellette, e-mail message to author, June 21, 2016.

had no direct connection to Sysco aside from living next-door, continue to suffer the bodily aftermath of these processes - more than 17 years after they left their homes. Their activism provides insight into the intersections of class and gender that exist among grassroots community protest groups. So, too, do their efforts illustrate how the types of knowledge produced by working-class people are called into question by state and institutional actors. That there has been no official recognition of the damage done to these women and other residents is shameful; their experiences reflect the bodily violence done to working-class people during deindustrialization – with mental and physical scars remaining long after industry disappears and brownfield sites are ‘remediated’ into green fields.

Occupational Knowledge and Incineration, 1986-1996

Scientific reports detailing Sydney’s heightened levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) were used by steelworkers in their fight for compensation; although the government was initially unwilling to deal with their claims, some of these early studies did prompt a state response. Testing conducted by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in 1980-1981 concluded that lobsters within the south arm of the Sydney Harbour contained much higher levels of PAH than did other coastal crustaceans.⁸ This resulted in a moratorium on lobster fishing in the area and, as J.H. Vandermeulen writes, “subsequent environmental surveys of various potential PAH-sources in the area indicated the Sysco coking facility and nearby “tar pond” in Muggah Creek as the likely sources of hydrocarbon contamination.”⁹

It was clear by the early 1980s that contaminants were negatively impacting the environment around the plant. This prompted the provincial government to contract

⁸ G.R. Sirota, J.F. Uthe, D.G. Robinson, and C.J. Musial, “Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in American Lobster (*Homarus americanus*) and Blue Mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) collected in Sydney Harbour, Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada,” *Canadian Manuscript Report of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences* 1758 (1984).

⁹ J.H. Vandermeulen, “PAH and heavy metal pollution of the Sydney estuary: Summary and review of studies to 1987,” *Canadian Technical Report of Hydrography and Ocean Sciences* 108 (May 1989): 1.

Acres International to “conduct a drilling program to obtain samples of the contaminated sediments and underlying strata in the Tar Pond” and propose possible solutions.¹⁰ In four phases, Acres assessed the extent of PAH contamination in more than 700,000 tonnes of soil and sediment surrounding the coking plant and organized a series of recommendations designed to stem the flow of pollutants from the tar ponds into the harbour. The company offered three options: in-situ encapsulation of contaminants, off-site disposal, or incineration; burning the material, Acres argued, was “by far the most attractive” option.¹¹



Figure 6.2: Illustrated Plan of the City of Sydney, Nova Scotia, 1934
Source: Map by Arthur N. Wallace, Map 216,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

On the basis of this study, federal and provincial governments proposed a clean up of the tar ponds site in December 1985. The decision was formalized on November 7,

¹⁰ Acres Consulting Services Limited, *Sydney Tar Pond Remediation: Phase I Report: Final*, 4 May 1984, Bras d’Or Collection, 6283, Cape Breton University Library, Sydney, NS.

¹¹ Acres Consulting Services Limited, *Sydney Tar Pond Study: Final Project Report, Volume I*, June 1985, Bras d’Or Collection, 5709, Cape Breton University Library.

1986, when representatives from each signed a \$34 million agreement.¹² Coinciding with Phase II of the Sysco modernization, the clean up was expected to occur over a 10-year period.¹³ Acres was awarded the contract for project management, and they outlined a multi-faceted remediation program:

The dredging will proceed in a step-wise fashion beginning at the south end of the Tar Ponds [...] The dredged material will either be trucked or moved by slurry pipeline to a prepared site on the adjacent Sysco property. The sediment will be de-watered, blended if required and combusted to produce electric power which will be fed into the provincial power grid.¹⁴

Superburn Systems Ltd. of British Columbia was sub-contracted to design and construct the necessary incinerators in 1989. They agreed to construct a “300 T/day revolving fluidized bed incineration plant” at an estimated capital cost of \$16.5 million; these incinerators were promised to destroy PAH “with an efficiency of 99.99 percent.”¹⁵

The problem with this plan, which steelworkers were quick to point out, was that it failed to account for other possible contaminants. A 1984 study by Ocean Chem had found heightened rates of the carcinogenic *polychlorinated biphenyls* (PCB) at the mouth of Muggah Creek and in other areas.¹⁶ These compounds, invented in 1929 to make plastics, pesticides, and hydraulic fluids, were banned in Canada since 1977 – but they

¹² “Sysco, tar ponds projects announced,” *Cape Breton Post*, December 28, 1985.

¹³ “Agreement signed to eliminate region’s worst toxic waste site,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 8, 1986.

¹⁴ Ian C. Travers, “Sydney Tar Ponds: A Case Study,” Presented to Hazmat Canada Conference, Toronto, Ontario, 9-11 September 1987, Bras d’Or Collection, 6292, Cape Breton University Library.

¹⁵ Geoff W. Boraston, “Revolving Fluidized Bed Technology for the Treatment of Hazardous Materials,” *Abstract Proceedings: Second Forum on Innovative Hazardous Waste Treatment Technologies: Domestic and International* (Philadelphia, PA: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 15-17 May 1990), 14.

¹⁶ Ocean Chem Ltd., *Examination of dredged material disposal alternatives Sydney, N.S. Final Report (Dartmouth, N.S.)*, 1984, Bras d’Or Collection, 6340, Cape Breton University Library.

had been in regular use within transformers at the steel plant since the 1930s.¹⁷ PCB required exposure to a much higher temperature than did PAH to ensure their destruction. In addition, Acres drilled and analyzed 32 bore holes throughout the tar ponds site in 1987; of these, varying levels of PCB contamination were identified – though they were under the 50 ppm threshold.¹⁸ Don MacPherson, former leader of Coke Ovens Workers United for Justice, argued in 1990:

They talked about the tar ponds situation, what it contained was PAH material, benzopyrene [...] that sort of thing, sludge. Now, being an electrician on the steel plant for twenty-six years, I knew that PCBs were . . . for many years, for generations, [the tar ponds] was the dump site of this transformer coolant when it was being changed [...] If it was 40 or 50 gallons, they used to dump that in the sewer system. And it would end up in the tar pond. If it was 300 or 400 gallons, they used to save that.¹⁹

Charles MacDonald reflected upon a similar experience:

Charles: We used to go working [...] down on the big transformers three or four days at a time, mucking out the old sediment and stuff.

Michael: The PCB's?

Charles: Yes, of course, PCB's [...] People used to take it home and rub it on their arthritis²⁰ [...] We used to take that stuff and just dump it in the sewers after a change. If it was a lot, like if we changed a big transformer [...] they had a little wagon [...] But if you had a small amount, 10 or 20 gallons, you just dumped that down the sewer. That went out in the harbour. They didn't tell anybody anything in that vein.²¹

¹⁷ Laurel Sefton MacDowell, *An Environmental History of Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 195-6.

¹⁸ JWEL-IT, *Report on PCB Delineation and Remedial Options for the Muggah Creek Containment Project*, 31 May 1996, Bras d'Or Collection, 5158, Cape Breton University Library.

¹⁹ Don MacPherson, interview by Michael Earle. January 1990, Steel Project, MG 14, 206, T-2590, transcript, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS.

²⁰ Some steelworkers would use the PCB-containing fluid as a curative remedy for arthritis and joint pain. This came up in several interviews.

²¹ Charles MacDonald, interview by Michael Earle, January 9, 1990, Steel Project, Box 6, File 39, transcript, BI.

With these common occupational experiences, it is unsurprising that some steelworkers were sceptical of the incineration plan. In fact, plant welder Leon Colford directly relates the ongoing tar ponds clean up efforts with the earlier campaign of the coke ovens workers:

There is a move by the people, and they're going to the city alderman and they're telling them that they are not going to put up with PCBs being burnt in that Superburner. They are not [...] The word is: 'What they didn't finish at the coke ovens, they're not going to finish it down in the Pier'. They're not going to dump it on us and finish us off [...] They did harm in the coke ovens, they're not going to do it again [...] They're going to their Alderman and the next thing it will be in the news media because we certainly don't want to see PCBs bunt in the Pier area.²²

Steelworkers' responses reveal a set of local and global solidarities that influenced how the planned incineration was perceived within the community. Richard Newman, writing of the protest movement at Love Canal, argues that there were two broader trends that influenced working-class activism: "Americans' rising environmental consciousness and deindustrialization."²³ These trends also influenced the early tar ponds clean up, but they cannot be divorced from the specific local conditions created by the coke ovens workers' public fight for compensation and an increasing popular awareness of the health impact of the pollutants found within the site. These experiences, combined with an occupational understanding of the types of contaminants involved, allowed for a particular form of cross-class agitation to develop.

Awareness of environmental concerns was strong in Canada by the late 1980s; the Department of the Environment, the Clean Air Act and the Canada Water Act had been in existence for nearly two decades. International events such as the Bhopal disaster in 1984, Chernobyl in 1986, and the PCB fire in Ville de Sainte-Basile-le-Grand in 1988 had

²² Leon Colford, interview by Michael Earle, September 18, 1990, Steel Project, Box 6, File 12, transcript, BI.

²³ Richard Newman, "From Love's Canal to Love Canal: Reckoning With the Environmental Legacy of an Industrial Dream," in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003): 127.

turned the world's attention to the impact of environmental disaster.²⁴ In Sydney, newspaper coverage of the coke ovens' workers struggle and the circumstances surrounding the final closure of the ovens in 1988 also prompted an increased understanding of the site's potentially harmful pollutants. Additionally, the clean up was intended to "generate 1,400 direct and in-direct person years of employment in Nova Scotia over the ten-year duration."²⁵ As a result, Sydney steelworkers were less hostile to clean up efforts than might otherwise have been the case; this contrasts with the Love Canal case study, where deindustrialization pitted workers directly against middle-class environmentalists.²⁶

While removing contaminants was not a controversial proposition, the means by which this would be accomplished continued to provoke reaction. The location of the incinerator, near the site of the Sysco blast furnaces, was only a short distance from a Whitney Pier elementary school. This prompted concerns regarding whether the sludge could be safely burnt, and gave a sense of urgency to steelworkers' recollections of dumping PCB-laden hydraulic fluids into the sewer system. Others suspected that the proposed methods by which contaminated sludge would be transported to the incinerator would be insufficient. Coke ovens employee Bill Graham remarked:

As a matter of fact I don't think they've even come to a concrete decision as to how to extract the material from the Tar Ponds itself. I hear them discussing dredgeline and trucking, and I've heard them discussing a pipeline and pumping. I don't think that after this two years of study, and the facility actually being in the construction stage, that they've even made a decision on that, which I find very surprising.²⁷

²⁴ Sefton MacDowell, *An Environmental History of Canada*, 255; Suroopa Mukherjee, *Surviving Bhopal: Dancing Bodies, Written Texts and Oral Testimonials of Women in the Wake of an Industrial Disaster* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 62.

²⁵ Travers, "Sydney Tar Ponds: A Case Study," 3; "Articles of Agreement for Project Management of the Sydney Tar Ponds Clean up Program," 1987, Bras d'Or Collection, 6286, Cape Breton University Library.

²⁶ Newman, "From Love's Canal to Love Canal," 129.

²⁷ Bill Graham, interview by Michael Earle, September 12, 1990, Steel Project, Box 6, File 24, transcript, BI.

Graham’s remarks are prescient, but steelworkers’ occupational knowledge was not taken seriously; the incineration plan was plagued with cost over-runs and missed deadlines. By the mid-1990s, problems relating to both the incineration and transportation of the sludge had manifested. These would call the viability of the entire operation into question.

Part of the problem was that there were no formal mechanisms by which local knowledge, occupational or otherwise, could be effectively communicated to project organizers. Although some steelworkers had reservations, as did other community-based environmentalists, the only means of communication available were letters to the editor of the *Post*, private correspondence with project organizers, or discussions with local politicians. While some took this route, as Colford describes, others outlined their concerns informally – in the interviews with the Beaton Institute “Steel Project,” for instance. Recognition of these shortcomings would, in the second iteration of the clean up, result in the creation of the community-based Joint Action Group in 1996.



Figure 6.3: Sydney Tar Ponds Cleanup public information display centre, 1988
Source: Photograph by Raytel Photography, Reference 88-594-18104,
Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

On March 26, 1991, the Provincial Government of Nova Scotia established Sydney Tar Ponds Clean up Inc. – a crown corporation created to oversee the processes of remediation. Its board of directors included John Strasser, president of Sysco, and Ray Martheleur – a steelworker with decades of experience at the mill.²⁸ Just six months after the organization issued its first annual report, Acres revealed that PCB tests found several “hot spots” throughout the tar ponds; these had not been visible throughout the earlier randomized testing.²⁹ According to the report, a 1.2-hectare area of the south pond contained more than 50 ppm of PCB material– qualifying as a hazardous waste. One of the boreholes, located outside a Sysco sewer pipe on Ferry Street, revealed a staggering measurement of 2,066 ppm of PCB within the soil – more than 40 times higher than the limit. As a result, this material could not be incinerated.³⁰

Meanwhile, residents and steelworkers alike pressed for information on heightened rates of cancers and other illnesses throughout Ashby and Whitney Pier. Dave Ervin, former president of Local 1064, recalls working to promote “Act! For a Healthy Sydney” as early as 1991, as well as the Atlantic Coastal Action Program after its formation in 1992. Act! was a community-based project, initially proposed by Dalhousie University epidemiologist Judith Guernsey, which sought to promote healthy lifestyles in Cape Breton and examine possible environmental factors of ill health.³¹ The province funded this project after 1993, when another steelworker – Don Deleskie – went on a

²⁸ Sydney Tar Pond Clean Up Inc., “Annual Report,” 1991-1992, Bras d’Or Collection, 5022, Cape Breton University Library.

²⁹ “Tar Ponds hot spots far above acceptable,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 14, 1992.

³⁰ Acres International Limited, *Sydney Tar Ponds Clean up, PCB Contamination, Interim Report*, October 1992, Bras d’Or Collection, 5999, Cape Breton University Library.

³¹ Dave Ervin, interview with author, August 8, 2013; ACT! For a healthy Sydney, *Final Report: survey of community opinions of health needs*, 1997, Bras d’Or Collection, 6197, Cape Breton University Library.

public hunger strike demanding an epidemiological study of residents.³² ACT! was officially launched in 1994 as a “health-protection, health-promotion community intervention trial,” and its data provided a basis for further studies by Guernsey and other public health specialists.³³

Another major problem soon emerged. In 1994, R.V. Anderson Ltd. was contracted to explore the delivery system through which the sludge was to be transported to the incinerators. The seemingly contradictory conclusions reveal:

The equipment and unit processes installed are considered to be appropriate for the intended functions [...] There is, however, some concern that the installed dredging and pumping system is not capable of delivering the contaminated sediment to the fuel cells in the required quantities.³⁴

This admission, coming nearly 10 years after the clean up was initially announced, prompted outrage within the community. That \$55 million had been spent with nothing to show for it did not go unnoticed; after defeating Donald Cameron and the Tories in the 1993 provincial election, the new Liberal government under John Savage sought an inexpensive path forward for the remediation process. These efforts led them to propose another solution for the tar ponds problem, which was announced to residents in Sydney on January 15, 1996: encapsulation.

**“If we don’t watch out, we’ll be studied to death”:
Environmental Activism and Public Health in ‘Canada’s Love Canal,’ 1996-1998**

³² Barlow and May, *Frederick Street*, 99; “Breathing poison in Cape Breton,” *National Post*, September 30, 1999; “Obituary – Donald Deleskie,” *Cape Breton Post*, June 2, 2008.

³³ Hajnol Molnar-Szakacs, “An Investigation of Adolescents Perspectives on Belonging to the Community and The Influence of Data Collection Methods on Information,” (master’s thesis, Dalhousie University, 1999), 9-10; Sheila Copps to Don MacPherson, 21 Dec 1995, Volume 1329, File 134994, Department of the Environment Fonds, RG 108-A, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON; Judith Guernsey, proposal – “Adverse Health Outcomes, Sydney,” 25 February 1997, Sydney Tar Ponds Briefing File, Volume 121, File 7, Lowell Murray Fonds, R14121-19-3-E, LAC.

³⁴ R.V. Anderson, *Sydney Tar Ponds Report: Review of the Sydney Tar Ponds Sediment Remediation System*, July 1994, Bras d’Or Collection, 6262, Cape Breton University Library.

Steelworkers and community members alike grew increasingly frustrated through 1995 as the clean up failed to proceed.³⁵ Compounding this was the apparent levity with which some provincial Liberals treated the tar ponds issue. The following exchange occurred on January 10, 1996 in the Nova Scotia legislature between George O'Malley, the Minister of Supply and Services, and Alfie MacLeod, a PC MLA from Cape Breton:

MacLeod: On December 14, 1995, in this House I asked the status of the plan regarding the clean up of the Sydney tar ponds. The minister responded, "It is in the very near future. In the very near future" that the government would be announcing its plan. Well, it is almost a month later and I was wondering if the minister is any closer to the future now than he was then?

O'Malley: Mr. Speaker, that is a very philosophical question, whether I am any closer to the future now than I was then. I would presume I am just about as close to the future as I was then [...] In serious answer [...] it is my hope that this time next week we will have gone to Cape Breton and made the appropriate statements.³⁶

Despite his mirth, O'Malley faced a raucous crowd of angry community members when he arrived in Sydney on the morning of January 15.

Arriving at 500 George Street in downtown Sydney for a 10:30 a.m. press conference, O'Malley announced a new \$20 million dollar commitment to the remediation effort. The incineration plan was to be entirely abandoned. Rather, the tar ponds were to be "encapsulated" using leftover slag from Sysco steelmaking operations, while the sludge containing the highest levels of PCB was to be transported out of province. "We're going from a clean up to a cover up," shouted Bruno Marcocchio, a local environmentalist.³⁷ Victor Tomiczek, a member of the Canadian Auto Workers, interrupted O'Malley, "Because it's in Cape Breton, you don't care about our jobs, you don't care about our health, you don't care about our future. You're just going to cover it

³⁵ Ron Nicholson, report on emissions at Sydney coke ovens, 7 November 1995, Departmental Correspondence, Volume 1339, File 136035, Department of the Environment Fonds, LAC.

³⁶ Nova Scotia, *Debates and Proceedings of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly*, January 10, 1996, http://nslegislature.ca/index.php/proceedings/hansard/C60/56_3_81/.

³⁷ "Tar Ponds burial slagged," *Chronicle Herald*, January 16, 1996.

up. Well it's not going to go away, and we're not going to allow you to do it."³⁸

According to Sydney mayor John Coady, O'Malley had told him "it was this or nothing" just prior to the announcement.³⁹

The next afternoon, the province backed off from that position. Instead, provincial Environment Minister Wayne Adams announced that he would send the plan to an environmental assessment board where the public would have an opportunity to offer input. Marcocchio, who lost his wife and fellow activist Roberta Bruce to cancer in 1992, welcomed the news – but demanded a full federal investigation.⁴⁰ Adding their voices to those of unionists and local activists were the youth members of the Sydney 4-H club, who organized a letter-writing campaign seeking support for alternative options to encapsulation. In response to one of these letters, Elizabeth May pledged the support of the Sierra Club of Canada; May's involvement helped to place the Sydney tar ponds in the national spotlight and her account of these events form the basis of *Frederick Street*.⁴¹

Global and national contexts influenced the community's outrage. Andrew Hurley describes the period between 1985 and 1994 as the "incinerator interregnum," in which the renewed appeal of [incineration as a waste-disposal method] coincided with [...] technological advancements facilitating the conversion of heat into steam and electricity, thereby restoring profitability to the method."⁴² While the popularity of this method of disposal declined as the result of public opposition and legal constraints, its failure in Sydney was also related to the local landscape and types of pollutants that were involved. After a decade of inaction, followed by the failure of incineration, residents feared that

³⁸ Kas Roussey, "Tar ponds cleanup plan unpopular with Sydney residents," *The National*, CBC, January 15, 1996, <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/entry/tar-ponds-cleanup-plan-unpopular-with-sydney-residents>.

³⁹ "Local politicians kept in the dark about details," *Chronicle Herald*, January 16, 1996.

⁴⁰ "N.S. orders assessment of tar ponds," *Chronicle Herald*, January 17, 1996; Barlow and May, *Frederick Street*, 109.

⁴¹ Sierra Club joins debate," *Cape Breton Post*, April 16, 1996.

⁴² Andrew Hurley, "From Factory Town to Metropolitan Junkyard: Postindustrial Transitions on the Urban Periphery," *Environmental History* 21, 1 (2016): 15.

burying the waste would simply be leaving the problem for another generation of Cape Bretoners to deal with.



Figure 6.4: Tar Ponds

Source: Photograph by Owen Fitzgerald, Reference 89-795-18989, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University

The emergence of a concerted community-based effort to influence the tar ponds clean up is also related to changes in how the Canadian state dealt with social movements. Catherine Corrigan-Brown and Mabel Ho argue that the governance style of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien (1993-2003) prompted the federal state to work more closely with community groups as part of an appeal to “ordinary citizens” instead of “interest groups.” This was in contrast to these relationships under former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1984-1993), when the legitimacy of social movements was sometimes openly attacked.⁴³

⁴³ Catherine Corrigan-Brown and Mabel Ho, “How the State Shapes Social Movements: An Examination of the Environmental Movement in Canada,” in *Protest and Politics*:

The federal position on the Sydney tar ponds reflects this change; although federal Environment Minister Tom MacMillan had been in the city to sign the 1986 agreement, clean up operations had been entirely under the purview of the provincial government throughout the early 1990s. By the summer of 1996, the federal Liberals became considerably more involved in the clean up process.

When Environment Minister Sergio Marchi traveled to Sydney in August 1996 to tour the tar ponds, he met with representatives from several community groups. Charles MacDonald, the president of Local 1064, was present, as were several former steelworkers, Elizabeth May on behalf of the Sierra Club, Shirley Christmas of the nearby Mi'kmaq community of Membertou, a number of economic development personnel, and Ron Deleskie of a local citizens liaison group.⁴⁴ Greg MacLeod of the Tompkins Institute at UCCB, who was also present at the meeting with Marchi, explicitly connected the ongoing environmental problems with deindustrialization:

The old [company] from England took out the coal, making profits for investment in England and New York. It left us with environmental problems. It kept the profits and made no investment in Cape Breton.

Again, we have outside companies that want to solve the environmental problems, and make profits, but they will not reinvest in Cape Breton.⁴⁵

The community message was loud and clear, Marchi told the *Chronicle Herald*; on the basis of the minister's urging and the community protest, the province announced that it would not be moving ahead with the encapsulation. Rather, he reported, "We'll have a joint action committee" to recommend solutions.⁴⁶

Marchi's announcement was the first step towards the Joint Action Group – a government-funded community organization with a mandate to examine and influence

The Promise of Social Movement Societies, eds. Howard Ramos and Kathleen Rodgers (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 105-6.

⁴⁴ "Tar Ponds toured," *Cape Breton Post*, August 13, 1996; Ron Deleskie and Don Deleskie were twin brothers.

⁴⁵ Greg MacLeod, "Let Cape Bretoners do it," *Cape Breton Post*, August 13, 1996.

⁴⁶ "Tar Ponds burial plan on ice," *Chronicle Herald*, August 13, 1996.

the tar ponds clean up efforts. JAG, billed as “one of the first times that citizens are being given a lead role in an environmental cleanup [sic],” was comprised of a main roundtable of 55 members and several smaller working groups such as: governance, site security, environmental data gathering, health studies, and public education and participation. The organization was initially funded by a \$300,000 grant, which drew upon municipal, provincial, and federal sources.⁴⁷ JAG was comprised of representatives from the steelworkers, concerned residents, local politicians, and economic development staff.

Cracks soon began to show within the organization; although initially intended as a space for each of the effected groups to have their voices heard, sometimes members’ positions were at odds with one another.⁴⁸ The first meeting of the steering committee devolved into a shouting match, when Marcocchio – the vice-chair of the committee - confronted representatives from JWEL-IT – the company that had initially proposed encapsulation as a solution. According to the *Cape Breton Post*, “Marcocchio approached the two JWEL-IT representatives [...] and after referring to them using a slang word for prostitute, ripped the [paper] handout in half.”⁴⁹ Despite these growing pains, representatives from the federal, provincial and municipal governments gathered in Sydney at the end of January 1997 to announce \$1.67 million in funding for the JAG program. This included funding for a secretariat, a review of all previous health studies, and environmental monitoring.⁵⁰

Circumstances at Sysco also made it difficult for labour environmentalists to remain united with other partners in the clean up process. In 1993, the China Minmetals Corporation arranged a deal with the Nova Scotia government wherein they would co-

⁴⁷ Joint Action Group (JAG), “Key Milestones,” 1996, in the author’s possession; Annual Report, 24 October 1998, JAGA, 2003-011, Box 1, File 1, JAG Project, BI; Tar ponds related funding, 2008-012. Box 13, File 5, Department of Transportation and Public Works Fonds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM), Halifax, NS.

⁴⁸ “JAG Governance Model,” 4 December 1996, GOVW, 2003-011, Box 2, File 1, JAG Project, BI.

⁴⁹ “Tempers flare while JAG members meet,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 15, 1997; Minutes, 14 January 1997, EDGR, Box 1, File 2, JAG Project, BI.

⁵⁰ Environment Canada, news release, 30 January 1997, in the author’s possession.

manage the plant for three years; this arrangement was organized with the intention that Minmetals would purchase the plant at the end of this period. Manning MacDonald took over the Sysco file in 1996. He recalls:

I found out that – when dealing with Minmetals – I wasn’t dealing with Minmetals in China, because when they came on board with Sydney Steel they formed a company called ‘Min-Canada.’ There was an office in Toronto. [...] And so Minmetals China, the corporate giant, wasn’t really responsible. It was this ‘Min-Canada.’ And they had no assets. So I soon realized that we were taking all the risk, and [they] weren’t putting anything up.⁵¹

Minmetals announced in 1996 that they were no longer interested in pursuing a purchase agreement and the province began exploring other options for privatization.

Even though the Sydney steelworkers had been at the forefront of combatting the environmental impact of industry for years, some felt that they were increasingly perceived as outsiders within these discussions. The uncertainty surrounding Sysco combined with an increasingly popular narrative that consigned industrial work wholly to the ‘dirty’ past meant that some within Local 1064 grew wary of the JAG process altogether.

This narrative consisted of two primary motifs: economic and environmental. Economically, Cape Breton’s industries were positioned as perennial-losers within the language of an emergent neoliberalism. As is examined further in Chapter Seven, political discussions surrounding regional economic development began to focus on the promise of tech-incubators, entrepreneurialism, and fiscal austerity; coal and steel, within this framework, were passé. Steelworkers grew wary of environmental narratives that viewed the operation of the mill as an ongoing problem, one that could only be solved by immediate closure. Pollution had decreased dramatically since the closure of the integrated mill, and some resented the notion that they clung to their jobs to the detriment of their community. Dave Ervin reflects:

I don’t have any use for the ‘rabid environmentalists.’ You know? “There’s only one answer,” and it’s their answer. There’s lots of answers to every problem [...] By the [mid-1990s], nobody on the steelworkers’ executive wanted to be involved

⁵¹ Manning MacDonald, interview with author, July 27, 2015.

with them. Well, I said, the place is going to get cleaned up one way or another. It's best we be on the inside, you know, tempering what they're doing.⁵²

Others felt that “outsiders” were using the tar ponds to advance their own careers, and would not pay any more attention to Sydney or its residents once the issue left the national spotlight. Several respondents, speaking anonymously, held this view of *Frederick Street*. As one reflected, “It was great when the Sierra Club first got involved [...] they brought media attention that would get things moving [...] but Elizabeth May hasn't been back to Sydney in awhile . . .”

This is why the impact of labour environmentalism must be taken into account within popular treatments of environmental and community activism; not only is it disingenuous to ignore workers' contributions – as Chad Montrie, Andrew Hurley, and others have shown – but the imposition of a wholly-exclusionary “toxic legacy” narrative of industrial history actively dis-incentivizes industrial workers from further participation in community-based environmental activism.⁵³ This should not be read as a claim that the bodily and environmental impact of industry is overstated, but as a reminder that workers, too, bear these scars alongside those wrought by the economic displacement and marginalization of industrial capitalism.

While Local 1064 participated in JAG and other discussions surrounding the clean up, particularly as these related to possible on-site jobs for laid-off steelworkers, by the end of the 1990s the employees at Sydney Steel were also facing economic threats. Disagreeing with the tactics of other local environmentalists, described by one former steelworker as “marching into an office and screaming for the head of the person in charge,” some stepped back from the process. Others, such as Eric Brophy, Don and Ron Deleskie, and Dan Yakimchuk remained staunch in their working-class

⁵² Dave Ervin, interview with author, August 8, 2013.

⁵³ Chad Montrie, *Making a Living: Work and the Environment in the United States* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Mark McLaughlin, “Green Shoots: Aerial Insecticide Spraying and the Growth of Environmental Consciousness in New Brunswick, 1952-1973,” *Acadiensis* 40, 1 (2011): 3-23.

environmentalism; these steelworkers would not only fight for environmental justice on the shop floor and within the union, they would become vocal supporters of the Frederick Street residents as the extent of pollution within the community became clear.⁵⁴

Despite the crosscurrents emerging within JAG, Sysco and Local 1064 remained invested in the clean up. In July 1998, JAG officially signed a memorandum of understanding with municipal, provincial, and federal governments. This formally outlined a mission statement: “To educate, involve, and empower the *community*, through partnerships, to determine, and implement acceptable solutions for Canada’s worst hazardous waste site and to assess and address the impact on *human health*.”⁵⁵ The mandate included a “Study and Assessment Phase,” wherein health and environmental studies would be conducted on-site, and a Recommendation phase, when JAG would present official recommendations of remediation options to government stakeholders.⁵⁶ Even prior to the signing of the MOU, work had begun on the assessment phase – provoking an immediate crisis for the working-class residents of Whitney Pier who lived closest to the former coke ovens site.⁵⁷ In two accounts of these events, the continuing spectre of de-industrial remediation becomes terribly visible.

**‘I live with it every day. It’s not something that goes away:’
Debbie Ouellette, Juanita McKenzie, and the Aftermath of Remediation**

Although the homes on Frederick Street have been demolished and the landscape of the former coke ovens has since been transformed into a community green space, the

⁵⁴ Deleskie Meeting With Government, 19 April 2000, 2008-012. Box 13, File 5, Department of Transportation and Public Works Fonds, NSARM.

⁵⁵ Memorandum of Understanding Among the Government of Canada, the Government of the Province of Nova Scotia, the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, and the Joint Action Group for Environmental Clean up of the Muggah Creek Watershed Association (JAG), 29 July 1998, JAGA, Collection 2003-011, Box 1, File 18, JAG Project, BI.

⁵⁶ Health Working Group, 25 February 1997, Sydney Tar Ponds Briefing File, Volume 121, File 7, Lowell Murray Fonds, LAC.

⁵⁷ Health Risk Perceptions of Sydney Residents: Risk Communication of Sydney Tar Ponds, May 1999, HSWG, 2003-011, Box 4, File 19, JAG Project, BI.

memory of spring 1998 remains rooted in place for former residents. It was at this moment when Debbie Ouellette describes her “Fear,” and nearly two decades of personal and legal struggles, as having truly began. Steven High writes, “Oral history provides us with an invaluable opportunity to see ruination from the point of view of those most directly affected.”⁵⁸ In the case of two former Frederick Street residents – Debbie Ouellette and Juanita McKenzie – the ruin wrought by decades of industrial production, the fraught political processes coinciding with deindustrialization, and the contentious community-based efforts to solve the tar ponds problem remain as relevant in 2016 as they were in 1998.⁵⁹ For these two women – neither of whom have a personal or occupational connection to Sysco – the psychological scars of de-industrial remediation will never disappear.

Debbie Ouellette

In June 2016, I met Debbie outside of what was once her home on Frederick Street. Over the next hour, we talked about her experience as we drove to a number of locations: nearby streams, the now-empty spaces that used to be filled with the homes of her friends and neighbours, and – finally – the site of the former coke ovens. It was Debbie who proposed conducting the interview in this manner; most of the interviews for this project took place across tables in the kitchens and living rooms of participants. As recent literature on “new mobile methodologies” describes, the mobile interview can offer special insight into the connections between place, space, time, and memory.⁶⁰ Although

⁵⁸ Steven High, “Mapping Memories of Displacement: Oral History, Memoryscapes and Mobile Methodologies,” in *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, ed. Shelley Trower (New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2011), 217-231.

⁵⁹ Others were denied the opportunity to move out of the neighbourhood. During the Frederick Street evacuations, Anne Ross – a woman who lived on the nearby Laurier Street, was told that ‘conclusive evidence does not to link what is going on at her property to the coke ovens property’; See Lawrence MacDonald to Clive Oldreive, 2008-012, Box 13, File 5, Department of Transportation and Public Works Fonds, NSARM.

⁶⁰ Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The new mobilities program,” *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006): 207-236; Jane Ricketts Hein, James Evans, and Phil Jones, “Mobile Methodologies: Theory, Technology and Practice,” *Geography Compass* 2-5 (2008): 1266-1285.

the distance between sites precluded us from walking, Debbie's control over the location of the interview at different points of her story offered what Mimi Shelley and John Urry have referred to as "atmosphere of place." Her spoken memories of life on Frederick Street were contrasted with the now-empty landscapes before us.⁶¹



Figure 6.5: Debbie Ouellette, 2005
Source: Photograph by Steven Wadden

"These are new trees. These are all new trees that were planted. This is a new brook. When we were here, nothing looked like that," she says, gesturing to the altered landscape that was once her front yard. Looking across the grassy expanse towards where the Sysco coke ovens once stood, she describes the symptoms that began to plague the street's residents as the earth was disturbed during the JAG assessment process: "severe headaches, nausea, sore throats, burning eyes . . . The headaches were so bad, I thought I

⁶¹ Sheller and Urry, "The new mobilities program," 218.

had a brain tumour [...] So that's when we decided to get together as a group.”⁶² Debbie and I drove away from Frederick Street, towards an exposed bit of water trickling through the newly constructed ditch-work. Here, we got out of the car and the conversation turned to her changing perceptions of the environment:

[After we started getting sick], I looked up here and started seeing this yellow, this yellow goo coming over the embankment. And I said, ‘Oh my God, what’s that – where’s it coming from?’ And I said, ‘this brook this year . . . Everything was different. The colour was different. Everything. The trees were turning orange. Everything looked different to me that year [...] My concern, at that time, was getting my kids out of there safely. I didn’t care about money. I just wanted them out of there.’⁶³

After residents brought their concerns to the media, politicians, and JAG in 1998, the provincial government contracted CANTOX Environmental Inc. to “conduct an independent human health risk assessment of the Frederick Street area.”⁶⁴ On August 12, 1998, this report was released to residents; although tests identified “elevated concentrations of several heavy metals (lead, copper, molybdenum) and some PAH (including naphthalene),” the authors’ concluded, “No measureable adverse health effects in local residents are predicted to result from long-term exposure to chemicals in the Frederick Street neighbourhood.”⁶⁵ As an “additional issue,” the report notes, “the signs posted on the coke ovens perimeter fence [erected in 1997, reading Human Health Hazard] are a considerable source of anxiety,” as is the fact that “when environmental work is conducted on the coke ovens site, the individuals wear protective gear (ranging from a dust mask to a full protective suit).”⁶⁶

⁶² Debbie Ouellette, interview with author, June 20, 2016.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Move us or we’ll sue, says Sydney Resident,” *Chronicle Herald*, July 8, 1998.

⁶⁵ Cantox Environmental Inc., *Human Health Risk Assessment of Frederick Street Area: Final Report*, 11 August 1998, Bras d’Or Collection, 6218: 3, Cape Breton University Library.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Chain-link fences marked “human health hazard,” located just yards away from residents’ front doors, and nearby workers in “moon suits” have indeed become part of the collective memory of Frederick Street and the remediation process. As Debbie recalls:

I lived on Frederick Street for 13 years and there was never a fence around the coke ovens site [until 1997]. People used that site as a short cut. The kids played over where. And when the fences did go up, signs were posted with these words that said HUMAN HEALTH HAZARD.

...

I remember driving on the overpass and noticed a man cutting the grass on the Coke Ovens site covered from head to toe in a white-suit. Why were we treated differently than the guys in white-suits?⁶⁷

These occurrences contributed to a sentiment expressed succinctly by another former resident: “somebody knew something we didn’t.”

Evidence continued to build; Frederick Street residents experienced a variety of symptoms through the fall of 1998. Judith Guernsey, who had initially been involved with Act! in the early 1990s, published some of her epidemiological findings: men and women in Sydney suffered far higher rates of various cancers than did their counterparts in mainland Nova Scotia.⁶⁸ By January, the International Institute of Concern for Public Health released a study challenging the conclusions of the CANTOX study; the Sierra Club of Canada commissioned this report, which identified several significant methodological limitations of the earlier study. Through all of this, Juanita, Debbie, and other Frederick Street residents continued to attend JAG meetings and lobby government officials for a solution.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Debbie Ouellette, e-mail message to author, June 20, 2016.

⁶⁸ “Cancer risk acute in Sydney,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 21, 1998; Guernsey’s research was published in 2000, see Judith Guernsey, Ron Dewar, Swarna Weerasinghe, Susan Kirkland, Paul Veugelers, “Incidence of Cancer in Sydney and Cape Breton County, Nova Scotia 1979-1997,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 91, 4 (July – August 2000): 282-92.

⁶⁹ Juanita and Rick McKenzie, e-mail requesting seat on JAG roundtable, RTBL 2003-011, Box 10, File 114, JAG Project, BI.

Debbie recalls what happened next “as though it was yesterday.” She related the story to me as we stood next to a watery ditch, alongside what is now Spar Road – a section of highway running along the former Sysco site, watching a piece of machinery clear left-over slag away from the nearby railway tracks:

We had another heavy rain [...] And our son Steven happened to go down the basement. And the orange stuff seeped up through one of the pipes on the floor [...] We had never seen that before. And I figure now that the coke ovens were the source [...] Of course, I wasn't home when [Environment Canada] came, it was pouring down rain. And they knocked at the door and my husband let them in. And he didn't know anything about this [chuckle] it was me that was doing the talking [...] They took samples [and the next week] They said, “Yes, arsenic was found in your basement [...] I got off the phone, and I headed out to Juanita's [...] and she said “What's wrong?” [...] I said I just got the arsenic results back from my basement and they're really high. She said, ‘do you want to go to a JAG meeting?’ I said sure [...] And before I walked out [of the JAG meeting] I said . . .

At this point in the interview, 17 years after the events described, Debbie begins to cry.

If my kids get arsenic poisoning . . . From living in their own home. There will be hell to pay. And I walked out . . . Emotionally and physically, I was totally exhausted [...] I didn't know what was going to happen next [...] I came back home [one afternoon] and I walked in the house, no word of lie, and I still don't remember who passed me the phone. And I said ‘Who is it?’ And it was [MLA] Michel Samson. And he said, ‘Debbie, we have a room at the hotel for you and your family to move into.’ And I said to Michel [...] Thank you very much, but I will never be coming back to Frederick Street.⁷⁰

As we returned to the car and began to drive back towards the area of Frederick Street, Debbie told me about the aftermath of the re-location. They had stayed in the Delta until after the provincial government announced a purchase offer to residents living alongside Frederick Street and the nearby Curry's Lane.⁷¹ According to the provincial government, “Offers for homes [were] based on the value of a similar home away from the Coke Ovens site [...] [This offer] is voluntary and is not being made because of a health risk.

⁷⁰ Debbie Ouellette, interview with author, June 20, 2016.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Residents may remain in their homes if they wish.”⁷² The refusal to admit any fault, offer any compensation, or provide alternative homes for Frederick Street residents has continued; a shameful response, this has meant that former residents have continued to make sacrifices.⁷³ In Debbie’s case, this meant moving to a small home in Glace Bay with a brothel operating next-door. Although she has since moved again, Debbie has continued her fight to force the province to recognize that the toxins found around the Frederick Street area and in the basement of her former home were the direct result of the historical operations of the Sydney Works. Her legal action remains in the courts as of 2016.

Juanita McKenzie

Juanita was also among the original six Frederick Street residents who began agitating for information and action on the environmental issues. In addition to Juanita and Debbie, there was Louise Deveaux, Ronnie and Debbie MacDonald, and Rick McKenzie. I met Juanita in her apartment in Ashby for our interview. She was born in Newfoundland, although she grew up in North Sydney until the age of 16. The ever-present smoke of Sysco surfaces early in our discussion; she relates, “I always remember seeing the plume of orange smoke. And Sydney, to me, back then, was a dirty place. I didn’t know [the city]. I just knew that orange smoke.” She eventually moved to Sydney, and in 1984 her family moved into a home on Frederick Street.

Her memories of the events leading up to the Frederick Street re-location are nearly identical to those described by Debbie. Along with Debbie and four other residents, Juanita helped to lead the fight against toxic pollution in her neighbourhood. Juanita’s entry into environmental activism occurred when the fencing and “human health hazard” signs were being erected around the coke ovens site:

⁷² Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and Public Works, news release, “Province offers to purchase homes on Frederick Street and Curry’s Lane,” 28 May 1999, in author’s possession.

⁷³ Barry McCallum to Debbie Ouellette, Secretariat Correspondence, December 2001, RTBL 2003-011, Box 10, File 123, JAG Project, BI.

I came home that day [...] and they were putting a fence up. And there was this guy there in the white [Haz-mat] suit, and anyone that knows me knows I always have my camera with me [...] And I took out my camera and I took a picture of this guy [...] And I went over to him and there was a sign. It said, “Human Health Hazard,” and I said, ‘What’s going on?’ He said, ‘Well, you can’t come over here.’ And I said to myself, ‘If he’s dressed like that, and I’m dressed like this . . . If something’s toxic, how can it just stop at the fence? So I went to a meeting they were having for JAG and the mayor, that night. And I was really upset [...] So I went up to the mayor, and I was getting nowhere with him, he was kind of brushing me off. And I just stuck out my hand, for him to shake my hand, and I said ‘My name is Juanita McKenzie and you’re going to be hearing a lot from me.’ And I turned around and walked out. And my husband wanted to kill me. [Chuckles].⁷⁴

As in the case of Lois Gibbs at Love Canal, Debbie and Juanita became leading voices among their neighbours in challenging popular conceptions of the tar ponds issue.⁷⁵ This is not radically distinct from other cases throughout Canada and the United States, where working-class women have turned to environmental activism to challenge threats to their health and the health of their families. As Phil Brown and Faith Ferguson write, “In their efforts to understand the hazards and to draw attention to the consequences of toxic exposure, these women activists come up against power and authority in scientific, corporate, and governmental unwillingness to consider their claims or address their concerns.”⁷⁶ In accounts of their early activism, both Juanita and Debbie speak of challenging authority at the JAG meeting – in Juanita’s account, this meant responding directly to the mayor’s indifference.

As we have seen in the response to Black Friday, Sysco’s male steelworkers often marshalled popular conceptions of traditional masculinity in their resistance to deindustrialization. This is not uncommon; as Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor describe, workers in the U.K. have also challenged deindustrialization in terms of the

⁷⁴ Juanita McKenzie, interview with author, June 20, 2016.

⁷⁵ Barbara Epstein, “The environmental justice/toxics movement: Politics of race and gender,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 8, 3 (September 1997): 63-87.

⁷⁶ Phil Brown and Faith I.T. Ferguson, “Making a Big Stink: Women’s Work, Women’s Relationships, and Toxic Waste Activism,” *Gender and Society* 9, 2 (April 1995): 146.

corrosion of traditional masculinity.⁷⁷ In similar ways, female toxic waste activists have sometimes centred their resistance upon a perceived threat to traditional femininity – based within the home, the family, and the body. Standpoint feminist analysis may also be applied to the Juanita and Debbie’s undertaking of leadership roles in their fight for the residents of Frederick Street. The ways in which these women have constructed epidemiological and environmental knowledge from their own experiences of class and gender – and how this knowledge was expressed to neighbours, family members, and authorities – reveals a particular form of “front porch politics” that emerged in response to the refusal of the state to take citizens’ health concerns seriously.⁷⁸

Both women discussed the role of popular epidemiology in oral interviews about their activism; Juanita describes purchasing the first computer on the street for the purposes of studying the health impacts of PAH, PCB, and Arsenic. Debbie was kind enough to forward me dozens of documents related to the tar ponds, coke ovens site, Frederick Street, and public health in Sydney. These included all of the state-funded environmental reports dating back to the 1970s, as well as newspaper articles, her written recollections, and photographs of the coke ovens and tar ponds sites. In studying the problem in this way, both women felt more authoritative in their efforts to challenge the recalcitrance of the state, offer unique and informed insight at JAG meetings, and argue their position against efforts to discredit their experiences.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor, “Dangerous Work, Hard Men, and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c. 1930-1970s,” *Labour History Review* 69, 2 (2004): 136; Craig Heron, “Boys Will Be Boys: Working-Class Masculinities in the Age of Mass Production,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 69 (2006): 6-34.

⁷⁸ Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

⁷⁹ Phil Brown, “Popular Epidemiology and Toxic Waste Contamination: Lay and Professional Ways of Knowing,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 33 (September 1992): 267-281; See also Jennifer Thompson, “Toxic Residents: Health and Citizenship at Love Canal,” *Journal of Social History* Advance Access, (2015): 1-20.
<http://jsh.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2015/12/18/jsh.shv105.full>

“Motherhood” played an important role as a mediating identity throughout this process. Debbie and Juanita’s stories are centred upon their children; in Debbie’s account, it is when her children are first mentioned that she becomes visibly emotional. The notion that her children would be directly harmed by exposure to toxic material, and that nobody in power seemed particularly interested in immediately resolving the problem, is described as a flashpoint for her activism. Juanita identifies a tension between the perceived safety of the home for her children and their friends and her own growing awareness of the dangers posed by the soil beneath their feet. This is fairly commonplace in narratives of white, female, working-class toxic waste activists. As Celine Krauss describes:

The traditional role of mother, or protector of the family and community, served to empower these activists [...] from the beginning, their view of this role provided the motivation for women to take risks in defense of their families and overcome their fears of participating in the public sphere.⁸⁰

Through this re-articulation of power relationships, drawing upon power in the private sphere to inform resistance in the public sphere, these women began reaching out to form activist relationships with other groups in the community.

Juanita reflected upon receiving both support and condemnation when they took their concerns public; some residents in Whitney Pier believed that she was harming property values and that her health issues were overstated. Critiques were often gendered in nature. She recalls, in the early days of Frederick Street activism, being told that the group was “making a mountain out of a molehill,” or that they were un-necessarily emotional. Throughout, state and environmental officials had their accounts positioned as “objective” and “factual,” while the Frederick Street women were constantly questioned about their recollections and symptoms. Others in the city offered solidarity. In a story reminiscent of the coke ovens workers’ earlier accounts, she remembers:

I woke up one morning and there was papers on my [...] step, and I have no idea to this day where they came from. And it was all these . . . had been some kind of,

⁸⁰ Celine Krauss, “Challenging Power: Toxic Waste Protests and the Politicization of White, Working-Class Women,” in *Community Activism and Feminist Politics: Organizing Across Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Nancy Naples (New York: Routledge, 1998), 140.

something that had been done back in the 60s, I believe, they had done a study on all of the poisons and toxins on the Sydney steel plant. And they hid it. But this person had this and gave it to me. And, like I said, I don't know where it came from.⁸¹

As with Dan Yakimchuk's earlier description of receiving the secret documents – air-quality studies from the 1970s - there is an indication that somebody was attempting to keep secret the full scale of toxicity, environmental degradation, and ill-health. In expressing her experience in this same way, Juanita reveals a sense of solidarity with Sysco workers – particularly those suffering illness or disease resulting from exposure to on-site toxins. Later in our interview, this comparison is explicitly stated.

The majority of steelworkers, Juanita explains, were supportive of the Frederick Street protesters. She believes that this was the result of their own struggles with occupational illness and disease – though she understood that they were unable to explicitly join the protest movement over fears relating to deindustrialization. She notes, many steelworkers were also residents of the Pier:

The majority of them knew the truth. And they were on the plus side of things. They knew that they were – they were sick. A lot of them were sick, too. [...] They were just another statistic and they knew they were going to be gone. They [knew they] had to work and they had to shut their mouths, that's just my opinion on it anyway [...] But you know what? The local people in the Pier who worked on the coke ovens, worked on the steel plant, are some of the finest people in the world. And, and they were taken as much advantage of as . . . as the rest of us. [...] They knew it.⁸²

Juanita, like many others within the community, recognizes a particular form of working-class solidarity that existed between Sysco employees and those who lived in the neighbourhoods around the plant. This was not simply the result of coinciding economic interests, as the steelworkers' efforts to maintain production at the plant were sometimes unappreciated by other local environmentalists, but they emerged from a shared sense of having been victimized by an extractive industry that relied on local labour and resources for decades before leaving residents and workers to deal with an environmental and

⁸¹ Juanita McKenzie, interview with author, June 20, 2016.

⁸² Ibid.

health disaster. The fear expressed by Harry Waisglass and Andrew Hogan to the Atlantic Development Board in 1966 proves prescient more than thirty years later; Cape Bretoners – steelworkers and Sydney residents alike – were left “with nothing but ashes in their mouths and carbon dioxide in their lungs.”⁸³

Conclusion: A Double-Sided Coin

Just as deindustrialization is a constituent part of unfolding global capitalism, so are its aftermaths continually experienced by the affected in the years and decades after decline or closure. The proposed remediation of the tar ponds and coke ovens sites during the final 14 years of production at Sysco reveals several concurrent lessons that relate to local and global experiences of deindustrialization.

Firstly, occupational knowledge should not be discarded in favour of scientific proposals for remediation; although steelworkers had asserted for years that PCB-containing materials had been disposed on the site and that the methods proposed for transferring the sludge to the incinerator were likely insufficient, it was not until more than \$55 million had been spent that the state officially recognized these realities. Not only were workers in the midst of being de-centred from their economic (and physical) place within the city by deindustrialization, the dismissal of their voices during the early phases of the remediation process also reflects a deep institutional antipathy to working-class ways of knowing and proposed solutions. This antipathy was in further evidence during O’Malley’s contentious press conference, when incineration was rejected and encapsulation was proposed as a *fait accompli*.

While the JAG process reveals the growth of a community-focused effort at the remediation process, prompted in part by the Chrétien administration’s comparatively accommodating attitude towards social movements, the seemingly endless political discussions, conflicts between interested parties, and bureaucratic wrangling contributed to a popular association of industry and its aftermath with wastefulness and incompetency. The notion that environmental remediation contracts were being offered to off-island companies for work that continually ran over-time and over-cost caused some to

⁸³ Harry Waisglass and Andrew Hogan, *A Submission to the Atlantic Development Board on the Prospects for Nova Scotia’s Steel Industry* (28 March 1966).

speculate that the period was simply another stage in the region's exploitation by "come from away" capital. The simultaneous collapse of the Minmetals purchase agreement and the emergence of a toxic legacy narrative that sometimes obscured the contributions of steelworkers and their families also meant that some became reticent to maintain cross-community solidarities. Each of these factors would become fertile ground for politicization, and by July 1999 the question of Sysco's future featured promptly in the ongoing provincial election.

Finally, the processes of de-industrial remediation holds a profound and terrible impact for residents. Debbie and Juanita's accounts reveal the connections that remain between place, memory, and deindustrialization within the framework of the environmental remediation process. They describe a transformation from complacency to toxic waste activism, prompted – in part – by the official rejection of their accounts, their perception of bodily health, and their lay understanding of the connections between their symptoms and the disturbance of the tar ponds and coke ovens sites. In their stories, the processes of deindustrialization represent economic violence – but its violence is also markedly physical. This reality remains certain and inescapable, and it will continue throughout the lives of former residents. The violence, and the reprehensible "plausible deniability" maintained by the province in relation to the site's toxins and health effects, is powerfully expressed in the following exchange between Juanita McKenzie and myself in 2016:

Lachlan: So were you glad to have gotten out of there? When you did?

Juanita: . . . [audible sigh] . . . That question kills me . . . I lost my daughter . . . seven years ago. She died of colorectal cancer . . .

Lachlan: I'm sorry.

Juanita: She was 33 years old. And the day before she died, she said to me. She said, 'Mom, did Frederick Street do this to me? And I said I don't know. And I *don't* know. I can't say for 100 percent certainty [...] Frederick Street is like a double-sided coin for me. I have a lot of good memories of Frederick Street. Frederick Street will always be my home. That was my home. My . . . my children grew up there. My grandchildren. I have all my memories of my daughter that passed . . . are there. And . . . how? How does a 33 year old die from colorectal cancer? You know? I lost my kidney. A couple of years after we moved from there I had kidney cancer. I have problems now, with other things [...] My

husband had a heart attack. My youngest daughter has it too. But she ended up having a hysterectomy last year. She's unable to have children. She has a lot of health issues [...] Frederick Street has a lot of good and bad memories for me. We had a beautiful home there. We had a pool in the backyard. The water might have been bad, but I mean, my . . . my house was where the kids came [...] And I have a lot of good memories of Frederick Street. Yet Frederick Street, you know, turned out to . . . to be a bad thing for me too. I think it took a lot from me. It took a lot mentally from me. It took a lot physically from me. And it took my daughter too, I think. And it took my other daughter's future [...] I live with it every day, it's not something that goes away . . .



Fig. 6.6: Juanita McKenzie and daughter, Michelle McGuigan, with photo of Juanita's late daughter, Tonya Kelley-Lepe
Source: Photograph by Steven Wadden, 2014

Lachlan: So what do you think now when you, you know, look at everything that's been done there and . . .

Juanita: I go down there a lot. I find peace down there, actually. I find my . . . I find my daughter there, which is strange enough . . . I drive by it a lot and I think of Ronnie and I think of Louise and I think of my daughter. I think of what we

gave up . . . to save other people, as far as I'm concerned. [...] We fought for what we thought was right and, you know, our names might not be over there on the steel plant but by Jesus we deserve it [...] We were the most unassuming people you'd want to meet in the world. But you know, we fought for what we believed in [...] I think back on Frederick Street and I think back lovingly on it . . . because we've just moved around ever since. And I've never really been content since [...] Like I said, I drive down there every now and again [...] And it's just sad. When I look at it it's a sad street to me [...] I drive by there and I see Ronnie leaning on his fence, having a beer, Friday night [...] what a man. I see Laurie, our next-door neighbour, sitting on her step. I see the kids at the pool. [...] I see Debbie's kids, out playing [...] I see, I see things as they progressed until we were taken away from there. And Debbie, God love her, she's fighting [...] But I lost it. I don't like fighting for it any more. Because it took everything from me. And people don't realize that. I might have started the fight, but I lost the fight – even if in some ways we might have won. So that's about it.⁸⁴

On May 12, 2004, nearly four years after the final rail was rolled at Sydney Steel, the federal and provincial governments announced a \$400 million dollar renewed clean up plan. This was to be accomplished through:

- The removal and destruction of PCBs from the tar ponds [...] with a proven technology such as high temperature incineration in a single use dedicated facility
- The in-place treatment of the remaining contaminated material using proven technology such as bioremediation, solidification or other appropriate technology
- The subsequent engineered containment of both sites
- Site restoration and landscaping compatible with the natural surroundings and future use.⁸⁵

This plan would ultimately destroy and solidify the remaining toxic material, before designing and constructing a community park – named “Open Hearth Park” – on the site

⁸⁴ Juanita McKenzie, interview with author, June 20, 2016.

⁸⁵ *Sydney Tar Ponds Agency website*, “Memorandum of Agreement between the Government of Canada and the Government of Nova Scotia, respecting Remediation of the Sydney Tar Ponds and Coke Ovens Sites,” 12 May 2004.
<http://www.tarpondscleanup.ca/index.php?sid=3&cid=9&pid=126&lang=e>.

of the former steel plant and tar ponds. The creation of this park and its role in the community's collective memory of steelmaking is explored in another chapter. Today, after thirty years of remediation proposals – the site exists as a green space. But for former steelworkers and residents such as Debbie Ouellette and Juanita McKenzie, the bodily and environmental impact of deindustrialization and the remediation process will never fade away.

Chapter Seven

From Dependence to Enterprise: Economic Restructuring and the End of the Steel City, 1984-2001

We do not want to work on remediation. We want to make steel.

- Murdoch McRae, 1064 Recording Secretary, April 6, 1999.¹

I had made a very firm commitment that the budget we introduced in the spring of 2002 would be balanced. [...] In my mind, I had decided that [Sydney Steel] was never, ever going to be not subsidized. I could see no way forward that it would not be subsidized. And I said, ‘Shouldn’t we be putting our money in something else? That has a possibility of return?’

- John Hamm, July 29, 2015.²

On the morning of July 28, 1999, employees of Sysco awoke to the news that the province’s Progressive Conservatives (PC) had won a majority government with 29 seats in the legislature. Liberal and New Democratic Party (NDP) contingents had only mustered a combined 23 seats throughout the province.³ The Tories did not fare as well in Cape Breton, with only two PC members elected out of the island’s 11 seats.⁴ In these two districts, Inverness and Guysborough-Port Hawksbury, the PC and Liberal races were extremely close – only separated by 327 and 134 votes respectively. The NDP also picked up a significant number of votes throughout Cape Breton. With their electoral victory, the new government under premier-elect John Hamm was well positioned to implement its campaign promise to privatize or close Sydney Steel.

¹ Recording Secretary’s Minute Book, Local 1064, April 6, 1999: 172, in the author’s possession.

² John Hamm, interview with author, July 29, 2015.

³ “Tories ‘Hammer’ province,” *Cape Breton Post*, July 28, 1999.

⁴ “Cape Bretoners elect seven Liberals, two Tories, two NDP,” *Cape Breton Post*, July 28, 1999.

The Tory position on Sysco evolved from an announcement made earlier in the year by John Hamm. A Liberal minority government, elected in 1998, had announced a \$44 million line of credit for the mill. While the Liberals had committed to selling the plant since taking power in 1993, several purchase agreements had fallen through during the decade. Unwilling to close the plant, Sydney Steel continued operating indefinitely. On March 23, 1999, Hamm revealed that he had examined the newly tabled Sysco business plan and found it to be seriously lacking. “Now is not the time to be sinking millions more into capital expenditures. Now is the time to close the book on Sysco . . . and to open a new book – one which promises a real future for Cape Breton.”⁵ This marked the first time since nationalization that the leader of a major party in Nova Scotia officially called for the closure of the Sydney steel plant.⁶

Political commenters framed the decision as a political gambit. The mill had not achieved profitability after the electric arc installation. That reality, coupled with the long history of failed modernizations, subsidies, and losses throughout the 1970s and 1980s, had soured voters in mainland Nova Scotia on the notion that the mill could one day be profitable. Parker Donham writes:

Conventional wisdom holds, incorrectly, opposing Sysco would carry an onerous price [...] Even if you assume all parts of Cape Breton love Sysco equally, the mainland, where Sysco is despised, still has four times as many seats [...] In any case, Hamm’s Conservatives placed last in all but one of Cape Breton’s ridings last year and they aren’t expected to be a factor here next time. So there is little downside in Hamm’s adopting a policy position most mainlanders regard as blindingly obvious common sense.⁷

Hamm’s announcement was also perceived as a sign that the Tories would either withdraw their support from the Liberal minority or Premier Russell MacLellan would call a snap election sometime in the spring or early summer.⁸

⁵ Nova Scotia House of Assembly, for immediate release, “Hamm Urges Premier to Close Sysco,” 23 March 1999, in the author’s possession.

⁶ “It’s Over,” *The Daily News*, March 23, 1999.

⁷ Parker Barss Donham, “On your mark . . .” *The Daily News*, May 12, 1999.

⁸ Don MacDonald, “Psst! Have you heard about the election?” *Chronicle Herald*, May 21, 1999.

In May, Manning MacDonald – now in charge of the Sysco file under the Liberals – revealed the government’s plans for the mill. Defending continued operations while privatization was explored, he writes:

Sysco has nothing to hide. Sysco wants to show its wares. Sysco and its workers want to show off what it is. Not what people think it is. Let’s, once and for all, bury the folklore that paints Sysco as a belching dinosaur. Let’s see it for what it is – an opportunity for Nova Scotia to make jobs, not make-work; an opportunity to replicate at Sysco the successes of the Halifax Shipyards and Trenton Car Works. Sysco is a modern facility – an asset to be exploited, not closed.⁹

The Liberals were defeated on June 18, after the PCs refused to support a budget that included nearly \$600 million in healthcare spending. “Fiscal responsibility,” from healthcare to Sysco, was the primary electoral campaign issue – and Hamm had established himself as the sole candidate willing to close the mill.

Although the Tory victory concerned union members and others in the community, there was not the same sense of looming civic devastation and shock that characterize Black Friday more than 30 years earlier. Nowhere in the days following the election were the concerted calls for community resistance that emerged in 1967. While one letter to the *Post* laments the “bleak” future for Sydney Steel, the author expresses larger concerns over the high cost of university education and the partisan nature of provincial politics. In this letter, the fate of Sysco is simply one among many issues facing Cape Breton and Nova Scotia.¹⁰ According to Fred James, the community response was quite distinct:

Lachlan: When you were talking about Black Friday, you said you remember exactly where you were [...] Do you remember where you were when John Hamm was elected, on the promise to close the steel plant?

Fred: Well it’s not really the same kind of thing, because we saw that coming – you know? [...] It didn’t surprise me. You’ve been living with the axe over your head for all those years, so you kind of prepared for anything. Although it’s

⁹ Manning MacDonald, “Private sector family Sysco’s key,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 26, 1999.

¹⁰ “Result of election worrisome – or maybe it doesn’t matter,” *Cape Breton Post*, July 20, 1999.

always a jolt when it comes. But still, you hang on to the hope that it will be . . . Because so many steelworkers had that doom and gloom prophesizing for their whole life. You can't put your life on hold because the plant's going to – you think the plant might close. You have to just live your life, and do the best you can. And so I think that was the general feeling with most of the people. [...] You hear what's going on, and you just continue on and you hope for the best. And deal with whatever comes out of it and do what needs to be done when the time comes.¹¹

Manning MacDonald highlights the sense of resignation that had settled into the community by 2000:

Lachlan: When that election happened, and they said they were going to close Sydney Steel, was that similar to, like, in '67 when they said they were going to close it, or?

Manning: No, no. Quite the opposite. People were resigned to the fact. The only people that cared about it after all the machinations about losing money and everything were the steelworkers themselves and people like me who put a lot into it, and our government did, to try and keep it open. The general public here were conditioned to the fact that it was going to close under a new government. They knew it was coming. And the workforce was down to 800 at that time.

Lachlan: So, less of an impact?

Manning: Yeah, well it was 4,000 when '67 was there. Or probably a little bit more than that [...] And the guys running for office said, you know, we're going to shift direction down here. We're going to create all kinds of other economic activity to take the place of Sydney Steel. Well, Sydney Steel's gone and the government, to my knowledge didn't create a thing. But they got rid of the plant.¹²

The long, slow decline in employment at the Sydney Works reflects a reality first articulated by Daniel Bell in his 1973 *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Bell describes how the industrial era would follow the same broad contours first charted by pre-industrial societies. Advances in technology allowed humans to supersede their reliance on labour-intensive agriculture, which prompted fewer workers and higher rates of production. With technological advances in modern industry, workers would similarly

¹¹ Fred James, interview with author, August 16, 2013.

¹² Manning MacDonald, interview with author, July 27, 2015.

vacate positions within the factory – leaving production unaffected – for jobs within the “post-industrial” service and knowledge sectors.¹³ While the first point is reflected through the re-structuring and modernizations at Sysco, the second has not come to pass. Frank Webster, expanding upon Bell’s vision of post-industrialism, writes:

As productivity soars, surpluses are produced from the factories that enable expenditures to be made on things once unthinkable luxuries: for example, teachers, hospitals, entertainment, even holidays. In turn, these expenditures of industrial earned wealth create employment opportunities in services, occupations aimed at satisfying new needs that have emerged, and become affordable, courtesy of industrial society’s bounty.¹⁴

Instead, a set of economic, and ideological axioms – broadly termed “neoliberalism” infected our political discourse with the fantasy of market objectivity.¹⁵ As industrial employment declines, workers are asked to do more with less; under neoliberalism, the state, its functionaries, and the wider public are expected to do less with less.

According to David Harvey, the economic character of this myth is based upon the tenets of financial and industrial deregulation, the privatization of state-held industries, and the withdrawal of the state from traditional areas of social responsibility.¹⁶ But neoliberalism is more complicated than simply the direct implementation of a political and economic plan of governance. As Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen, and Gisela Neunhöffer offer, “neoliberal hegemony must be understood not as a *fait accompli*, but

¹³ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 14-16.

¹⁴ Frank Webster, *Theories of the Information Society*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 46

¹⁵ Greta R. Krippner, *Capitalizing on Crisis: The Political Origins of the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 138.

¹⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

rather as an ongoing process of struggle and compromise through which the meaning of neoliberalism is both re-examined and reaffirmed.¹⁷

This chapter positions the final closure of Sydney Steel within this shifting intellectual landscape. It reveals how perceptions of political economy and the state can restrict local forms of resistance, and examines the rhetoric of the “new knowledge economy” in these stages of deindustrialization. The first section considers the changing role of the local university in response to dominant regional development paradigms. Prior to 1984, the University College of Cape Breton was envisioned as a supplement to industrial society; for blue-collar, middle-class coal miners and steelworkers, it represented an opportunity for the next generation to receive an education and achieve class or social mobility. This shifted after the 1984 federal election, when the PC party under Brian Mulroney achieved a landslide victory over the incumbent Liberals. At this point, with the establishment of various federal development agencies, the University College of Cape Breton became firmly embedded within a neoliberal strategy designed to actively push the island towards a post-industrial economy. In this new framework, the university did not complement industrial society, but came to act as a mechanism for its supplantation.

The circumstances surrounding the Sysco closure are examined in the second section. A series of factors in place by 1999 meant that the mill no longer held the economic and cultural value to the city that it once commanded. The failure to achieve profitability and ongoing reductions in the workforce meant that other institutions, such as the university and hospital, were now comparable in terms of their economic impact. Concerns relating to the environmental and health impacts of steelmaking, and the unfolding disaster on Frederick Street, created further divisions. Nor had the more than \$700 million dollars in Sysco debt assumed by the province in 1991 enticed private firms— such as Minmetals – to seriously consider a purchase. These factors, combined with a North American steel market in crisis, meant that Sydney steelworkers were in a poor position to offer any significant resistance to closure. With closure presented as a

¹⁷ Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen, and Gisela Neunhöffer, “Introduction: Reconsidering Neoliberal Hegemony,” in *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique*, eds. Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen, and Gisela Neunhöffer (London: Routledge, 2006), 1-2.

certainty, and barring the last-minute intervention of a private buyer – steelworkers turned to what Steven High has referred to as “effects bargaining;” they asked that the province at least furnish them with pensions in return for taking away their jobs, their economy, and the once-centre of their community – the Sydney steel plant.

“Devco University” and Neoliberal Development, 1984-1999

The growth of the public sector in the postwar period is inseparable from 20th century political economy. Public institutions provide a critical backdrop to the deindustrialization process, and they have sometimes been referred to as “safety valves” for cities suffering from high unemployment, high poverty rates, and low tax-bases. As Ira Harkavy and Harmon Zuckerman describe, public sector employers provide both short and long-term employment and can help to facilitate the turn towards alternative economic drivers.¹⁸ In 2007, for example, American hospitals were the top employer in five of the top ten cities with the highest rates of poverty. In Philadelphia, education and health services together accounted for a full 26 percent of the city’s total employment in 2002.¹⁹

Universities play an important role in these processes. They are gateways into local and regional labour markets, and in working-class cities they are sometimes viewed as a means of escape from the factory, mill, or mine; this point is reflected in Christine Walley’s *Exit Zero*, where she reflects personally upon the transitions in identity

¹⁸ Ira Harkavy and Harmon Zuckerman, report, *Eds and Meds: Cities’ Hidden Assets*, The Brookings Institution (Washington, D.C.: Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, 1999), 3-5.

¹⁹ Guian McKee, *Health Care Policy as Urban Policy: Hospitals and Community Development in the Post-industrial City* (San Francisco: Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, 2010), http://www.frbsf.org/community-development/files/working_paper_2010_10_healthcare_policy_as_urban_policy.pdf; Carolyn Adams, “The Meds and Eds. in Urban Economic Development,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 25, 5 (2003): 572-3; Roger D. Simon and Brian Allnutt, “Philadelphia, 1982-2007: Toward the Postindustrial City,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 131, 4 (October 2007): 395.

undergone by a working-class university student.²⁰ In Cape Breton, the university has been a major part of the island's economic fabric since its earliest iterations. Its contributions can be broken into two periods, each reflecting a particular set of institutional and political pressures. In the first, encompassing the years between 1952 and 1984, the institution existed as a compliment to the "free industrial society" envisioned by its founders. After 1984, corresponding with a national turn towards neoliberalism and the designs of various federal agencies involved in Cape Breton, it became a local instrument in the rhetorical shift towards entrepreneurialism, self reliance, and the promises of the "new" economy. As Fuyuki Kurasaw writes, Canadian universities were soon positioned as "a major platform for the generation of territorial wealth and corporate profitability [...] simultaneously cast in the role of innovation incubator, engine of economic growth, and source of corporate profit."

Higher education in Sydney was closely tied to the fortunes of heavy industry since Xavier Junior College, an affiliate of St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, held its Grand Opening in January 1952. Students came from Sydney and the surrounding mining communities; education, for these men and women, represented an opportunity not afforded by the coal mines or steel plant.²¹ Moses Coady, a Roman Catholic clergyman and notable cooperativist, described the importance of educational institutions for industrial communities:

[The founding] proves that there is still very alive in our people the possibility of progress within the democratic framework of society and, what is more important, the conviction that [Cape Bretoners] must have adequate instruments for the achievement of their full destiny. The past history of Cape Breton is proof that people of many races and cultures can come together for the development of a free industrial society.²²

²⁰ Christine Walley, *Exit Zero: Family and Class in Post-Industrial Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 113-15

²¹ Robert Morgan, *Perseverance: The Story of Cape Breton's University College, 1952-2002* (Sydney: UCCB Press, 2004), 28; James D. Cameron, *For the People: A History of St. Francis Xavier University* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 283; Moses Coady to C.H. Millard, 3 June 1953, Volume 17, United Steelworkers of America Fonds, MG 28 i268 Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON.

²² Moses Coady to Malcolm MacLellan, 16 January 1962, "Xavier Scrapbook, 1951-1960," 20, Beaton Institute Archives (BI) Sydney, NS.

The notion that a local educational institution could provide the bedrock for economic diversity and the establishment of a “free industrial society” remained visible into the 1960s. In 1961, religious leaders wrote an open letter to Prime Minister John Diefenbaker and Nova Scotia Premier Robert Stanfield on the subject of the ongoing coal crisis. They argued for the establishment of a “modern progressive trade school,” and demanded that, “the Department of Education put on a compulsory course on the Maritime Economy in Grades 11 and 12 as an experiment for the next ten years.”²³ The college’s promoters believed that the history of industrial Cape Breton and its relation to capitalist production was necessary to understand in light of the contemporary problems facing the island’s industries. One course offered in 1965 devoted an entire semester to the historical analysis of capitalism - including “the theory of competition as opposed to its apparent reality.”²⁴

On July 1, 1974, Xavier Junior College merged with the Nova Scotia Eastern Institute of Technology to create a new institution: the College of Cape Breton (CCB). The number of students taking credit-courses in Sydney numbered 1,068. With long-term growth predicted, the suitability of the small downtown campus came into question.²⁵ Early plans to purchase more property downtown from the Department of Defence fell through, and the institution instead bought a large plot of land approximately 10 kilometres away from the city centre – between Sydney and Glace Bay. Residents would come to view this decision as a mistake; the city’s downtown core and the surrounding neighbourhoods would never experience the economic benefits that are associated with spatial proximity to a university or comparable institution.

The federal government, through its role in the Cape Breton Development Corporation, was directly implicated in these events. In 1971, Tom Kent – then-President

²³ A. Hogan, L.B. Sears, J. McLaughlin, and J. Day, resolution re: mine closure, 1961, St. F.X. Extension Department, C.12 (b): 1, Education and Educators, MG 11, 7, BI.

²⁴ Ed Murphy to Dr. D.F. Campbell, resolution re: mine closure, 1961, St. F.X. Extension Department, Education and Educators, BI.

²⁵ “Student Accommodations ‘woefully inadequate’,” *Chronicle Herald*, July 13, 1972.

of Devco - announced a \$500,000 loan to compliment a pre-existing \$500,000 grant to support the initiative. Robert Morgan writes, “DEVCO realized [early on] that the higher education of the local population was an essential component of any economic expansion.”²⁶

Some mainlanders reacted negatively to perceived federal favouritism towards industrial Cape Breton. Irene Henry, a town councillor in Antigonish, derided CCB as “Devco University” in a May 25, 1974 interview:

[Antigonish is] on our own. We’re outside of DREE, we haven’t factories so we have always had to struggle to exist and we are not going to quit. St. F.X. is our big employer. We have to pay for everything we have.²⁷

Another concerned citizen, Peggy MacDonald, penned an editorial drawing attention to the ongoing state intervention:

CJCB [radio host] Earl Smith came on strong to piously chastise Antigonish for its ‘vested interest’ opposition [to the planned campus expansion in Sydney]. Somehow, it was quite respectable for Sydney to fight for its ‘vested interest’ in the steel plant . . .²⁸

Despite the opposition, CCB was granted the ability to offer BA degrees in 1982. In recognition of this change, the institution added “university” to its title, officially becoming the University College of Cape Breton (UCCB). Soon, the scope of federal involvement in UCCB would expand dramatically; by the end of the 1980s, the institution was poised as a major actor in a renewed development strategy for “post-industrial” Cape Breton.

Hopes for the island’s coal industry were temporarily bouyed by the second global oil shock in 1979-80, but – as is examined in earlier chapters -Sysco continued to bleed jobs. It was also at this time that federal involvement in industrial Cape Breton

²⁶ Morgan, *Perseverance*, 56.

²⁷ “Coming Out Fighting Over Devco University,” 25 May 1974, College of Cape Breton Scrapbook, 1960-1977, BI.

²⁸ “Academic Manipulators Insulting People’s Intelligence,” *Chronicle Herald*, July 12, 1974.

began to shift away from the Keynesian strategies employed in the postwar period.²⁹ During the lead up to the 1984 federal election, Progressive Conservative (PC) candidate Brian Mulroney promised a re-consideration of regional economic development methods. Business interests had expressed concerns that the Department of Regional Industrial Expansion was too centralized and focused too extensively on sectoral growth.³⁰ Mulroney and the Tories were voted into office on September 4, 1984; with this, Canada joined in the neoliberal revolution underway in both the U.S. and the U.K.

The language found within the Tories economic planning documents reveals the contours of this transition. Michael Wilson, the new Minister of Finance, described the renewed interest of the government in establishing bottom-up aid for small business and entrepreneurship.³¹ In Canada, this would take the form of tax cuts – designed to facilitate the “re-allocation” of resources to the most productive ends possible.³² In Cape Breton, it meant the withdrawal of federal support from two heavy water plants, which employed approximately 700 workers.³³ The impact of this decision, James Bickerton argues, “could not have come at a worse time: 700 jobs would be lost when the Island was

²⁹ Memorandum, 4 November 1986, OLGS. A.C.O.A. – Sydney Steel Corporation (SYSCO) / General (1986-1987), Volume 92, File 21, Lowell Murray Fonds, R14121-19-3-E, LAC; The Liberals had also previously considered ‘putting an end to the idea that Canada owes Sydney a living.’ See Memorandum, Department of Finance, 3 August 1978, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Volume 5370, File 4052-03-5 pt. 3, Department of Finance Fonds, RG 19, LAC.

³⁰ Donald Savoie, *Regional Economic Development: Canada’s search for solutions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 127.

³¹ Communication Strategy, 21 January 1993, OLGS Federal-Provincial Relations Ad. Hoc Committee on Steel Industry, Part 1, Volume 139, File 3, Lowell Murray Fonds, LAC.

³² Department of Finance, *A New Direction for Canada: An Agenda for Economic Renewal* (Ottawa: 1984), 39-40; See also Annual Report on the Industrial and Regional Development Program, 1986-1987, 13 June 1986, Records of Minister of Industrial Expansion, Sinclair Stevens, 1994-95/065 File 101-1, Department of Regional Economic Expansion Fonds, RG 124, LAC.

³³ David Milne, *Tug of War: Ottawa and the Provinces under Trudeau and Mulroney* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1986), 225-6.

suffering a 25% unemployment rate.”³⁴ Federal cabinet was also almost immediately looking towards the possible privatization of Sysco, although this was an unofficial position.³⁵ As a planning document reveals:

The Cabinet Decision required that the provision of federal funding be subject to the Province of Nova Scotia agreeing to seek a private sector investor for SYSCO and that the steel making technology employed be such as to attract a private sector partner.³⁶

The Mulroney administration soon moved to decentralize regional development. Sinclair Stevens, the newly appointed Minister for Regional Economic Development, announced a plan to relieve some of these economic pressures that had been pushing Cape Breton towards crisis. Enterprise Cape Breton was created to administer and oversee a tax credit to promote the growth and expansion of local businesses. Governor General Jeanne Sauv  also announced during the 1986 speech from the throne:

An Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) will be constituted to facilitate and coordinate all federal development initiatives in the area. This agency will make fuller use of the expertise available in the Atlantic region and invite the maximum participation of other governments and organizations in the area.³⁷

Enterprise Cape Breton merged with ACOA in 1987, although the following year the industrial development wing of Devco was turned into another crown corporation –

³⁴ James Bickerton, “Old Wine in New Bottles? Federal Development Agencies in Cape Breton, 1984-1989” (Saint John’s: Atlantic Provinces Political Studies Association, 1990): 185.

³⁵ Although Sysco subsidies were ‘non-viable,’ federal bureaucrats also recognized that the circumstances surrounding the corporation were politically fraught. See Lyle Russell to H.M. McGee, 30 May 1985, Regional Industrial Expansion - Programs for Export Market Development (PEMD) – Sydney Steel Corporation, Volume 255, File 7997-A-40321, Department of Regional Economic Expansion Fonds, LAC.

³⁶ Cabinet Memorandum, 1987, Cape Breton Island – Sydney Steel Corporation, Volume 5370, File 4052-03-5 pt. 3, Department of Finance Fonds, LAC.

³⁷ Jean Sauv , Speech from the Throne, September 30, 1986, <https://www.poltext.org/en/part-1-electronic-political-texts/canadian-throne-speeches>.

Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation (ECBC).³⁸ UCCB was soon embedded within these processes as a local partner; in 1990, the institution received \$200,000 in ECBC funding for the creation of a laboratory devoted to the ongoing tar ponds remediation efforts. This was the beginning of an extensive relationship between the university and the federal “alphabet soup” development agencies.³⁹

An official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between UCCB and ECBC in 1991. The purpose of this agreement, write Paul Patterson and Susan Biagi, was to seek the beginning of a new era in Cape Breton – “the first steps toward creation of a technological and entrepreneurial culture on the island and to rebuild a devastated economy.”⁴⁰ This new cultural mindscape, intended to supersede the old industrial orthodoxy, would be built upon the basis of university partnerships with private firms.⁴¹ With this, the university took on a new role within the deindustrializing city; rather than the “free industrial society” that Moses Coady envisioned during the institution’s earliest years, the university would now serve as an instrument for moving beyond the trappings of industrial society altogether.

Very quickly, the language used to facilitate these changes identified the working-class cultures and practices on the island as a problem. One ECBC planning document describes Cape Breton as a region where “public demonstrations [are seen] as an acceptable response to change;” an “assumption exists that outsiders will solve the

³⁸ Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), *Report of the Enterprise Cape Breton assessment team: from dependence to enterprise* (Moncton: February 1991): 8, Bras d’Or Collection, 5087, Cape Breton University Library, Sydney, NS; Bickerton, “Old Wine in New Bottles,” 188.

³⁹ Deloitte and Touche, *Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation and University College of Cape Breton: Report on Evaluation of Technology Industry Development Program* (February 1994).

⁴⁰ Paul Patterson and Susan Biagi, *The Loom of Change: Weaving a New Economy on Cape Breton Island* (Sydney: University College of Cape Breton Press, 2003), 12.

⁴¹ Jon Van Til, *Growing Civil Society: From Nonprofit Sector to Third Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 156.

island’s problems;” and that “lacks an entrepreneurial culture.”⁴² Such ideas continue to be widely expressed, and they draw upon deeply rooted stereotypes about Maritimers that eclipse the role of political economy in favour of cultural explanations for disparity. Maritime “folk,” in these readings, are simply not suited to the globalized, entrepreneurial economy – but they must be made to accept its new realities.

These stereotypes are not new; as Ernie Forbes describes, they have been marshalled as explanatory apparatuses for circumstances as disparate as regional support for prohibition, the apparent conservatism of Maritimes suffragettes, and the purported tardiness in developing social welfare programs. In castigating these explanations as unsatisfactory, Forbes writes:

One should be under no illusion that myths disappear simply because their basic inaccuracies are exposed by a scholar. Myths become popular when they serve the purposes of those transmitting and / or receiving them. They will tend to endure as long as they are useful.⁴³

And endure, they have. Development groups within Nova Scotia also adopted the language and ideals of neoliberal restructuring, an impulse that remains visible today. As recently as 2014, the “Ivany Report” warned:

This lack of solidarity as a province undermines constructive dialogue about our future and makes us a more difficult and risk-averse place to do business and build communities. It seems apparent that if Nova Scotia is to find ways to meet its current challenges, there will need to be change on the cultural level as much as in economic structures and government policies and programs.⁴⁴

The bold strategy identified in the Ivany report does not differ in intent from those employed 25 years ago by Voluntary Planning – another provincial advisory group comprised of regional business people, labour organizers, and community activists. This document identifies seven core values and articulates an overall goal designed to guide

⁴² Patterson and Biagi, *The Loom of Change*, 37.

⁴³ E.R. Forbes, *Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes*, (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989), 11-12.

⁴⁴ The Nova Scotia Commission on Building A New Economy, *Now or Never: An Urgent Call to Action for Nova Scotians* (February 2014): vii, <http://onens.ca/commission-report/>.

Nova Scotia's economic strategy. The "core values" of this system are: private sector driven, outward looking, value added, technologically advanced, performance oriented, environmentally sustainable, and regionally sensitive. The stated goal is "to build an economy that is based on *competitive success* so we will be able to sell more goods and services in the global marketplace." The authors remark:

We must develop in Nova Scotia a competitive culture, a shared sense that we are all competing with each other and with those in other parts of the world to be the best at whatever we do.⁴⁵

The Voluntary Planning document recommends that the province re-focus their attention towards the promising future of high-tech enterprise. Key to this notion is the idea that "the structure of higher education in Nova Scotia today is inhibiting the establishment of strong linkages between academic science disciplines and engineering."⁴⁶ UCCB, with its combination of academic and trades education, was positioned advantageously in light of these proposals. The agreement with ECBC allowed the university to cooperate with federal agencies in charting a new way forward not only for industrial Cape Breton, but also for the Maritime Provinces. The desire for the university to play such a role is further expressed within the early ACOA assessment, *From Dependence to Enterprise*, which recommends:

Reshaping and rebuilding of the Cape Breton economy must come from within, through the efforts of Cape Bretoners. There must be a concentrated effort to shift from dependence to enterprise and to nurture entrepreneurship. We must recognize the vital role that education and training, and, in particular, the University College of Cape Breton, must play in effecting this shift.⁴⁷

Federal and provincial strategies began to hinge upon the language and intent of an ascendant neoliberalism by the 1980s. Cape Breton, a region already suffering from the dual shocks of deindustrialization in steel and coal, seemed ready-made as a case study for the implementation of these strategies. Interestingly, and counter to neoliberal orthodoxy, the state played a significant role in the proposed transition. Development

⁴⁵ Voluntary Planning, *Our Province, Our Future, Our Choice: A Consultation Paper for Nova Scotia Economic Strategy* (Halifax: 1991), 3-5.

⁴⁶ Voluntary Planning, *Our Province, Our Future, Our Choice*, 16-17.

⁴⁷ ACOA, *Report of the Enterprise Cape Breton assessment team*, 119.

agencies in collusion with the local university directed funding towards chosen private sector actors in the “new economy.” This was intended to foster a transition away from reliance upon state-owned industrial firms, such as Devco and Sysco, which would ultimately allow for their disintegration. While ACOA remains in place at the time of writing, Devco, Sysco, and ECBC have since closed – and the promised post-industrial economy has not emerged to take their place.

By May of 1992, the MOU had already resulted in nearly \$700,000 of additional federal funding allocated to UCCB. This included \$500,000 dedicated to the creation of a Chair in the Management of Technological Change, and an additional \$182,000 towards further research in the technology sector. The university worked closely with ECBC to encourage the establishment of high-tech companies in Cape Breton and a “Technology Advisory Group” was created to help members of the community and other entrepreneurs with the planning and execution of tech start-ups. As Patterson and Biagi write, “in creating TAG, one of ECBC’s original goals was to encourage partnerships between the University College and the private sector.”⁴⁸ The development of closer relationships between universities and private firms, Harvey argues, was a fundamental aspect to the spread of market ideology. That these ideas would take root in the modern university is not surprising; “Business schools at prestigious universities like Stanford and Harvard, generously funded by corporations and foundations, became centres of neoliberal orthodoxy from the very moment they opened.”⁴⁹

Jacqueline Scott, appointed as President of UCCB in January 1993, sought to expand upon this strategic impulse. Scott was a staunch supporter of neoliberal restructuring in the Cape Breton economy and within the university. Between 1996 and 2009, she sat on the Board of Directors for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies – a neoliberal think-tank favouring pro-market reforms.⁵⁰ Brian Lee Crowley, the institute’s founder, has written extensively on the works of Friedrich Hayek, the “morality” of the

⁴⁸ Patterson and Biagi, *The Loom of Change*, 37.

⁴⁹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 54.

⁵⁰ *Atlantic Institute for Market Studies website*, “Annual Reports, 1996/1997 – 2009/2010, <http://www.aims.ca/en/home/aboutus/annualreport.aspx>.

market, and the importance of market-based solutions for the problems facing the region; the think tank was designed to bring these ideas to bear on Atlantic Canada.⁵¹ Deeply-rooted cultural and attitudinal handicaps, Scott would later write, were a primary factors in preventing the island's industrial communities – and, indeed, its First Nations residents – from achieving prosperity. She describes:

[Some First Nations leaders] believe that ‘the government victimized us and, under the treaties, it owes us a living’ or that government should provide jobs through grants and subsidies to enterprises — a sentiment that is, indeed, shared by many non-aboriginals in Cape Breton's industrial communities.⁵²

Throughout the decade, the university expanded its focus and partnered with more than 100 local tech-projects. It also reshaped its internal structure; on-campus programs now included the Bachelor of Technology in Environmental Health, Nautical and Chemical Sciences, and Petroleum Studies. A program in Community Economic Development was unveiled in 1998. By this point, the university had become more than a go-between amongst federal development agencies and local business - it was positioned as a research and development incubator. In 1999, the University College established its Department of Economic and Technological Innovation to “facilitate the transfer of research and development to the private sector, for commercialization, and to promote economic diversification.”⁵³ Research clusters included:

- The Computer-Assisted Design/Computer-Assisted Manufacturing Centre
- The Geographical Information Systems/Global Positions Systems Centre
- The Centre of Excellence in Information Technology
- The Centre of Excellence in Petroleum Development and Education
- The Centre for Excellence in Environmental Research
- The Technology Enterprise Centre

⁵¹ Brian Lee Crowley, *The Self, the Individual and the Community: Liberalism in the Political Thought of F.A. Hayek and Sidney and Beatrice Webb* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Brian Lee Crowley, *The Road to Equity: Gender, Ethnicity, and Language* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Co. Ltd., 1994); Brian Lee Crowley, *Taking Ownership: property rights and fishery management on the Atlantic coast* (Halifax: Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, 1996).

⁵² Jacqueline Scott, *Doing Business with the Devil: Land, Sovereignty, and Corporate Partnerships in Membertou Inc.* (Halifax: Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, 2004): vi.

⁵³ Patterson and Biagi, *The Loom of Change*, 71.

Although many of these centres continued in the years immediately following the closure of Devco and Sysco, not a single one remains in operation today.

Trying to Light a Candle With a Wet Piece of Paper: The Death of Sysco, 1999-2001

In the fall of 1999, with UCCB ostensibly positioned as the agent of change that would help to guide Cape Breton into the post-industrial future, all that remained was for citizens to accept this change with open arms. This necessitated the closure of the two firms that had, by this point, become associated in popular imagination – on the mainland, at least - with the failure of industrial interventionism: Sysco and Devco.

Recalling the decision to close Sydney Steel, Hamm asserts that it was not based on ideology; rather, he felt that the subsidization of Sysco did not fit within a program of targeted economic development. This position fits within the context of a development strategy that viewed the economic future of the province in terms of the nascent tech and knowledge industries. In fact, the former premier spoke highly of Stanfieldian economic interventionism – but geared towards the proper economic drivers:

John Hamm: I am a believer in business incentives, but only the ones that work. And some of them worked very well, I mean, the best [historical] example we have in our province is Michelin. Michelin came [to Nova Scotia] with business incentives. They didn't come here out of the goodness of their hearts.⁵⁴

Rather than continuing to support the steelworks in Sydney, increasingly seen as a drain on provincial coffers and portrayed as an industrial dinosaur in development literature, the PC's focused their plan on the much-touted “new” economies of the 21st century. NovaKnowledge, a private company supported by provincial and federal grants, produced a report in 1999 in which they laud the decline of federal and provincial spending in Nova Scotia. This decline, including the closure of Sysco and Devco, would apparently provide opportunities for the private sector to create sustained, job-creating economic growth. Traditional government spending, on the other hand, would “retard the

⁵⁴ John Hamm, interview with author, July 29, 2015.

development of the competitive, business-oriented mindset.”⁵⁵ Instead, subsidy dollars could be redirected to other sectors; in October of 1999, for example, the province provided \$3 million to Scotiabank Atlantic for the training of nearly 300 employees for positions at the company’s Halifax call centre.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, the Hamm administration continued to search for prospective buyers for Sydney Steel. Hoogovens Technical Services Technological & Operational Assistance Inc. had been commissioned by the Liberals in 1998 to bring the plant to a level of operation that would appeal to global steel firms.⁵⁷ The firm continued in this capacity under the Tory government. Some workers were sceptical of the company’s intentions, particularly surrounding the \$700,000 per month fee for their services. The following exchange occurred in a group interview with former steelworkers in August 2015:

Gerry McCarron: They brought Hoogovens in before . . . when we were trying to sell it [...] brought a group of about thirty of them in. And each guy went into different department and [...] they’re going to correct our problems [...] We lost more money under these guys then we did with our own guys running it [...] They paid these guys . . .

Sheldon Andrews: Top dollar

Gerry: Top dollar. To come in and try to run things.⁵⁸

Concerns over the remuneration of outside management firms reflect the worry that international firms were simply interested in Sysco as a means to profit from closure and liquidation. Even when a possible sale appeared on the horizon, employees wondered if a private owner would simply shutter the plant and sell off equipment after gaining control.

⁵⁵ NovaKnowledge, *Knowledge Economy Report Card* (Halifax: Nova Knowledge, 1999), 4.

⁵⁶ Salaries for these non-union call centre positions averaged approximately \$26,000 per year. “Province to train workers for bank,” *Cape Breton Post*, October 25, 1999.

⁵⁷ Sydney Steel Corporation, press release: New Management Takes Over, 31 July 1998, in the author’s possession.

⁵⁸ Gerry McCarron, Sheldon Andrews, and George MacNeil, interview with author, August 5, 2015.

Manning MacDonald recalls these fears: “It’s the same old story. If something is vulnerable, there’s always somebody willing to come in the door and make you an offer you can’t refuse.”⁵⁹

The steelworkers knew that they were vulnerable. Several significant factors, which have been examined throughout this thesis, meant that their labour was no longer considered indispensable within their community, nor could they count on the sustained public support that had emerged during previous shutdown attempts. As a result, Local 1064 soon had to engage in “effects bargaining.” To ensure that members would receive appropriate remuneration should closure occur, members began pressuring the provincial government on the issue of workers’ pensions.⁶⁰

They were right to be concerned. A number of firms expressed interest in purchasing Sydney Steel during the final months of 1999, but none moved beyond the initial bidding stage. Bill McNeil, the president of Local 1064, met with members of WCI Steel, a subsidiary of New York-based Renco Steel Holdings Inc. The steel executives indicated that they would only be interested in Sysco if higher production rates could be attained and lower man-hours negotiated; this would require significant layoffs.⁶¹ Although this sale did not move beyond preliminary interest, WCI Steel declared bankruptcy just three years later and absconded with a \$117 million shortfall in the pensions of its American employees. Had this company decided to take on the Sysco operations, a similar fate could easily have befallen Sydney steelworkers.

On December 31, Hamm arrived in Nova Scotia with good news. The plant was to be sold to a consortium of companies under the Ohio-based “Research Group.” The workforce would be reduced through attrition, but the firm hoped to employ approximately 150 steelworkers. Following this press conference, steelworkers in the audience remained subdued. The collapse of the Minmetals sale in the 1990s had made steelworkers wary of pinning their hopes on a “fly-by-night” operation. After all, the

⁵⁹ Manning MacDonald, interview with author, July 27, 2015.

⁶⁰ Minute Book, Local 1064, December 21, 1999: 9-10.

⁶¹ Mary Williams Walsh, “U.S. Moves to Seize Pension Fund in Dispute with Renco,” *New York Times*, February 3, 2006.

agreement specified an April 15 closing date – it was not yet a done deal. Local 1064 now turned their attention towards bargaining for a government commitment to their pensions. As one worker remarked following the announcement, “where will the older workers be left if in three years or so the privatized steel company fails and the government declares itself free of obligation to them?”⁶²

By mid-January, 2000, this deal collapsed and liquidators from Ernst & Young began to prepare for the demolition of the plant.⁶³ Roger Faulkner, a representative from the national chapter of the USWA, visited Sydney and revealed that the union had separately contracted out an American company, Locker Associates, to try and find other possible buyers for the plant.⁶⁴ With no serious offers on the table, Sysco workers began to take more direct action in search of a solution to the ongoing pension issue. In the chill of late February, more than 500 steelworkers and their families crowded the doorway at the Provincial Building in Sydney. One expressed his thoughts in an open letter to the premier:

I was hired at Sysco on March 12, 1979, and I’ve worked sporadically ever since. I am 47, with 21 years seniority and only 5 years of actual work time and credited pension service. While on layoff I began my own small business in Ingonish. I received a registered letter to return to work at Sysco in 1991 so I decided to do that, giving up on my business project. I worked eight weeks and was laid off again. And that’s the story of my life. I am living between welfare and Employment Insurance. [...] At this point in my life I cannot leave the area to look for work. Who would spend the time and money to train me at my age? [...] Now it’s time for [the Premier] to protect me and my family.⁶⁵

The provincial government set up a bidding process for potential buyers and began negotiating with the union regarding pensions. The union was sceptical of their assurances; Hamm, the executive believed, was stalling for time and making empty promises. The union revealed:

⁶² Minute Book, Local 1064, January 4, 2000: 14-15.

⁶³ Minute Book, Local 1064, January 18, 2000: 17-18.

⁶⁴ “Steelworkers’ Develop Plan,” *Cape Breton Post*, February 5, 2000.

⁶⁵ Brian MacDonald, “It’s Time for Hamm to Deliver for the Steelworkers,” *Cape Breton Post*, February 21, 2000.

The executive met and decided to [begin protesting] John Hamm [...] as the province is causing untold stress to steelworkers and their families. We agreed [...] to send a bus to opening of Legislature On Mar. 28 [...] Also planning a trip to Hamm's office in Pictou with support from Trenton Local 1231.⁶⁶

The response reveals how steelworkers in Sydney felt hamstrung by their uncertain future. One member spoke out about the abnormality of the situation; in usual contract negotiations, trade unionists would have the ability to withdraw their services in protest. This tactic would be useless as a protest mechanism against either the proposed closure of the plant or as part of pension negotiations. The member argued, "We cannot and must not do this, as it would look like we closed the plant. The government is looking for any excuse."⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Hamm remembers that the steelworkers' protest in Pictou did have an impact:

And to be perfectly honest, despite the fact that it was a very, very emotional issue. They did not treat me badly. I remember one time [...] my MLA office was downtown, New Glasgow. Bus loads of them came to New Glasgow to protest outside my office [...] But government played a role in [Sysco], so government can't just suddenly say, 'we don't have a responsibility.' [...] I said to them on the picket line, I said 'We will treat you fairly. Now, they might have had a different idea of what fairly . . . But what I meant was, you know, first of all the pension fund was in terrible shape, number two the benefits weren't really adequate, and I didn't think they were [...] And number three, if we could arrange it, employment with a new employer.⁶⁸

Negotiations surrounding the Sysco pensions continued into May. The union sought clarification on a number of issues; notably, they pressed for an early retirement incentive package after 25 years of service, a drug plan for retirees, and \$2,200 per month. The government, on the other hand, pushed for \$1,500 per month for all employees with 30 years of service in the event of a closure, a retirement window for those with 27-29 years, and severance packages for those with fewer than 27 years service.⁶⁹ John Kingston, the Atlantic Provinces representative for the USWA, explained the union's position:

⁶⁶ Minute Book, Local 1064, March 21, 2000: 47-48.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ John Hamm, interview with author, July 29, 2015.

⁶⁹ "Sysco Pension Plans," *Cape Breton Post*, May 5, 2000.

Without fear of contradiction, the Steelworkers in Sydney were closer to and competitive with wages and benefits paid by the Industry prior to the Province assuming ownership in 1967. Thirty-three years later we are on an average \$5.00 - \$6.00 below that mark in wages; pensions are \$10.00 - \$20.00 per month times years of service behind the industry.⁷⁰

At the same time, two other companies expressed interest in organizing a purchase arrangement. North American Metals (NAM), a subsidiary that had been involved in the failed Research Group deal, and the Swiss-based Duferco both put forward operational proposals. Local 1064 favoured the NAM proposal, which included the maintenance of 500 positions, while Duferco sought a “leaner” operation of only 200 employees.⁷¹

In the midst of these discussions, the final rail was rolled at Sysco on May 22, 2000. This brought a century of steelmaking to an end.⁷² This occurred without much fanfare. While the final order was completed, steelworkers and management continued to entertain the possibility of a private sale. Steven High describes how workers at the Weyerhaeuser paper mill in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, remembered with great clarity the events of the last shift – as well as ongoing resistance to closure.⁷³ In the documentary film *Last Shift*, which examines the final days of a Bowater mill in New Brunswick, workers’ memories of their final days at the mill are presented as a “bookend” for decades of work.⁷⁴ This was not the case in Sydney; the overbearing possibility of a

⁷⁰ John Kingston to Gordon Balsler, 1 February 2000, in the author’s possession.

⁷¹ Local 1064, “On Our Own Terms: Sysco Progress Report,” May 2000; Bill McNeil, “North American Metals offers jobs and security,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 13, 2000; The union began a public relations campaign pushing for the NAM deal, though the executive remarked that they would have to avoid any association with work stoppages. They decided upon a pamphlet campaign and a series of letters to the editor of the *Post* and the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*. Minute Book, Local 1064, May 16, 2000: 76-77.

⁷² “Final Sysco order rolled,” *Cape Breton Post*, May 23, 2000.

⁷³ Steven High and David Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007).

⁷⁴ “*Last Shift: The Story of a Mill Town*,” directed by Tony Tremblay and Ellen Rose (A Golden Girl Production, 2011), DVD.

private sale not only robbed steelworkers of the ability to actively resist closure through striking or walkouts, but it also ensured uncertainty surrounding whether or not there would be further work at the plant. Gerry McCarron and Dave Nalepa recalled:

Dave Nalepa: Well, we knew when the last rail was rolled because I remember that night, it was the four to twelve shift, and as soon as the thing – they started working on dismantling right after that.

Gerry: Well, we knew it was the last rail rolled – but there was always still that glimmer of hope that before they started pulling everything apart that maybe a sale could happen – but something would have had to fallen out of the sky.⁷⁵

Nearly 250 workers were laid-off the next day. Executives from Local 1064 continued to believe that a deal would be reached. Duferco and the NAM proposals were under consideration and members of the union executive met with Teresa MacNeil – chair of the Sysco board – to discuss the possibility of new rail orders. NAM planned to maintain operations at the rail mill, while the Duferco proposal was based solely on the production of slabs.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the scheduled protest in New Glasgow went ahead.

Approximately 130 steelworkers picketed Hamm’s office, although attendees would later regret that there had not been more participation. Roddie Livingston, speaking at a 1064 membership meeting, said “people are not interested in taking part in rallies, this must change.” Others echoed these sentiments, with some remarking that pressuring the government would lead to a better pension agreement and continued interest in procuring a sale.⁷⁷

On Wednesday, June 22, Ernst & Young officially recommended that the province accept the Duferco offer. Matt Harris, speaking on behalf of the liquidators, argued that this purchase agreement was the only possible option; the sale would see the

⁷⁵ Dave Nalepa and Gerry McCarron, interview with author, December 8, 2015.

⁷⁶ Hugh MacKenzie, “Loss of Sysco rail mill would be very costly and can’t be justified,” *Cape Breton Post*, June 10, 2000. The author of this letter was the Director of Research at the national office of the USWA; Teresa MacNeil, interview with author, 18 December 2015.

⁷⁷ Minute Book, Local 1064, June 6, 2000: 81.

buyer pay \$7 million up-front and an additional \$15 million in bonds.⁷⁸ Before this could be finalized, however, the company demanded that a pension agreement be negotiated with the provincial government and that a contract be agreed upon with the plant's unions.⁷⁹

Pension negotiations began immediately. In the first week of August, some steelworkers took matters into their own hands; a group of about 100 younger workers blocked the gates at Sysco for the first time since the provincial election. As steel production had already ceased, this only impacted a few remaining employees in management positions and scheduled deliveries of scrap metal – though it also delayed the shipment of the final rail order. These workers felt that they were being left out of the deal, and they demanded that the province drop the eligibility requirement from 27 to 25 years of service.⁸⁰ Steelworkers held another protest on September 11, this time disrupting a garden party held for Nova Scotia Lieutenant Governor Myra Freeman at UCCB.⁸¹ Bill McNeil reflects on the eventual agreement:

So that's the way it worked out. The guys hired on [after] '75 [with less than 25 years] never got anything [...] The guys with 30 years service got the total, the full pension. And the guys with 30 years service down to 25 were prorated. And the guys after that got severance packages [...] and the union agreed that these [younger] guys would get the work [at Duferco].⁸²

With the pension issue settled, Duferco began serious negotiations with employees from CUPE, the USWA locals, and salaried staff. This bargaining did not take long; by Halloween, CUPE workers, salaried employees, and the steelworkers had agreed to the terms of a 5-year Duferco contract. Under this contract, nearly 200 former Sysco workers

⁷⁸ “Duferco has Sysco plan,” *Cape Breton Post*, June 23, 2000.

⁷⁹ Joel MacLean and Gerry McCarron, interview with author, 29 April 2016.

⁸⁰ “Steelworkers shut Sysco down with pension protest,” *Cape Breton Post*, August 3, 2000.

⁸¹ “Steelworkers crash party,” *Cape Breton Post*, September 11, 2000.

⁸² Bill McNeil, interview with author, August 18, 2015; See also, “Agreement between Province of Nova Scotia and United Steelworkers of America and its Locals 1064, 6537, and 1064-2,” 14 May 2001, in the author's possession.

would have continuous employment; the union agreed that those men who were ineligible for pensions would receive the first opportunity for work. These jobs were categorized into five base wage groups, ranging from \$15.50 per hour to \$17.22 per hour.⁸³ This offer, for many former employees, appeared to be a done deal; according to Gerry and Dave:

Gerry: We all got together, the management, and we actually picked the workforce – we had it all lined up for when –

Dave: Yeah. I had the HR side of it done. We probably had – 90 percent of the employees picked and a lot of people had signed up, and all the salaried people had all signed up, with letters and contracts.

Gerry: Jackets ordered. Jackets with Duferco-Sydney.⁸⁴

But this deal, like so many before, would not come to pass. The final stage in the sale process required a contract between Duferco and Nova Scotia Power – a former provincial crown corporation that had been privatized in 1992. The inability of the two companies to reach an agreement on power rates caused the entire deal to collapse on January 18, 2001. John Hamm reflects:

They came that close to buying it. And it was only afterwards that I found out why the deal fell through. And it wasn't really their fault. They, in their business plan, had to negotiate the electricity rate with Nova Scotia Power. And they came within half a cent of bridging the gap. But they couldn't bridge the gap. And that gave them the out.⁸⁵

“Steel Era Ends,” read the *Post* headline the next morning; “Sydney’s designation as a steel town ended Thursday.”⁸⁶ It was this event, the collapse of the Duferco deal, which most respondents view as the final end of Sydney Steel; in 2015, very few interviewees expressed the belief that another serious buyer could have been found in time to maintain production at the plant.

⁸³ Duferco Farrell Corp and USWA 1064, “Contract Appendix A: Wages,” in the author’s possession.

⁸⁴ Dave Nalepa and Gerry McCarron, interview with author, December 8, 2015.

⁸⁵ John Hamm, interview with author, July 29 2015

⁸⁶ “Steel Era Ends,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 19, 2001.

Table 7.1

**Monthly Crude Steel Production in Canada, 2000
(Thousand Tonnes)**

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
1,460	1,401	1,534	1,339	1,443	1,428	1,420	1,397	1,335	1,408	1,315	1,114

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A global downturn in the steel market was forecast at the end of 2000. Market uncertainty likely played a role in the decision by Duferco to halt the Sysco sale agreement. In Canada, crude steel production had already slowed by the end of the year, and a predicted slow down in the automotive sector indicated that steel prices would remain low. An inventory glut had depressed the global market, and forecasts for 2001 continued to predict a nearly 7 percent fall in demand. According to the OECD report on steel markets, “Canadian producers will be facing a difficult situation that was not seen since the early 1990s and that is expected to result in layoffs.”⁸⁸ It was a bad time for any company to consider purchasing a steel mill. Matt Harris announced, “There is no remaining credible option out there to operate Sysco.”⁸⁹ As of June 1, 2001, all remaining employees of Sydney Steel were officially off the company’s books; the steel industry in Sydney had come to an end.

Conclusion

Ten years after the collapse of Communism, Perry Anderson reflected, the world had moved on. American capitalism re-asserted its primacy in all fields. Europe moved

⁸⁷ International Iron and Steel Institute, *Steel Statistical Yearbook, 2001* (Brussels: Committee on Economic Studies, 2001), 48.

⁸⁸ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Outlook for the Steel Market in 2001 in Countries Participating in the OECD Steel Committee* (22 March 2001): <http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=PAC/COM/NEWS%282001%2927&docLanguage=En>.

⁸⁹ “Demolition and liquidation of Sysco to begin this summer,” *Globe and Mail*, June 6, 2001.

towards the American model following the apparent discrediting of Marxism, and Asia – including the Indian subcontinent – had broadly adopted the prescriptions of the World Trade Organization. The dominant intellectualism was that of practical resignation; capitalism had won – or at least scored a major victory – and the left would have to contend with that hard reality.⁹⁰ It was into this international environment that the “discourse” of neoliberalism became predominant; Pierre Bourdieu writes:

It is so strong and so hard to combat only because it has on its side all of the forces of a world of relations of forces, a world that it contributes to making what it is. It does this most notably by orienting the economic choices of those who dominate economic relationships. It thus adds its own symbolic force to these relations of forces. In the name of this scientific programme, converted into a plan of political action, an immense political project is underway.⁹¹

The ideological contours of this project are particularly relevant to the circumstances surrounding the final closure of Sydney Steel and the evolution of UCCB in the rapidly deindustrializing city. Both institutions represented poles of the changing landscape; Sysco is framed, within this discourse, as a symbol of the old economy – and old working-class ways of thinking that, like the landscape itself, must be “remediated.” As Jackie Clarke argues, “while this language of class death registers a process of social and economic restructuring that is real, it does little to get to grips with the fact that the people who populated the old industrial order still exist.”⁹² In contrast, UCCB was institutionally positioned to soothe the transition from a city dependent upon state employment towards a private sector economy.

Sysco employees keenly felt their displacement; “trying to light a candle with a wet piece of paper,” is how Charles MacDonald describes attempts to get the community

⁹⁰ Perry Anderson, “Renewals,” *New Left Review* 1 (January – February 2000): 1-20.

⁹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Essence of Neoliberalism,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (December 1998): <https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu>.

⁹² Jackie Clarke, “Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France,” *Modern and Contemporary France*, 19, 4 (2011): 449.

involved in trying to keep the plant open.⁹³ When asked why a sense of resignation permeated the plant's final months, workers offered several answers. Fred James reveals:

I think there were a number of factors [...] Probably the biggest single factor was the fact that the number of employees had been reduced so much, I mean we were down under 800 people at that point in time [...] So it didn't have the economic impact [...] The other thing, I think, is that people were in a position that they had come to terms with it. That it was inevitable. They had, for '67, well – 30-some years – 33 years, I guess – watched millions and millions of dollars pumped into the steel plant, and still didn't turn it around. I know you could write books and volumes on why, and what have you, but that's the bottom line right there. After all those millions of dollars pumped into it, it was still losing money. And they couldn't say that was going to stop. So I think the people were much more willing to accept . . . the demise of the steel plant in 2000 [...] And [sighs] . . . I never experienced it myself, I mean face to face, but I was hearing that there were a lot of business people, even in Sydney . . . that were saying, you know, alright, enough's enough.⁹⁴

Bill McNeil echoes many of these points:

I was talking to John Hamm [...] and he told me right out, he said, 'Look, Bill,' he said, 'there's organizations within the City of Sydney that want to see it closed.' He said, 'It's not only Halifax that wants the plant closed [...] Now he told me that himself. So, it became that – you know – the fight from 5,000 men, to 3,000 men, down to 1,200 men, down to 700 men, down to 300 men! You know? The fight. The community was . . . At one time when you had 5,000 people working on the steel plant everybody that lived in Sydney [...] they were related to them. But after awhile as the workforce dwindled down we just didn't have the support. We tried, of course, it's just . . . it wasn't going to happen. But anyway, the feeling was 'get a pension [...] if somebody wants to work with Duferco, let them run it.'⁹⁵

A number of themes remain common to discussions of final closure at Sydney Steel. That Sysco suffered a “death by 1000 cuts” through frequent layoffs and the long-term failure to diversify and achieve profitability is frequently articulated. The age of the workforce is another; the majority of workers qualified under the pension arrangement, and those who did not were generally in their mid-to-late forties. Dave Nalepa explains: “[In 1967] you had young guys and old guys at the plant. You had the whole slew. When we closed, you

⁹³ Charles MacDonald, interview with author, March 3, 2015.

⁹⁴ Fred James, interview with author, August 16, 2013.

⁹⁵ Bill McNeil, interview with author, August 18, 2015.

just had old guys. There were no young guys. There was no, you know, the son of so-and-so, is 22, is working in the melt shop.” This lack of younger workers, who would perhaps have been more invested in the continued operation of the plant, is another reason frequently given to explain the inability to organize effectively against closure.

In these answers, the absence of resistance is contingent upon the decline in employment at Sysco and the displacement of the plant from the economic and cultural centre of the community. Workers were fearful of acting as barriers to the market, they believed that traditional forms of resistance would scare off potential buyers. These attitudes did not simply spring from the period between 1999 and 2001, but developed alongside the global dismantling of the Keynesian welfare state and the ideological turn towards “flexibility” and “lean production” in North America and Europe.

Marx wrote, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please [...] but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.”⁹⁶ As Sydney steelworkers responded to these global forces, the decision to close the plant was similarly circumscribed. That is not to say that such a decision was *inevitable*, but rather that the closure of Sysco had become a hugely appealing political option in a marketplace of ideas dominated by the voices of an ascendant neoliberalism.⁹⁷ John Hamm does not personally view the closure through the lens of neoliberal ideology. Rather, he positions himself as a neo-Stanfieldian – willing to use government to intervene in markets, but only in cases where it makes “economic sense.” Neoliberal economism, as outlined by Harvey, is not found in Hamm’s recollections of the Sysco closure. Instead, as he explained, the time for subsidizing heavy industry had passed – other sectors, such as technology, appeared more promising and a better investment for taxpayer dollars.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852; repr. New York: Cosmo Classics, 2008), 1.

⁹⁷ Such restructuring was globally reinforced through the passage of free trade agreements such as NAFTA and GATT; see Peter Burnham, “Capital, Crisis and the International State System,” in *Global Capital, National State and the Politics of Money*, eds. Werner Bonefield and John Holloway (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1995), 92-4.

⁹⁸ John Hamm, interview with author, July 29, 2015.

If we consider G.I. Smith's decision to nationalize the Sydney steel plant in 1967 as the natural culmination of a regionalist/interventionist development strategy, Hamm's resolution to close the plant in 1999 was framed within a set of popular ideological axioms about the market, production, and society that were nearly the polar opposite of those that surrounded the issue on Black Friday. Neoliberalism must be understood, as Philip Mirowski argues, as "a set of *epistemic* commitments" that hold as a primary ambition the redefinition of the form and function of the state – *not* its destruction.⁹⁹ The closure decision was more than simply an impartial analysis of where public dollars would be better spent. It was developed as the result of a decades-long ideological construction whereby the employees of Sysco, the residents of industrial Cape Breton, and the citizens of deindustrializing regions throughout the world were castigated as symbols of a bygone era.

Noam Chomsky describes policy prescriptions under modern capitalism as being chosen from within a particular spectrum of "acceptable opinions."¹⁰⁰ In Nova Scotia, alternative solutions to the problems of deindustrialization were either ignored or preemptively dismissed as backwards-looking by a canon of development literature that presented the issue as a dichotomy. Cape Breton, in these narratives, *must* transition wholesale from dependence to entrepreneurship. This is why the language of the neoliberal project is so odious. As Oliver Schöller and Olaf Groh-Samburg write, it affirms Social Darwinist assumptions while lobbying for specific political/economic solutions.¹⁰¹ If the transition from coal and steel to the "restructured" capitalism of entrepreneurship, knowledge, and innovation were to fail, this could simply be blamed on the inability of the population to move beyond their industrial mindscape – the project itself could – and did - continue without question.

⁹⁹ Philip Mirowski, "Postface: Defining Neoliberalism," in *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*, eds. Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 417, 436.

¹⁰⁰ Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, *The Common Good* (Berkeley, CA: Odonian Press, 1998), 43.

¹⁰¹ Oliver Schöller and Olaf Groh-Samburg, "The education of neoliberalism," in *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Critique*, eds. Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen and Gisela Neunhöffer (London: Routledge, 2006), 171-3.

The importance of UCCB to this process cannot be overstated. The institution, following Mulroney's re-envisioning of regional development during the mid-1980s, provided an in-community link between research dollars and the nascent private tech industry. A primary goal of these activities was to shrink the reliance of Cape Bretoners on federal and provincial expenditure, which would be accomplished not only with the establishment of private-public partnerships at the institution, but also through an effort at conditioning local students and community members to have a more "entrepreneurial" and "business-friendly" perspective. As one Cape Breton County Economic Development report from 1994 recommends, "UCCB [in conjunction with local schools] should develop a series of teacher/administrator inservices, teacher retraining programs, and information services for students based upon the new economy of Cape Breton."¹⁰²

This lengthy process, culminating with the final closure of Sysco and the ascendancy of UCCB as a prime-mover within the island's much-lauded "new economy," must be considered in terms of both top-down ideational constructions and bottom-up responses to the material circumstances of capitalist reproduction. As Hans-Jürgen Bieling argues, "It seems very alluring to adopt a view that emphasizes the prominent role of intellectual leadership in social and political struggles [...] [However], the ideas and perceptions – the content of common sense – which emerge from the 'bottom up' in these processes [are by no means simply secondary]."¹⁰³ Restructuring in two institutional "poles" of the community – the steel plant and the university – reveal how workers' responses to the material economic changes of neoliberalism can differ drastically depending upon their place in constructed discourse.

If the goal of neoliberal restructuring in industrial Cape Breton was to produce significant private sector employment, it was an abject failure. In 2015, the island's unemployment rate remained between 15 and 20 percent – far higher than anywhere else in the province. If, on the other hand, the goal was to implement an ideological project of

¹⁰² Cape Breton County Economic Development, *Strategic Economic Action Plan*, 12 August 1994, Bras d'Or Collection, 5066, Cape Breton University Library.

¹⁰³ Hans-Jürgen Bieling, "Neoliberalism and communitarianism: Social conditions, discourses, and politics," in *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique*, eds. Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard Walpen and Gisela Neunhöffer (London: Routledge, 2006), 207.

economic neoliberalism – using Harvey’s definition – then it has been an unmitigated success. Federal and provincial governments have since abdicated responsibility for Devco and Sysco, ECBC was closed by the federal government in 2014, and the Liberal government of Stephen MacNeil has recently enacted further austerity measures – including an attempted wage freeze imposed on 75,000 of the province’s public sector workers.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps, as a result, it should be no surprise that the language of economic development from the early 1990s remains so remarkably consistent today. The solutions proposed 25 years ago to the problems of regional deindustrialization are still described as bold and fresh ideas. Strategists bemoan the lack of an “entrepreneurial spirit” among residents of the Maritimes, while pushing for Nova Scotians “to endure major sacrifices – such as cuts to rural services, so that money can be invested elsewhere.” As University of Prince Edward Island political scientist Peter McKenna told John Ibbitson of the *Globe and Mail* in March 2015, “our region lacks the energy, entrepreneurial spirit, and the desire for a fresh start.”¹⁰⁵ The reasons for this are clear; Forbes words remain prescient: Myths will endure as long as they are useful.

¹⁰⁴ “Feds cut Enterprise Cape Breton Corporation,” *Chronicle Herald*, March 19, 2014; “Liberal law limiting public-sector union wages passes third reading,” *Chronicle Herald*, December 18, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ John Ibbitson, “How the Maritimes became the incredible shrinking region,” *Globe and Mail*, March 20, 2015.

Chapter Eight

Making History from Sydney Steel, 2012-2016

I had to go to the steel company site and look up these old personnel records. I went on the steel plant for the first time since being laid off. I got in that main gate and I turned right and the tracks weren't ploughed – the railway tracks when you come in. From 1965 to that point I had never ever seen that. In my life. And I filled up. It just . . . it sounds like such a stupid little thing . . . it just struck me, all that history, all the families that fed their children and maybe put their kids through university and all the rest of it for almost 100 years. And it's gone. Gone. Even today sometimes . . . a memory will be sparked and, and I'll feel the sadness.¹

- Fred James, 2013

Demolition of the plant began almost immediately. By the end of July 2001, work crews staffed with former steelworkers began dismantling what remained of the Sydney Works. Re-usable assets were organized for auction, and the province sought private buyers to begin recouping some of the funds that had been spent on the Sydney Steel Corporation over the years.² In 2003, Zoom Developers of India purchased several large pieces of equipment from the Sysco site; the company hired teams of former workers to dismantle and organize the universal mill to be shipped. During this process, the last fatality on the Sydney Steel site occurred; on September 23, 2004, Roy Marchand – a former steelworker – was killed when a falling steel beam struck him in the head.³

Community divisions remained. Questions over the environmental and health impacts of the site again erupted as work was carried out. Throughout the early 2000s, local environmentalists and members from the Sierra Club continued pressuring government to resolve the issue. Some of these divisions were visible on August 30, 2001, when a crowd gathered outside the plant to watch the destruction of the smokestacks at the Open Hearth Department. After several quick explosions, three of the stacks had

¹ Fred James, interview with author, August 17, 2013.

² “Sydney Steel demolition has started, what’s next?” *CBC*, July 23, 2001.

³ “Falling steel beam kills former Sysco worker,” *CBC*, September 24, 2004.

fallen – but two remained standing. Charles MacDonald reflected, “They just don’t want to lay down and die, it seems [...] The worst part is that this shouldn’t have happened. The fact that Cape Bretoners let this happen is sickening.”⁴ Meanwhile, Elizabeth May and several others shouted for officials to stop the demolition; “What’s the urgency of blowing up the stacks?” May asked, “Even if [it’s] entirely benign, they’re treating the people with contempt.”⁵

On May 12, 2004, representatives from the provincial and federal governments announced a renewed commitment to the clean up of the Sydney tar ponds and the remediation of the area surrounding the former steel plant. Adrienne Clarkson, in the 2004 speech from the throne, revealed that the Canadian government would provide approximately \$280 million to aid in these efforts. The Hamm administration agreed to fund the remaining \$120 million. Stephen Owen, the Minister for Public Works and Government Services of Canada, told gathered reporters that the project would include a combination of high-temperature incineration and on site encapsulation.⁶ The demolition of Sydney Steel structures concluded in 2007, and by the end of the decade the remediation phase of the tar ponds and coke ovens sites was also drawing to a close.

The Sydney Tar Ponds Agency, a federal crown corporation created to oversee the clean up, stated in 2011 that the planned end-use of the site was to take the form of a community green space. Envisioned as a “central park” for Sydney, the design would include trails, bike paths, and public art, and would act as a connection between Ashby, Whitney Pier, and downtown Sydney. Today, this green space bears the name “Open Hearth Park.”⁷ In this chapter, Open Hearth Park and a corresponding historical film about the Sydney steel plant, titled *Heart of Steel* (2012), are explored as public history

⁴ Tera Camus, “Sysco stacks dust in the wind,” *Chronicle Herald*, August 31, 2001.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “\$1.48 million future-use design contract awarded,” *Sydney Tar Ponds Agency*, November 23, 2011, in author’s possession.

⁷ “Park called Open Hearth to grace tar ponds site,” *Chronicle Herald*, June 14, 2013; Province approves \$1M loan to Harbourside Commercial Park,” *Cape Breton Post*, November 6, 2009.

representations of the deindustrialization process more than 10 years after final closure.⁸ James Rhodes describes the importance of critically analysing these cultural forms:

The realm of popular culture becomes an important site within which claims to the industrial past and its related cultural forms are reasserted and reproduced; there, increased material and symbolic marginality is challenged, and attempts to relocate such cultural practices and identities at the symbolic center of place are advanced.⁹

In the first section, the process of naming the park is examined for the tensions it reveals between labour history and public history on the site of the former mill. Additionally, the physical features of the present landscape reveal how place identities shift in response to existing social relationships. The second section focuses on *Heart of Steel*, which presents a “green” vision of the city that is politically disconnected from the concerns of the industrial past. Any recognition that Cape Breton’s current circumstances are related to its experience of deindustrialization is subsumed under a celebratory narrative that highlights the transition from dirty industry to green fields.

What’s in a Name? A Commemorative Controversy at Open Hearth Park

On Labour Day weekend, at the end of August in 2013, hundreds of Sydney residents gathered at the site of the former plant to hear a variety of local musicians, purchase food from a gourmet street fair, and participate in multi-cultural events organized by members of the Mi’kmaq, Acadian, Eastern European, and black communities of Cape Breton Island. The keystone event of the weekend took place at dusk on Saturday evening, when a procession of former steelworkers –some dressed in their Sysco work-clothes – walked through the park under a banner bearing the name of the event, “Stronger than Steel.” The title was meant to represent survival; the city had moved away from its industrial past, and the reclaimed land that now rests on nearly 100 hectares of the former mill property has come to signify re-use, remediation, and adaptation.

The purpose of the Stronger than Steel event was twofold; it was a celebration of the conclusion of the \$400 million tar ponds and coke ovens remediation project that had

⁸ “Heart of Steel captures story of steel plant,” *Cape Breton Post*, January 29, 2012.

⁹ James Rhodes, “Youngstown’s ‘Ghost’? Memory, Identity and Deindustrialization,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 74.

been announced in 2004, and it served as the official opening of Open Hearth Park. Representatives from the federal and provincial governments were both on hand for the festivities. Diane Finley, the Canadian Minister of Public Works and Government Services, offered credit to her own government for its hand in the process. “Thanks to the leadership of the Harper Government,” she began, “This has been the most successful contaminated site remediation project in Canada's history and we're proud that it was completed on time and on budget.”¹⁰ Provincial NDP minister Maurice Smith spoke of remembering the industrial history of steel and coal on the island and honouring those who took part, but also of looking ahead “to a brighter future.” This is perhaps easier said than done. Open Hearth Park has memorialized the city’s industrial past in a number of ways. Some of these, as we shall see, remain contentious.



Figure 8.1: Focus on the Future
Source: Photo by author

Before the park opened, the first commemorative efforts had already taken shape. In March 2013, a competition was announced for students from local elementary, junior

¹⁰ *Public Works and Government Services Canada website*, 30 August 2013, “Stronger Than Steel Celebration Pays Tribute to Sydney's Past, Present and Future,” <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?nid=768179>.

high, and high schools. Students were invited to submit proposed names for the park, along with an attached essay, story, video, photograph, or song that explains their reasoning for their choice. Frank Corbett, Deputy Premier of Nova Scotia, explained, “Providing students with the opportunity to name the new park gave them a meaningful role and voice in helping to shape the community's future.”¹¹ The Sydney Tar Ponds Agency described the criteria of the “Sydney Park Project” naming competition: “We're looking for upbeat and original name submissions that show pride in Cape Breton’s history and hope for the future. Names from all local cultures are welcome, but we won’t be considering peoples’ names for the overall park site.” The organizers preferred that the park have some form of collective significance beyond memorializing a single person.



Figure 8.2: Open Hearth Park
Source: Photo by author

¹¹ *Government of Nova Scotia website*, Sydney Tar Ponds Agency Press Release, 14 June 2013, “Open Hearth Park Selected as Name of Reclaimed Tar Ponds Site,” <http://novascotia.ca/news/release/?id=20130614002>.

In public history, the act of naming is political. Meanings are contested, memorializations can include or exclude particular groups, and place-identities shift in response to present conditions.¹² Toby Butler writes:

The problem is that places are not static; people move, leave, visit, and pass through. Over time, places and populations change with the seasons, the markets, and the ages, yet the stories tend to come from those that have stayed a long time in one area and can give the impression that communities are far more stable than they actually are.¹³

Steelworkers' perceptions of the park reflect such a transition in place identity, and these processes are often uncomfortable. While almost everybody interviewed for this project initially expressed a positive attitude towards the park, this was often qualified through a discussion of mitigating factors. Some expressed the opinion that a steel plant should still be operating on the site, while others expressly took issue with the process by which the name was chosen. Fabian Smith describes:

Well, they gave [the responsibility of naming the park] to the children. And that's fine. But to me, with all the money they spent . . . they were taking away a steel plant. Dozens of guys got killed there . . . Why would you put Open Hearth Park? It's only one of the dirtiest departments on the plant. Why is it not named Steelworkers' Memorial Park? To me, that says it all. As I told you, I worked with this guy, one day, and 22 hours later he was dead. I mean to me, that's still . . . things like that take a lot out of you, that's something you never forget. It should be people like him that the park is named after. Steelworkers' Memorial, you know? But anyway, it's too late now.

Naming controversies periodically emerge in response to the creation of public sites or commemorations. As Derek Alderman describes, they arise periodically in the American South in response to the re-naming of streets after Martin Luther King Jr. In these controversies, Alderman argues, larger struggles over social, political identity, and

¹² Jani Vuolteenaho and Lawrence D. Berg, "Towards Critical Toponymies," in *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming*, eds. Lawrence D. Berg and Jani Vuolteenaho (London: Ashgate, 2009), 7.

¹³ Toby Butler, "Memoryscape: How Audio Walks Can Deepen Our Sense of Place by Integrating Art, Oral History, and Cultural Geography," *Geography Compass* 1, 3 (2007): 365

racial identity – and the power to exert those identities – become visible.¹⁴ So, too, are some negative reactions to these processes a response to the perceived exercise of power. Although it was children who ultimately named the park in Sydney, some respondents felt that the site held such significant meaning that the decision should have been undertaken with more care. This is revealed through the frequency in which our conversations soon turned to the numbers of men who were killed at the plant, close calls on the job, or direct experiences of workplace injury.

Perhaps more stinging is the realization that the input of steelworkers, their families, or their union held no more weight in the decision than did the general public. Submissions were posted to a website for the Sydney Park Project, and the top five were selected by a committee of project and community representatives. These included members from the municipal council, provincial and federal representatives, a representative from the African Nova Scotian community, a member from the First Nations community, and members of the tar ponds clean up committee. A short list was created, and online voting began in May 2013.

Demographically, former steelworkers were unlikely to participate in this type of online selection. The democratization of commemorative sites represents another step in the displacement wrought by deindustrialization. Workers are displaced economically, first through decline, then by closure. As employment at the Sydney Works continued to decrease, so did its workers find themselves pushed further to the margins of the city's social and cultural landscape. This process is visible both in the "toxic legacy" and the perceived place of Sysco workers within that narrative, and in the language of neoliberal economic development popularized during the 1980s and 1990s. Open Hearth Park, though named after one of the central departments in the steelmaking process, does not necessarily communicate the sense of collective experience that many former workers seem to prefer.

Students throughout Cape Breton submitted more than 200 proposals. These included options such as Heartfield Park, Sydney Pleasant Park, We Rise Again Park, and

¹⁴ Derek H. Alderman, "A street fit for a King: Naming places and commemoration in the American South," *Professional Geographer* 52, 2 (2000): 673-4.

more. The social media campaign that corresponded with the contest offered an opportunity for broader participation. Here, some contemporary concerns relating to memory and commemoration came to light. On April 12, 2013, James Duane Marchand – whose father Roy was the man killed during the demolition in 2004 – had the following online exchange with the Sydney Park Project social media co-ordinator:

James Marchand: My Dad was the last man to fall on the job there. [I] think this [park] should be named after the men who gave their lives to feed their families. Keep in mind that we lost fathers, sons, brothers, friends - for this place to make steel.

Sydney Park Project: Thanks, James many of the proposed ideas coming in absolutely commemorate the contributions, efforts, and incredible accomplishments of the men and women who worked in the Steel industry in Sydney [...] Making steel was often a dangerous job and impacted the lives of many Cape Bretoners and their families over the years.¹⁵

Michelle Gardiner, whose husband Kevin was employed at the plant, added:

Remember, too, many of us are still young. My husband worked for 13 years in the "plant". I had a family member working in the steel plant from the day it opened [...] Do us all proud by giving it a name that reflects respect do for those who lost their lives and the heart of steel that beat in everyone who lived through the good times and bad to keep the hot steel flowing for 100 years. Believe me it wasn't easy those last ten years when she was on the auction block and you didn't know your future from 1 day to the next.... [sic]¹⁶

From the beginning of the competition, it is clear that those who were connected to the operations of Sydney Steel hoped that the memory of work at the plant would be prominent in whichever name was chosen.

Others used the campaign to publicly express concerns over the tar ponds remediation. Shane Paul, commenting on a *Cape Breton Post* article about the naming competition, offers, “The ‘Just Cover it Up Park’ made possible by the federal government!” Anonymous posters offered sarcastic suggestions: “Tarpark,” “Carcinogen

¹⁵ James Duane Marchand, Comment on The Sydney Park Project Facebook page, April 12, 2013 (3:46 p.m.), Accessed August 5, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/OpenHearthPark>.

¹⁶ Michelle Gardiner, Comment on The Sydney Park Project Facebook page, April 14, 2013 (2:26 p.m.), Accessed August 5, 2016.

Creek,” or “Mutation Legacy Park.”¹⁷ These refer to the fears among some within the community that the 2004 encapsulation and incineration plan has simply “covered up” the toxic site. Such fears have also been expressed in a number of oral history interviews; Debbie Ouellette, for example, mentions that she will not attend any community events held in the park.¹⁸ The toxic legacy is visible in these proposals; the site, for some, remains more firmly associated with the environmental and health costs than with the history of steelmaking.

In early May, five finalists were revealed: Rob Sinclair’s Grade 6 classroom at MacDonald Elementary School in Dominion proposed Open Hearth Park; Piley Poqtamkiaq Park (trans. New Beginning Park) was submitted by Lori Anne Leroy’s Grade 9 class at We’koma’q Mi’kmaq School in Whycocmagh; S.P.A.R.C.K. Park was recommended by the Grade Primary class at Harbourview Montessori School in Westmount; and Phoenix Park was proposed by Katelyn McPherson, a Grade 10 student at Riverview High School in Coxheath. Few of these include descriptions of direct connections to the steel plant; indeed, the winning entry – Open Hearth Park – was submitted by students from a nearby former coal town.

The conceptual renewal of the site was obviously an appealing notion for the selection committee. Three of the finalists explore themes related to re-birth and remediation. Katelyn McPherson, in her description of “Phoenix Park,” describes a site characterized by a Phoenix rising from the ashes. She writes, “A land that was devastated from a century of steel industry is given a new life and rises out of the ashes of the former – a beautiful new park is born.”¹⁹ Similarly, the students who proposed Piley Poqtamkiaq Park describe their submission “We picked this name because the tar pond project has

¹⁷ Shane Paul et. al., Comment on “Contest to name park on former tar ponds site to begin,” *Cape Breton Post*, March 24, 2013, <http://www.capebretonpost.com/News/Local/2013-03-24/article-3206468/Contest-to-name-park-on-former-tar-ponds-site-set-to-begin/1>.

¹⁸ Debbie Ouellette, interview with author, June 20, 2016.

¹⁹ Katelyn McPherson, “Sydney Park Project: Phoenix Park,” in the author’s possession.

given the Sydney/Pier area a new beginning and start to heal mother earth.”²⁰

S.P.A.R.C.K. Park stands for “Steel Park Renewal for the Community and Kids. In their video submission, these children included a musical motto for the new site:

Our new park will be a sign
That the past is the past
And the future is mine
It’s a place for recreation
A symbol of hope for our generation²¹

None of these refer explicitly to steelmaking or steelworkers; rather, they are based upon the remediation of the site and the tar ponds clean up.

Two other finalists explore some connections between past and present with explicit reference to the site’s industrial history. History Heroes Park proposal commemorates coal miners and steelworkers, “whose labour is at the centre of Island history,” but also remediation workers, the animals that live in the park, and the Mi’kmaq “who hunted and fished there long ago.”²² “Open Hearth Park,” which won the competition with more than twice as many votes as the second-place finisher, refers most explicitly to the experiences of former steelworkers. But this choice, too, was lauded for its broader themes. An editorial in the *Post* describes, “From a contemporary ‘branding’ perspective, it is hard to find two more welcoming words than ‘open’ and ‘hearth.’”²³

Each of the final selections, including “Open Hearth Park,” reflects the tensions that Lucy Taksa identifies as existing between public history and labour history. Based upon state efforts at remediation through the Sydney Tar Ponds Agency, the desire to commemorate working-class history on the site is combined with efforts to celebrate the present and future of a community green space. Taksa is critical in her assessment of Australian industrial heritage sites, writing, “public history, at least in the context of

²⁰ “Sydney Park Project: Piley Poqtamkiaq Park,” in the author’s possession.

²¹ “S.P.A.R.C.K. Park – Harbourview Montessori,” Vimeo Video, 1:13, posted by Mike Targett, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/67180047>.

²² “Sydney Park Project: History Heroes Park,” in the author’s possession.

²³ “Rants and Raves,” *Cape Breton Post*, June 16, 2013.

redeveloped industrial heritage, reflects an urge to create a collective memory that mythologizes the past and construes it as a foreign country in which workers' collective struggles are concealed beneath the large machines that once enslaved them."²⁴ Open Hearth Park does not contain the same sort of exclusionary focus on industrial machinery that Taksa describes in Australian public history sites, but the selection of possible names does reflect a sense of disruption between the industrial past and the current problems found within the city.

This disruption is a sensory recollection offered by several former steelworkers as they describe visiting Open Hearth Park. Fred James, in the quote that begins this chapter, explains his perception that something was very wrong upon his first seeing the unploughed Sysco railway tracks. Similarly, Adrian Murphy discusses visiting the park and attempting to re-orient himself based upon buildings, departments, and gates that no longer exist:

Adrian: I was there a couple of times with my brother who worked there for thirty-plus years, too. And trying to visualize. And the only thing we can base our point of origin is the tunnel going through five-gate. There's a tunnel that was directly across between the Open Hearth and the Blooming Mill, and I just stop right there and to the left I'd see, well the little furnace was right there, then you'd have the Old Mill, then you'd have the Open Hearth, and drive down a little place and this was where the Blast Furnace and . . . Yeah, it's unbelievable. Unbelievable.

These accounts expose a deep sense of place attachment, but an attachment that is rooted within a set of social and productive relations that have no referent in the present. This is why Adrian, and several other former Sysco workers who relayed similar stories, try to re-articulate themselves within the disappeared landscape of the plant. In the existing scenery, replete with green grass, walking tracks, and children's play equipment, former workers confront a set of recognitions first articulated by Doreen Massey in 1994: that place and identity are constantly being radically unsettled, that the very notion of a static

²⁴ Lucy Taksa, "Labor History and Public History in Australia: Allies or Uneasy Bedfellows?" *International Labor and Working Class History* 76 (2009): 99.

place to call one's own has always been a fiction, and that memory can promote the acceptance of new place-identities rather than congealing into nostalgia.²⁵

The former worksite is now organized around a series of walking paths. In addition to a playground and two sporting fields, there are several historical panels, a memorial site, and pieces of public art that refer to the site's industrial history. The Coke Ovens Sculpture, a conceptual art installation that stands nearly 30 feet tall, was installed in Open Hearth Park just three days before the Stronger than Steel celebrations. Designed and constructed by Gordon Kennedy, a Cape Breton artist who spent the first years of his career in British Columbia, the sculpture consists of four central figures, each facing the cardinal compass points. This represents the distinct nationalities that made up the workforce in the Coke Ovens Department.²⁶ A smaller memorial site, officially named Steelworkers' Memorial Park, exists within Open Hearth Park. Here, a monument bearing the names of 308 steelworkers who were killed on the site rests alongside several benches.²⁷



Figure 8.3: Coke Ovens Sculpture
Source: Photo by author

²⁵ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), 122-3.

²⁶ "A Man of Steel: Gordon Kennedy's Biggest Challenge," *Victoria Standard* 3, 5 (August-September 2013).

²⁷ See for a full examination of this monument, Lachlan MacKinnon, "Reading a Labour Landmark in Sydney, Nova Scotia," *Labour/Le Travail* 72 (Fall 2013): 101-128.

When historical material is present, as it is in the panels that crop up alongside the paved trails of the park, the site's identity is positioned as part of a continuum. This history does not begin, as many would expect, with the founding of the mill in the late 1800s; rather, the first panel describes the contours of the land as it existed under the proprietorship of the Mi'kmaq before their purposeful displacement in the early 20th century. The sparse text perhaps leaves room for further context, but the foundational notion – that the site existed prior to its industrial life – also gestures towards a multiplicity of identities that could come to characterize the site in the future. Other panels describe the former mills and departments, while some explain the steelmaking process, but the overall sentiment of transition is one that works.

The site brings to mind a term coined by Sherry Lee Linkon, “the half-life of deindustrialization,” which she described at the 2014 “Deindustrialization and its Aftermath” conference at Concordia University. Linkon revealed how the influence of industrial production remains within the culture and landscape of communities long after the industry has itself vacated. My research, in many ways, is based upon my experiences growing up not in the shadow of the mill, but in the shadow cast by its absence. For the children who now play on the equipment at Open Hearth Park, even that linkage between the plant and Sydney's present will seem tenuous. Rather, their perceptions will be informed by the longer view visible within the public history narrative of Open Hearth Park; while the political circumstances surrounding absence are perhaps not examined within the landscape, for its purposes the site does a good job of connecting its past, the experiences of steelworkers who laboured there for a century, and its present iteration as a community green space.

Deindustrialization on Film: Heart of Steel, 2012

Another representation of the site's industrial history, a 42-minute film that was released to correspond with *Stronger than Steel*, does not reflect these interconnections. *Heart of Steel* was funded through the Sydney Tar Ponds Agency as part of the remediation project. Its opening shots are an exercise in juxtaposition; immediately following scenes

depicting the integrated mill in full operation, the viewer is treated to the plush greenery and coiffed fields of the present-day. “Birds flock here now,” proclaims the narrator, “when the government funded clean up project finishes, the former Sydney Steel site will be a placid refuge.”²⁸ Randy Vallis, the federal director for the remediation project, told the *Chronicle Herald* in 2012 that the film sought to “capture the story of steelmaking” because “the last vestiges of steelmaking are about to disappear.”²⁹ In the film, the problems associated with the end of the steel industry are nowhere to be found; they, similar to the landscape, have apparently been remediated. So are the men and women who once worked at the plant represented simply as vestiges of the industrial past. “Ghosts linger,” reads a voice-over, as Gerry and several other former steelworkers are shown walking onto the site. “Once, on these vacant lands, the epic saga of the Sydney steel industry unfolded.”³⁰

The film does incorporate significant testimony from workers at the plant, but when this begins to discuss present concerns the narrative quickly moves ahead. In the first five minutes of the film, several steelworkers are seen walking around the former plant site and brief excerpts describe women’s experience at the coke ovens during the Second World War. Ray Martheleur, a local photographer and Sysco employee, gestures towards some discomfort with how the mill came to an end. “I would definitely like to see the plant in operation now,” he says. This statement is not followed up on; instead, the film transitions to a discussion of the plant’s earliest years.

Issues of ethnic conflict, racial prejudice, or discriminatory hiring strategies are also glazed over. Although, as Ron Crawley writes, “antagonism between the long-established residents of the Sydney area and the incoming ‘foreigners’ was evident from the beginning,” the film deftly sidesteps these stories.³¹ The closest it comes to

²⁸ *Heart of Steel*, directed by Peter Giffin (Canada: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2012), DVD, 00:01:30.

²⁹ “Heart of Steel enshrines part of Cape Breton,” *Chronicle Herald*, 3 February 2012.

³⁰ *Heart of Steel*, 00:02:58.

³¹ Ron Crawley, “Class Conflict and the Establishment of the Sydney Steel Industry, 1899-1904,” in *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton history*, ed. Ken Donovan

identifying these divisions is when former steelworker Sid Slaven remarks upon the tradition of “Catholic” and “protestant” sections of the plant in its early years – although the reasons for this are not discussed. John Murphy, who was also interviewed for the film, reflects that “everybody got along,” and “there was none of this racism or . . . you’re this and you’re that, everybody was equal.” Garfield Moe, an African-Canadian steelworker, explains: “we had a United Nations long before it was ever thought of being.”³²

This representation of ethnicity and religion on the plant is particularly puzzling because it directly conflicts with workers’ oral testimony collected during the Steel Project in the 1990s. In a January 10, 1990 interview, for example, Murphy discussed the pattern of employment in the different departments of the plant: “It was called the patronage system,” he says, “Nepotism.”³³ Similarly, Dan Yakimchuk described discriminatory hiring practices occurring at the plant in the 1950s: “I worked for about three years or so in the general yard because that is where you had to start, especially if you weren’t in the right either political or religious denomination [...] In the mechanical, as an ethnic person or a black person you never got the opportunity.”³⁴ These attitudes, writes Elizabeth Beaton, existed to some extent at the steel plant as late as the 1970s.³⁵

Deindustrialization, too, prompted the structural continuation of discriminatory hiring long after such practices were made illegal. The seniority system in a deindustrializing mill plays a role in this process. As workers are laid off, those who

(Fredericton and Sydney: Acadiensis and University College of Cape Breton Press, 1990), 152.

³² *Heart of Steel*, 00:09:55.

³³ John Murphy, interview by Michael Earle, January 10, 1990, Steel Project, MG 14, 206, Box 7, File 57, transcript, Beaton Institute Archives (BI), Sydney, NS.

³⁴ Dan Yakimchuk, interview by Michael Earle, April 20, 1990, Steel Project, Box 5, File 7, transcript, BI.

³⁵ Elizabeth Beaton, “Making Steel: Understanding the Lived Experience,” *Scientia Canadensis: Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine* 15, 1 (1991): 63.

maintain seniority are the first to be hired back should the opportunity arise. In the case of Sysco, with some workers maintaining seniority from periods when women, blacks, or Indigenous peoples would not have been considered for work in particular positions, the mill's decline prompted an effective continuation of these practices. With the workforce having dropped from several thousand in the 1960s to less than 1000 by the 1990s, there were always enough people looking for work from the seniority lists that new hires were sparse.

There were instances where this process was overcome. Alana MacNeil was one of the few women to work in steel production at the Sydney Works in the decades after the Second World War. Although other women were employed in the General Office and in administrative or managerial roles, it was rare that they would find work in steel production or quality control. Alana describes having come onto Sysco as a clerical worker, organized under the USWA clerical union Local 6537. In 1995, her union merged with Local 6516, the metallurgical lab union. As a result, she was able to keep her seniority and became available for work within the mill. She soon moved into the lab, where she worked inspecting the Sysco rails on the line.

Alana: I was working shift work, but it was good work. I'll tell you, it was a learning curve. It took while. I was the first female that came in, Denise [another woman in a similar circumstance] came after me, I was the very first one that went down there. And I was working and I could feel . . . not daggers, but you feel eyes on you there were people . . . There was people that wouldn't trust me. I think some of the men, from old ways, thought that I was down there to spy and make sure everyone was working, not taking an extra break or . . . I really think they were. It took a few months before they got to know me, you know, I'm here working for a pay cheque, too. I'm just "one of the guys." And once that turned around it was a whole different – I got respect, I was, you know . . . No harm ever came to me, don't get me wrong, but at first it was just to break that barrier. You know, all of the sudden there was this female, you know?³⁶

In *Heart of Steel*, all issues relating to ethnicity, religion, or gender are wholly explained as concerns of the distant past, while more recent issues are downplayed. The film engages in what Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott call "smokestack nostalgia;" it presents a de-politicized view of life in and around the mill, which contains few direct

³⁶ Gerry McCarron, Alana MacNeil, and George MacNeil, interview with author, April 29, 2016.

connections to present conditions in the post-industrial city.³⁷ As these conversations unfold, the viewer is left with the distinct sense that the industrial past and the post-industrial present have been entirely divorced from one another.

Resistance and political agitation is visible in the film's treatment of the Parade of Concern. The community's participation in the event – “right from the old retirees right down to babes in arms,” in the words of former steelworker Syd Slaven – is discussed, as are the potential devastating economic consequences for the city's residents.³⁸ This does not extend to the continuing affects of the mill's final closure. The Parade is framed as a successful, albeit temporary, moment of resistance. “Mistakes were made about modernizing the plant, strikes hurt productivity,” asserts the narrator, “even the millions of government dollars spent modernizing the plant couldn't make it profitable in the face of cutthroat international competition.”³⁹ Decline, in this view, was inevitable; international competition was too powerful for Sydney Steel to overcome – even under the control of the provincial state. The uncomplicated presentation of the mill's eventual closure allows for further distancing from the present. Any suggestion that Sydney should have remained a steel city is rejected as a position at odds with the realities of the globalized 21st century market.

Workers' accounts of the final closure are the strongest portion of the film. Garfield Moe describes his feelings in 2000:

Yeah. I made a living out of it. My father before me made a living out of it, and I think it should be there for the other guy to make a living [...] To drive over the overpass now and see no fire, no smoke coming out of the stacks . . . it'll make you wonder.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, “Introduction: The Meanings of Deindustrialization,” in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 15.

³⁸ *Heart of Steel*, 00:26:50

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 00:29:05.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 00:40:21.

In Moe's account, there is both a sadness surrounding the loss of the mill and a question regarding the necessity of its erasure. Steven High explores these sentiments in his study of a mill closure in Sturgeon Falls, ON. He writes, "If place attachment is a symbolic bond between people and place, this bond is often severed in time of sudden social or economic crisis such as a mill closing. People then attempt to re-create these attachments by remembering and talking about these places."⁴¹ Again, the film fails to connect these sentiments to the present. Instead, they are positioned as the final remnants of a distant past – one that holds no relevancy for the dire economic situation existing in Cape Breton today.⁴²

The final section of *Heart of Steel* examines the environmental legacy of industrial pollution and the tar ponds. The extensive pollution that characterized the site during the 1990s is briefly described, but this is relayed only as a set-up for the complete success of the remediation and solidification efforts. The contentious politics of the clean up, the remaining health effects that plague those who lived and worked around the site, and its unforgettable impacts – such as those that remain with Juanita McKenzie and Debbie Ouellette – are ignored.⁴³ Contrarily, the entire clean up process is positioned as an unmitigated success; the ability of citizens and their government to work hand-in-hand to overcome the toxic legacy is entirely restorative.

This intense focus on environmental and geographical remediation is not uncommon in state-driven representations of former industrial sites. Sherry Lee Linkon describes this approach as a "variation on smokestack nostalgia, one in which images of deindustrialization serve not only as representations of the past but also as a resource for

⁴¹ Steven High, "Placing the Displaced Worker: Narrating Place in Deindustrializing Sturgeon Falls, Ontario," *Placing Memory and Remembering Place in Canada*, eds. James Opp and John C. Walsh (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 163.

⁴² In March 2013, the unemployment rate for industrial Cape Breton stood at 17.5 per cent. "CBRM to Province: Your Turn," *Chronicle Herald*, March 28, 2013.

⁴³ "Report says arsenic levels in Sydney neighbourhood unsafe," *Chronicle Herald*, July 17, 2001.

imagining the future.”⁴⁴ Historian Kent Curtis, writing of a similar situation in Anaconda, Montana, reminds us that projects of “turning brown into green” can paper over legitimate social and political concerns in the aftermath of deindustrialization. In Anaconda, Curtis writes, much of the image-making has been “an elaborate show of smoke and mirrors.”⁴⁵ In these representations, “post-industrial” describes not the absence of industry, but an opposition to it altogether; residual aspects of industrial life are ignored, and – in some instances – are presented simply as backwards-looking reflections of practices, people, and events that are best left behind.

In the final moments of *Heart of Steel*, John Murphy treats the viewer to an insightful commentary on the history of work, and the working-class identity that emerged from experiences at the plant. These *will* continue in Sydney – he believes – though they may exist in a changed form. “It’s history,” he says, “It’s all in a book. It’s on a DVD, somewhere. It’s in a song. The older people, generation, they remember. My daughter’s 17 years old and she knows nothing of the steel plant. She knows I was a former steelworker. She knows her grandfather, both grandfathers, were former steelworkers. And that’s it.”⁴⁶ Murphy’s daughter, along with an entire generation of Cape Bretoners, occupies what has sometimes been called a “middle space” in the deindustrialization process. This generation, Linkon writes, “do not have their own memories of either industrial work or widespread job loss, but they were born and raised during the decades after major closings, and their families and communities experienced both industrial labour and the displacement and disorientation of deindustrialization.”⁴⁷

While I, as another occupant of this middle space, might not have any direct connection to industrial work at Sydney Steel, its shadow has been influential. This

⁴⁴ Sherry Lee Linkon, “Narrating Past and Future: Deindustrialized Landscapes as Resources,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013): 40.

⁴⁵ Kent Curtis, “Greening Anaconda: EPA, ARCO, and the Politics of Space,” in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 91-111.

⁴⁶ *Heart of Steel*, 00:40:15.

⁴⁷ Linkon, “Narrating Past and Future,” 39.

dissertation is an attempt at understanding the aftermaths that remain visible within this space. More broadly, out-migration continues unabated among islanders of my generation. In 2012, almost 20 percent of Cape Breton's population were more than 65 years of age. Underemployment, contingent work, and unemployment are significant factors in driving our youth away.⁴⁸ The recent downturn in the Alberta oilfield has caused many to return home, though federal crisis allowances for EI claims have not been extended to Cape Breton. Our crisis, apparently, has already been normalized.⁴⁹ Further attention to the creative output of this generation offers an opportunity for future research; Linkon's recent work reflects this type of approach, and she concludes that "those who have inherited the economic struggles and blighted landscapes of deindustrialization have the opportunity to use the complicated past [as] a problematic resource that both shapes and highlights the contradictions of the present and future."⁵⁰

Cultural representations of industry remain an important source for the historical examination of deindustrialization. In the introduction to a recent special issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, and Sherry Linkon describe how film, photography, or landscapes can reflect and influence forms of memory and perspective. Through this media, they write, "we can gain insight into the continuing struggle over the meaning of industrial work and its loss, for displaced workers, their families and communities, and outsiders."⁵¹

Open Hearth Park and *Heart of Steel* each reflect a particular view of deindustrialization. The Park presents the industrial past as but one iteration of the site's changing identity. While the plant no longer exists, in this narrative, its impact cannot be separated from the site – or the city – in the present. *Heart of Steel*, contrastingly,

⁴⁸ Medavie Health Foundation, "Youth at Risk Feasibility Study: Options for Youth in the Cape Breton Regional Health Authority," June 30, 2012, <http://medaviehealthfoundation.ca/>.

⁴⁹ "EI benefits extended to resource dependent regions," *Globe and Mail*, March 22, 2016.

⁵⁰ Linkon, "Narrating the Past and Future," 53.

⁵¹ Tim Strangleman, James Rhodes, Sherry Linkon, "Introduction to Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (Fall 2013), 8.

positions the industrial past as a foil for the post-industrial present; this perspective is rooted in Whig conceptions of history, where the site's progression from industrial to post-industrial was as inevitable as it was apolitical. Any continuing concerns over how the decline of Sysco was handled, or how its closure is directly related to the political and economic problems on the island today, are themselves castigated as relics of the past. They, like the workers shown in the film, are "Ghosts" of a bygone era.

Each of these, when read as cultural products, reflects the limitations and continuities of working-class memory and industrial structures of feeling. According to John Kirk, Sylvie Contrepois, and Steve Jeffreys, "heritage practice in former industrial areas offers 'versions of the past' that imply new identities in contexts often marked by the 'old' [...] The past is constituted for the purposes, primarily, of the present."⁵² In Sydney, these issues have by no means been decided. These memories remain contested. Another group of citizens – comprised largely of former steelworkers - has recently attempted to garner support for a brick-and-mortar Sydney Steel Museum at the Open Hearth Park. This group initially emerged immediately after the plant closure, and – although they were unable to muster enough support for the museum – their efforts resulted in a "Sydney Steel Museum Website," which includes a series of photographs of the plant and demolition, prose by former employees of Sysco, and other information related to the mill's history.⁵³ In their efforts, and in existing representations of the city's history of steelmaking, we see how "post-industrial Sydney" retains some aspects of an industrial structure of feeling, now residual, that ebbed and flowed throughout the 20th century history of industrial Cape Breton.

⁵² John Kirk, Sylvie Contrepois, and Steve Jeffreys, "Approaching Regional and Identity Change in Europe," in *Changing Work and Community Identities in European Regions: Perspectives on the Past and Present*, eds. John Kirk, Sylvie Contrepois, and Steve Jeffreys (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 14.

⁵³ Sydney Steel Museum website, www.sydneysteelmuseum.com/.

Conclusion

The seeds of this project sprouted from anger that I felt towards what I perceived as an injustice committed against residents in my hometown. The plant did not just close, it had *been* closed - by the province, by John Hamm, by Halifax. I remember watching the Sysco demolition as it progressed day-by-day from my seat on the school bus into Whitney Pier. I remember, later, hearing the names of young people – my peers – from Sydney and the other towns in industrial Cape Breton who lost their lives to drug abuse, suicide, or violence. I remember my friends leaving to begin their lives elsewhere and having the Prime Minister wag his finger at those of us who stayed over our “culture of defeat.”

If my anger has not dissipated, it has become more narrowly focused. Rather than a “Who Killed Sydney Steel?”-type assignment of blame, this dissertation has transformed into a far more nuanced assessment of working-class experience than was perhaps initially envisioned. My informants played an undeniable role in this shift. While the Sydney Works is a central character in my work, life continues for those who have been directly affected by both its operation and its closure. The loss of the plant has been a loss for the city and its residents, but so, too, has a century of steelmaking taken its toll. One need only look at the hundreds of names on the Sydney Steelworkers’ Memorial Monument or listen to the accounts of Joe Legge, Debbie Ouellette and Juanita McKenzie to recognize the full cost of industrial production. But the lives of those who remain are not fodder for anthropomorphic “ruin-gazing.” Their present concerns, struggles, hopes, and fears are related to life in a post-industrial city, but they are no longer rooted in Sydney Steel.

Gerry McCarron’s work history reveals this continuum of industrial and post-industrial life. Today, working for the provincial crown corporation Nova Scotia Lands, he oversees the Harbourside Commercial Park on the site of the former plant. In a December 2015 interview, another former employee joked that Gerry was the “last man standing” from Sysco. There is truth to this. After beginning at Sydney Steel in 1978 in the Blast Furnace Department, Gerry moved to the metallurgical lab in 1982. In 1993, he went on salary in production planning, where he remained until the liquidation began in 2001. While some steelworkers began working on the demolition process under Zoom

Developers, Gerry and four other employees were transferred to Ernst and Young – the company that had been hired by the province to oversee the receivership of Sysco. After six years, they began working for Nova Scotia Lands out of an office that used to be part of Sydney Steel. Gerry remains the only Sysco worker to have been continuously employed on the site of the mill to this day.¹

Although he remains on site, the terms of Gerry’s current position could not be more different from his time as a steelworker. In overseeing Harbourside Commercial Park, he is involved with planning and organizing events on the remediated site and dealing with public and private inquiries. His experience reveals how the issues and concerns of industrial work end up giving way to an entirely different set of post-industrial experiences. In this sense, industrialism is not all encompassing; Gerry is more than a “former steelworker,” just as all of the people involved in this project cannot be defined solely by their position *vis-à-vis* the steel plant.

The larger focus of this dissertation has been to expose the ways in which deindustrialization in Sydney has resulted from the particularities of Canadian capitalism, how this process has been influenced from the bottom-up through worker and community-based action, and how its impacts continue to echo through to the present. The challenge, going forward, is to recognize the significant difficulties that continue to face residents in these communities and begin to move towards possible solutions. In assessing this need, Cathy Stanton problematizes the very notion of the “post-industrial.” She argues that in accepting a narrative trajectory – industrial/de-industrializing/post-industrial – we risk masking “the continued elaboration of industrial capitalism in ways that may actually make it more difficult to understand its ongoing trajectories and to resist its most insidious and divisive effects.”² Using the “post-industrial” experience of Boston, which saw a return to prosperity driven largely by the knowledge sector after

¹ Gerry McCarron and Dave Nalepa, interview with author, December 8, 2015.

² Cathy Stanton, “Keeping ‘the Industrial’: New Solidarities in Post-Industrial Places,” in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places*, eds. Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

industrial exodus, Stanton outlines how the relationships engendered within this “new” economy are actually quite industrial in character.³

Stanton’s critique of the post-industrial applies directly to cities and geographies that Andrew Hurley refers to as “Info-boom catch basins.” In de-industrialized cities that were geographically positioned to take advantage of the nascent tech, financial, and knowledge economies, we have seen the emergence of high-end suburban development, condo-ization of formerly working-class neighbourhoods, and greenfield office construction.⁴ This transformation has already found purchase within popular culture; British punk poet John Cooper Clarke, for example, writes of the shift from the dusty tenements and working-class pubs of 1980s Salford to the “noodle bars and poodle parlours” of the 2000s in his comparative poems “Beasley Street” and “Beasley Boulevard.”⁵ Rather than viewing this transformation as a dichotomy, Stanton asks that scholars become more holistic in our analysis. She writes:

What if we entertained the possibility that while capital flight, plant closings, and economic restructuring have most certainly taken place in many parts of the world, something that can be identified definitively as “deindustrialization” never has? [...] It’s something we can and should do now, not because we and the places and people we study have “gotten over it” but precisely because we shouldn’t get over it—and because it isn’t actually over.⁶

Based, as it is, upon a case study of Boston, her call for a vigorous re-analysis of our own terms of reference pre-supposes a popular conception of the “end” of deindustrialization’s impact that does not exist within many single-industry rural resource economies where re-vitalization has been conspicuously absent.

This does not mean that we cannot re-assess these terms, simply that they – like the processes of capital mobility and industrial closure – must be geographically situated

³ Stanton, “Keeping ‘the Industrial’.”

⁴ Andrew Hurley, “The Transformation of Industrial Suburbs since World War Two,” in *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places*, eds. Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, and Andrew Perchard (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).

⁵ John Cooper Clarke, *Anthologia*, (Sony Records, 2015), CD.

⁶ Stanton, “Keeping ‘the Industrial’.”

and contextualized. In contrast with “Info-boom catch basins,” Hurley describes the conditions in what he terms “Plunder Zones” – cities where today, more than 20 years after collapse in some cases, there is little sign of economic recovery, poverty rates remain astronomical, and out-migration threatens their very existence.⁷ In Sydney, which corresponds more closely with this latter category, “post-industrial” can perhaps be considered as a place-holder. It describes an absence, not only in economic terms, but also of an entire way of life, personal and place-identities, and a working-class culture fixed in the particularities of the shop floor. The industrial structure of feeling that is described in Chapter Two has come irrevocably unspooled. Though it remains in residual forms, its decomposition can be usefully understood in “industrial” and “post-industrial” terms. In this sense, though it casts a long shadow, the industrial character of 20th century Cape Breton cannot truly be re-constituted. That is neither to say that industrial work cannot occur, nor that new forms of class identities and cultures cannot take shape based upon other forms of production; however, the historical forms evidenced throughout this dissertation are unlikely to re-emerge.

Nor would such a direct reconstitution be desirable. Efforts at “re-industrialization” often go hand-in-hand with anti-union and anti-regulatory attitudes. I am reminded of a recent flight back to Sydney, where I met a man affiliated with ongoing efforts to re-open the Donkin Mine between Glace Bay and Port Morien. In 2014, Kameron Collieries – a subsidiary of the American company The Cline Group – purchased the flooded mine and announced their intention to re-start production.⁸ My aisle-mate told me that Cline was flying him back and forth between Cape Breton and his home in Pennsylvania to work on managing the re-constitution of the mine. Apparently unaware of the island’s history, he mentioned that it was nice to work in an area without the headache of unions or Obama’s job-killing environmental regulations. Should the Donkin Mine re-open, barring a confrontation with the United Mineworkers (UMWA) in a province where the memory of Westray remains a dark cloud, the 120 non-union jobs it intends to provide will be a paltry salve for the problems facing the island’s residents.

⁷ Hurley, “The Transformation of Industrial Suburbs since World War Two.”

⁸ *Morien Resource Corp. website*, “Donkin Project,” <http://morienres.com/donkin-project/>.

Historian Ian McKay has articulated the anti-modernism endemic to tourist-driven representations of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton.⁹ So, too, do efforts at re-industrialization exist as backwards-looking attempts to deny the gains – constrained as they were – of labour in the 20th century. In June 2016, I had the pleasure of hearing Bobby Burchell – the Canadian representative for the UMWA and a New Waterford local – speak to a gathered crowd at the Davis Day ceremony in Glace Bay. He described how, in recent decades, mining companies in Cape Breton would traditionally donate wreaths for the ceremony. With their purchase of the Donkin mine, the Cline Group became the first in decades to neither send a representative to the Davis Day gathering, nor donate a wreath.¹⁰ For the Cline Group, presumably, the ceremony represents a form of locally-based working-class practice that does not fit with their desire for non-union operations and a contingent workforce; in this sense, Stanton’s critique rings true. There will always be new forms of resistance that respond to material conditions. While these may assume the shape of past struggles, the political, economic, and ideational circumstances of the present mean that they will unfold in a markedly different way.

The state also suffers from this anti-modernist view of re-industrialization. Recent attempts to develop the Port of Sydney, driven largely by the municipal government and Mayor Cecil Clarke, envision the city as a significant North American seaport. As recent planning document describes, “The Port of Sydney is located on the east coast of Canada. The Port’s channel and sheltered inner harbour can handle the world’s largest vessels and the Port is positioned on direct shipping routes to Europe, the U.S., South America and Asia.”¹¹ In a promotional video, created by a consulting firm hired to assess the project,

⁹ Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994); Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ “Union leader briefly puts Donkin mine owner in spotlight,” *Cape Breton Post*, June 11, 2016.

¹¹ *Port of Sydney website*, “Positioned for Success, 2016 Business Prospectus,” <http://www.sydneyport.ca/portofsydney/port-of-sydney-prospectus/>.

“West Coast labour disputes” are described as one major reason why such development is necessary – apparently the Sydney port will be free of such disruptions.¹² In this view, it is not basic industry that belongs to the past, but the labour movement, class struggle, and workers’ agitation for better wages and conditions.

The mayor’s assuredness about the Sydney port development would not have been out-of-place 115 years ago, when an article in the *Daily Post* reported, “By and by, when Pittsburgh is a village and New York has got to be whistled for to stop a steamboat, Sydney will be the grand seaport of a continent.”¹³ In this rhetorical turning-back-of-the-clock, the potential for re-industrialization is framed as existing outside-of and beyond the struggles of the 20th century. In his recent book, *The Great Exception*, Jefferson Cowie argues, “The political era between the 1930s and the 1970s marks what might be called a “great exception” – a sustained deviation, an extended detour – from some of the main contours of American political practice, economic structure, and cultural outlook.”¹⁴ As Chapter Seven of my thesis describes, much of the language surrounding economic development in the Maritimes has, in recent years, been informed by the neoliberal notion that working-class cultures developed during this interregnum have resulted in anti-business attitudes that must be overcome. Sydney Steel, with its history of unionism and state ownership, is apparently representative of these attitudes; as one history-themed kiosk on the Sydney waterfront asserts, “100 years of steelmaking. Good-bye to all of that!”

My research explores deindustrialization as a series of changes and conflicts that occur across time and space and have the ability to provoke both resistance and resignation. Rooted in the material relationships of capitalist production, deindustrialization is like a Russian nesting doll. Its impacts are fragmented, and each fragment reveals an aspect of its totality. At the individual level, the scars of industrial work, environmental degradation, and de-industrial remediation efforts continue to

¹² “Novaport – Sydney, Nova Scotia,” Youtube Video, 2:37, posted by 4582 n11, May 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjBdUMUqwxg>.

¹³ “The Steel Boom Comes to Sydney, 1899,” *Cape Breton’s Magazine* 39 (1985): 33.

¹⁴ Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 9.

plague the bodies and minds of those who have been affected. Working-class cultures and voices are de-centred from their communities during these processes; the decline and closure of Sydney Steel reveals a slow unwinding of an industrial structure of feeling that emerged during the struggles of the early 20th century. State action also constrains and shapes how deindustrialization unfolds locally; the provincial response to Black Friday resulted in 33 years of further production at Sydney Steel, and it prevented some of the drastic effects of immediate closure that have occurred in many Rust Belt cities in the U.S. So, too, did federal policies relating to regional economic development promote an economic and philosophical turn towards a promised post-industrial knowledge economy that has failed to emerge in the aftermath of industry. With this broad focus, I express the multi-variable aspects of deindustrialization in the historically grounded experiences of people affiliated with Sydney Steel.

Looking forward, we must also examine our own historical position. Tim Strangleman writes that we are now able to “consider a range of social, cultural, and political factors and determine how they continue to shape and structure the lives of individuals, families, communities, and places long after the immediate event of shutdown and closure.”¹⁵ While this dissertation takes a step in this direction, there is much room for further research. If the industrial structure of feeling is now “residual” in post-industrial areas, what productive and cultural forms are now emergent? Such attention could take the shape of environmental histories that position the human experience of industry and deindustrialization within the broader context of climate and ecological change. Scholarship on the history of capitalism is also worth engaging; as Julia Ott writes, this field remains “deeply concerned with performativity, with the ways economic theories operate as ideology and shape the reality they purport to describe in a neutral fashion.”¹⁶ With this renewed focus, we will be better able to ensure that our scholarship responds to the present needs of our subjects and provides a link between 20th century experiences of deindustrialization and 21st century politics of resistance.

¹⁵ Tim Strangleman, “Deindustrialization and the Historical Sociological Imagination: Making Sense of Work and Industrial Change,” *Sociology* 50, 1 (2016): 1-17.

¹⁶ Sven Beckert, et. al., “Interchange: The History of Capitalism,” *Journal of American History* 101, 2 (September 2014): 506.

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Appendix A:

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is as follows:

- To examine the processes of deindustrialization at the Sydney steel plant.

B. PROCEDURES

- I understand that this interview will take place at a location of my own choosing.
- I understand that I will be asked to participate in a conversation regarding my involvement with the Sydney steel plant or my role in the community more broadly.
- I understand that I have the right to end this conversation at any time, for any reason, or to refuse to answer any question that is posed.
- I understand that I have the right to request that my full name not be used in any research that results from this interview. This includes the right to ask that a pseudonym, neutral identifier, or number identifier be used in place of my name.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

- I understand that there are no potential risks associated with my participation in this interview.

D. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.

- I understand that my participation is NON-CONFIDENTIAL (i.e., my identity will be revealed in study results) unless I request otherwise.
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I AGREE THAT THE RECORDING OF THIS INTERVIEW MIGHT BE DONATED TO THE BEATON INSTITUTE ARCHIVES AT CAPE BRETON UNIVERSITY AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS RESEARCH

YES _____

NO _____

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

If at any time you have questions about the proposed research, please contact the study's Principal Investigator

Lachlan MacKinnon
6 Carmichael Drive
Sydney River
Nova Scotia
B1S 3R3
902-371-1351
e-mail: Lachlan.f.mackinnon@gmail.com

or

Prof. Steven High
Department of History
Concordia University
Montreal, QC
H3G 1M8
e-mail: shigh@concordia.ca

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics and Compliance Advisor, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 ethics@alcor.concordia.ca