

Unemployment Relief Camps in Saskatchewan, 1933-1936

THE efforts of the federal government to deal with the problem of the single, homeless unemployed in Saskatchewan from 1933 to 1936 were based on federal policies which were applied on a nation-wide basis. The methods chosen to deal with the problem, in Saskatchewan as elsewhere, were meant to minimize the possibility of violent upheavals in the urban centres. An examination of the state of the single unemployed during these years reveals that the fear of violence and even insurrection, though greatly exaggerated by the authorities for political and economic reasons, was not entirely unfounded.

The people who, as a group, suffered perhaps more than any others from the economic depression were the unskilled workers in primary industries such as mining, forestry and agriculture and the unskilled workers who depended upon the many facets of the construction industry. The severe decline in the price of primary products dealt a stunning blow to what had always been an unstable part of the economy. In Saskatchewan the disastrously low prices for agricultural products combined with repeated crop failures destroyed the livelihood not only of farmers but of the thousands of transient labourers who depended upon seasonal agricultural work. The same factors spurred on the near collapse of the construction industry in the private sector and federal and provincial public works came nowhere near taking up the slack. The people deprived of their livelihood comprised a class which had played an indispensable role in building Canada. They had been the mainstay of the forestry industries, railway and road construction and maintenance and were absolutely essential for seasonal agricultural work. Many were recent immigrants who had been lured to Canada by the propaganda of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian government. During prosperous years they did much of the most undesirable work at lower than average wages and during the Depression they were the first to be sacrificed.¹

As the economic situation worsened the federal government was pressed strongly by the provinces to assume responsibility for the transient unemployed and particularly the unmarried transients. Municipalities, hard pressed to look after their permanent residents, were reluctant to do anything to look after transient single men. Provinces were likewise reluctant to assume responsibility on the grounds that if any province provided adequate food and shelter or provided work on relief projects for the single unemployed they would be inundated by an influx from across the country. This was particularly true of British Columbia where unemployed from other provinces gathered in large numbers because of the moderate climate during the winter months and in the hope of employment in the forestry and other primary industries. The same was true to a lesser extent of the Prairie provinces during the summer months when thousands would migrate from other provinces in the hope of obtaining work in the agricultural sector and failing

¹H. M. Cassidy, "Relief and Other Social Services for Transients," in L. Richter, ed., *Canada's Unemployment Problem* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1939), IV.

this, would congregate in the cities and require relief. The practice of "riding the rods" across the country had become a common pastime of the single unemployed. It was this mobility, mainly an enforced mobility, which made the problem of the single unemployed even more a federal issue than unemployment in general and caused the provinces to demand federal action.

By 1932 the radical political potential of the single unemployed was becoming increasingly apparent to the federal government. Workers in primary industries such as mining and lumbering and the unemployed in the urban centres were given little assistance by the established unions in the Trades and Labour Congress (T.L.C.) and the All Canadian Congress of Labour (A.C.C.L.) who were busy trying to hold themselves together in the face of the Depression and were, at any rate, too conservative to take the militant action which the times required. The result was that new unions were built by left-wing militants under the auspices of the Workers' Unity League (W.U.L.) which was dominated by the Communist Party. Unions and associations of the unemployed sprang up in most of the major cities and many of the larger towns throughout Canada. Many such associations grew up spontaneously but the largest and most effective were built by supporters of the Workers' Unity League. Demonstrations, hunger marches, strikes and disturbances became more widespread than at any time since 1919. All of this was going on at a time when the country was gripped in an orgy of anti-Communism unequalled before or since in Canadian history.² The federal and most provincial governments were applying R. B. Bennett's "iron heel of ruthlessness" against radical political and labour unrest in a wholesale fashion. Political deportations, raids on the headquarters of the Communist Party and affiliated organizations, arrests under Section 98 of the Criminal Code and the use of police to suppress strikes, demonstrations and even public meetings were widespread.³

The people feared most of all by the political authorities at all levels of government were the single transient unemployed. Having no families to provide for and often no firm roots in any one locality they were the most difficult to intimidate by threats of cutting off relief or even imprisonment and the latter was hardly feasible given the large numbers involved. By 1932 it was estimated that there were a minimum of 70,000 single homeless unemployed transients who congregated in the cities when they were not travelling between cities. These unfortunates, along with the hundreds of thousands of other unemployed, were becoming frustrated and militant to the point where the federal government believed that disorder could become general. Reports from welfare authorities and the police indicated that trouble might soon escalate to the point where the armed forces would have to be used on a large scale.⁴ Many businessmen and newspapers were urging that more

²Stuart Jamieson, *Toil and Trouble: Labor Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada 1900-1966*. Prepared for and received by the Federal Task Force on Labor Relations, Oct. 15, 1968, pp. 227-228.

³Cassidy, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 197, and Jamieson, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-228.

⁴Public Archives of Canada (PAC), *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 10, File 46. Memorandum by Chief of the General Staff, June 13, 1931, on a meeting of C.G.S., the Adjutant-General (Secty. of Militia Service) and the Quartermaster General, in which plans were made for calling out the Non-Permanent Active Militia and the Permanent Force should it become necessary. McNaughton thought that about 20,000 of the N.P.A.M. might have to be mobilized in the autumn and "might probably be on duty for some considerable time."

be done to get the single jobless out of the cities before major trouble erupted. Others were recommending for humanitarian reasons that a "peacetime army" of the unemployed be organized to construct great public works as a means of alleviating economic suffering and raising the morale of the populace.

During a tour of the country in the summer of 1932 General A. G. L. McNaughton, Chief of the General Staff, observed the deteriorating situation and conceived the idea, which he sold to Bennett's cabinet, of establishing, under the auspices of the Department of National Defence, relief camps throughout the country for the accommodation of physically fit single homeless males. The scheme was begun by Order-in-Council on October 8, 1932, and was to be carried on by successive Orders-in-Council until the spring of 1936. It got underway on a major scale during the spring and summer of 1932 when, by agreement with the provinces, the Dominion assumed responsibility for all physically fit single homeless unemployed men. It was during May and June of 1933 that Dundurn relief camp became the major centre for accommodating the single unemployed in Saskatchewan.

From the very beginning, in Saskatchewan and elsewhere, the primary purpose of the camps was to keep young men out of the cities and the camps were compulsory for thousands of the single unemployed who were cut off relief and left with a choice between the camps or facing arrest for vagrancy.⁵ Even "riding the rods" became more difficult as the RCMP and railway police reversed their earlier policy of leniency in this regard. The camps were not meant to accommodate *all* the physically fit single homeless unemployed but merely to relieve congestion in those cities where trouble was most likely to break out and camps were located, where possible, with this purpose in mind.⁶ The camps also made it possible to step up the intimidation of those single unemployed who obtained relief jobs on farms or remained in the cities. The threat of being sent to a camp could be and was used to discourage would-be critics among relief recipients.⁷ From the beginning to the bitter end R. B. Bennett and his government insisted publicly that residence in the camps was purely voluntary though it was clear to anyone familiar with relief policies in the cities, and this included a significant proportion of the population, that many of the single unemployed had no choice in the matter. It was this type of credibility gap which helped to discredit the Bennett government and assure broad public sympathy for the camp inmates when they rebelled against the authorities as they occasionally did.

Unrest among the unemployed in Saskatchewan cities prior to the establishment of Dundurn relief camp in 1933 appears to have been fairly widespread though

⁵P.A.C., *Bennett Papers*, Microfilm page nos. 494713-23; Hugh G. Farthing to A. E. Millar (P.M.'s secretary), Sept. 7, 1933, and Sept. 8, 1933. Also Mayor Andrew Davison (Calgary) to A. E. Millar, Oct. 6, 1933. Microfilm p. 494237, R. K. Finlayson (assistant to P.M.), memo to A. E. Millar, Oct. 6, 1933. "It would be a great mistake to lose sight of the main objective that the government has in this work, namely to keep urban centres clear from such single men as more readily become amenable to the designs of agitators." See *Regina Leader Post*, May 11, 1933 for a statement by Premier Anderson about Saskatoon single unemployed being forced to go to Dundurn.

⁶P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 58. C.G.S. to D.O.C. 13, December 14, 1934.

⁷P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 58.

in magnitude, and probably intensity, it had not reached the proportions of the situation in the larger urban centers like Winnipeg and Vancouver. Saskatchewan, lacking any large urban centre, was generally less troubled by demonstrations and disorder (excepting the Estevan-Bienfait coal miners' strike of 1931) than any of the other provinces outside of the Maritimes. There were, however, organizations of the unemployed in Saskatchewan's four major cities and many of the smaller urban centres by the summer of 1932.⁸ From 1931 much of the organizing in Saskatchewan had been done by the Workers' Unity League. As the agricultural and employment situations deteriorated and the grievances of the unemployed mounted their organizations used increasingly militant tactics.

In Saskatchewan as elsewhere the married unemployed were provided with relief by the municipalities with financial assistance by the provincial and federal governments. The provincial government, and this was also true in other provinces, played a more direct role in providing for single transients. Until the autumn of 1932 the two main methods used by the provincial government were to try to place as many single unemployed as possible in farm labour jobs and to provide relief employment for some in work camps which the province began setting up in the autumn of 1930. At one time the province had twenty-three such camps with the larger ones being in the vicinity of Prince Albert National Park.

In the autumn of 1932 when the federal government began to take a more active interest in the single unemployed the province, in co-operation with the federal authorities, commenced with a three-pronged attack upon the problem. By federal-provincial agreement an allowance of \$5 monthly would be paid to "destitute unemployed homeless single men or women now resident in any urban centre of the Province who will accept work on the farms in the Province."⁹ The \$5 monthly plus room and board would, in most cases, constitute the total wages received by these workers. The farm labour plan was supplemented by federal work camps operated by the Department of the Interior in Prince Albert National Park, where the pay would also be \$5 monthly, and a few provincial work camps, though these were being phased out in anticipation of an expanded federal program. By federal-provincial agreement the Saskatchewan Relief Commission would also operate concentration camps in Saskatoon, Regina, and Moose Jaw where the single unemployed would be provided with food and shelter until they could be placed on farms or in work camps.¹⁰ The camp in Moose Jaw was for single unemployed ex-servicemen and was begun largely by the efforts of the Canadian Legion. The program of the Department of National Defence began too late in the year for them to establish work camps in Saskatchewan until the spring of 1933 at the earliest.

⁸By 1933 there were six such organizations in Saskatoon alone with three of them affiliated to the Workers' Unity League.

⁹Archives of Saskatchewan, *Saskatchewan Relief Commission (S.R.C.)*, Thomas Molloy (Deputy Minister of Railways, Labor and Industry) to Municipal Councillors, October 27, 1932.

¹⁰Archives of Saskatchewan, S.R.C., roll B., memo on Saskatoon Relief Camp. Unsigned and undated but probably written by A. Kendall, Manager, Field Service Branch, Unemployment Division of the Sask. Relief Commission, shortly after May 8, 1933.

Before the Saskatchewan and federal governments launched their expanded programs in late October and early November, 1932, the unemployed, single and married, had alarmed the provincial authorities on several occasions. The RCMP in Regina were sufficiently alarmed that they requested and received from the Department of National Defence an issue of 300 bayonets and 30,000 rounds of .303 ammunition in October, 1931.¹¹ Demonstrations were numerous with perhaps the largest being a May Day parade in Regina in 1932 which involved 10,000 participants and spectators and resulted in scattered violence and nine arrests. On October 27, 1932, several hundred relief workers employed on city relief projects in Regina went on strike under the leadership of the Regina Unemployed Workers' Council. Mayor McAra blamed the strike on five or six leaders who allegedly forced the majority to strike against their wishes though news reports indicate that the strike had widespread support with the support of a large majority on at least some work projects.¹²

At the same time as the strike of the married relief workers in Regina, federal officials were conferring with the provincial cabinet and both governments were issuing announcements about their plans for the farm labour scheme and the relief camps. The associations of the single unemployed complained loudly against working for \$5 monthly and being segregated into relief camps which unemployed leaders in Regina referred to as "slave camps". Delegates of the unemployed from Saskatoon and Regina waited on Hon. J. A. Merkley, provincial Minister of Railways, Labour and Industry and demanded \$25 monthly or \$1 daily for farm or camp work. In Saskatoon the provincial government had authorized the city to provide the single unemployed with meal tickets pending their removal to farms or work camps. On October 27 Mayor J. E. Underwood exacerbated an already tense situation by announcing that before obtaining meal tickets men would have to register at the government employment office and signify their willingness to take farm work. "Throughout the day unemployed thronged around the relief office, many of them in an ugly mood and threats of disturbance were noised abroad although no disorder occurred."¹³ On November 2 a proposed protest march of the unemployed was cancelled after being banned by the Mayor. That the authorities expected trouble was evidenced from the fact that RCMP were ready to assist city police, special constables had been sworn in and tear gas bombs were in the hands of police. Instead of a march the unemployed held a meeting on Market Square and declared that, though it was banned in advance by the Chief of Police, they would hold a mass rally in front of the relief offices on November 7 to protest, among other things, establishment of the relief camp at the Exhibition grounds. On November 7 about 80 RCMP and city police dispersed the rally and the result was what the Canadian Press called "the bloodiest riot ever seen in this city".¹⁴ Dozens of unemployed and policemen were injured but apparently only one policeman was hospitalized. Several people were arrested for unlawful assembly. Further

¹¹P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 10, No. 46, C.G.S. memo of October 16, 1931.

¹²Regina *Leader Post*, October 28, 1932.

¹³*Ibid.*, October 27, 1932.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, November 8, 1932.

outdoors meetings were temporarily banned and the resistance of the unemployed against the new government plans appears to have waned for the time being.

With the approach of winter the single unemployed registered in large numbers and were absorbed into the various sections of the federal-provincial relief program. About 8000 were placed on farms with the numbers in work camps at Prince Albert National Park and the concentration camps in the three major cities fluctuating from month to month. There appear to have been about 600 accommodated in the National Park and about 1200-1500 in the three city camps during the early spring of 1933.

During this time the Department of National Defence (DND) was making plans for opening a number of projects across the country as soon as weather permitted. The decision as to where projects would be located and on what scale depended upon where useful work could be done, the state of unrest in the various localities and the demands of provinces and municipalities for particular public works. From the standpoint of the DND enlargement of existing facilities and construction of additional permanent facilities at the militia camp near Dundurn would be a useful project and one which the Department was well equipped to undertake. Plans were made for opening a relief camp for these purposes if and when the situation warranted one. Events in the Saskatoon relief camp during April and May were to move the provincial government to urgently demand that the federal government expand its camp program with all possible speed.

That there would probably be some trouble in the Saskatoon relief camp was evident from the fact that the establishment of the camp had been one of the factors contributing to the increased unrest in Saskatoon during November, 1932. Many of the people who had raised objections in November would be inmates of the relief camp. Added to this would be the environment of the camp which was designed as a temporary holding centre pending transfer of the men to farms or work camps and not as a work camp itself. The men were given food, shelter, medical care and some necessities such as clothing and were required to perform minor fatigue duties such as washing dishes and cleaning the camp. They were not, excepting a minority who were hired to perform cooking and other more specialized camp duties, required to do much work and hence they had time on their hands to dwell on their grievances and could be easily organized. The author has not been able to locate copies of the specific regulations which the supervisors attempted to enforce at the Saskatoon relief camp. However, it was reported in the press that the camp was to be "of a military character" and it was under the supervision of a former military officer, Captain P. J. Philpott, M.C., then president of the local branch of the Canadian Legion and vice-president of the provincial command.¹⁵ There were attempts to introduce some military routine into the camp and it is likely that, given the rules commonly in force in camps of this nature at that time and the attitude of the authorities towards the single unemployed, there would be little agreement between the supervisors and the men on how the camps should be

¹⁵*Ibid.*, November 3, 1932.

operated. The environment appears to have been eminently suitable for the development of radicalism and militant protest.

Militant agitators, many of them supporters of the Workers' Unity League, lost no time in organizing the inmates of the Saskatoon camp. Superintendent Philpott was faced with trouble two months after the camp opened.

As early as January, 1933, I encountered and reported, organized opposition and propaganda, to the Relief Commission's policy of drafting men to Prince Albert National Park Work Camp. I received a ruling from the Commission under date of February 4 that inmates refusing to proceed to Prince Albert camp when drafted should be dismissed from my camp and reported to local police as vagrants.¹⁶

Philpott attempted to carry out this policy but was unable to do so and attributed this to insufficient co-operation from the Saskatoon City police and the militancy of the camp inmates. He cited an instance when, with police assistance, he evicted five people but they were only kept over night in the police station and returned to camp the next day. "By this time inmates had rallied to the cause of the malingerers, until I was powerless to evict and keep out the troublemakers."¹⁷ Philpott reported on numerous occasions during January and February that he was unable to fill drafts for the National Park work camps "due to the fact that a radical organization within the camp had gained sufficient influence over the men generally that there was a total disregard of constituted authority."¹⁸ He also reported instances of men refusing to do camp fatigue and destroying camp property.

That the radicals had the support of the general camp population is evident from the report of an official of the Saskatchewan Relief Commission (SRC) who visited the camp on April 5.¹⁹ He found the morale of the camp entirely broken down and the inmates under the influence of an unnamed radical organization which he claimed was led by about twenty men. "I found the Superintendent and his assistants in a state of nervous excitement due to the continued demonstrations which had been conducted within the confines of the Camp during the past months."²⁰ The SRC official reported that delegations were hourly making demands upon the Superintendent and his Assistant and that as many as eight or ten meetings were held daily where a crowd of from 300-600 men "were addressed in violent language and advised to make further demands for better food, clothing and tobacco, and at the same time refusing to perform any kind of work, including the necessary fatigues."²¹ The Chief Constable of Saskatoon and the officer in charge of the local RCMP recommended that action be taken to avoid more serious trouble but not until more police were available to cope with the situation. The SRC insisted that the grievances of the men were unfounded except the one concerning sanitary conditions and that this was the fault of the men themselves. The Com-

¹⁶Archives of Saskatchewan, S.R.C., roll B, undated memo on Saskatoon Relief Camp.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

mission embarked upon a program to restore order and institute a cleanup "putting the premises in a sanitary and healthy condition."²²

Captain P. J. Philpott resigned as Superintendent on April 7 and was replaced by Captain L. G. Woodward who had been recommended by the Mayor of Saskatoon and members of the Civic Relief Department. New regulations were passed which included a ban on speeches and demonstrations and there were greater efforts to enforce them. RCMP officials had previously been posted at the camp and on April 11 a full troop of mounted RCMP arrived in Saskatoon to be on hand in the event of trouble. At least one police spy was placed among the men.²³ The authorities appear to have been preparing for a showdown with the radicals not only in the Saskatoon relief camp but throughout the province. May Day parades were banned in Regina and Saskatoon. In the latter city two troops of mounted police were posted near the Market Square during a rally of about 500 persons. In Moose Jaw RCMP and city police were stationed at the relief camp where one alleged Communist agitator was arrested and charged with creating a disturbance. Both parades and meetings were banned for May Day in Moose Jaw and a labour hall was raided by RCMP and city police who seized banners, lapel buttons and a list of names of about 100 single unemployed whom they claimed had refused to go to work camps at the pay offered.²⁴

There were some indications that the radicals were concentrating their forces for a potential showdown at Saskatoon relief camp. The population of the camp greatly increased in late April and early May and the Superintendent claimed that the "Reds" had sent out word to their supporters in Prince Albert and Moose Jaw to congregate in Saskatoon.²⁵ The author has seen no documentary proof of this but, whatever the reason, the camp population at Saskatoon swelled from 391 in February to about 1,000 in early May by which time there were only a couple of hundred in each of the Regina and Moose Jaw camps. The Saskatchewan Relief Commission decided to transfer some of the Saskatoon inmates to the Regina camp and to include the most militant men in the first draft of fifty in an effort to deprive the men of their leadership and make it easier to reassert the authority of the camp supervisors. The camp inmates demanded, to no avail, that the Commission call for volunteers to go to Regina since overcrowding was the ostensible reason for the transfers. On May 7 the fifty men chosen by the Commission were given notice that they must board the train at noon, May 8, for transportation to Regina and, failing this, they would be evicted from the Saskatoon camp and denied further assistance at any relief camp in Saskatchewan.²⁶ Their names were posted around the camp. This brought the crisis to a head and led to a violent clash with the police the next day.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, September 21, 1933. It came out at the trial of the arrested men that Constable H. M. Wilson of the R.C.M.P. had been in the camp as an undercover man from April 18 to May 8.

²⁴*Ibid.*, May 1, 1933.

²⁵Superintendent Woodward to A. Kendall, May 6, 1933.

²⁶Undated S.R.C. memo, *op. cit.*

The fifty men refused to accept transfer to Regina and they and their supporters protested that the single unemployed should be allowed to go to or remain in the camp of their choosing. A resolution to the same effect was passed by the executives of seven Saskatoon labour and unemployed organizations including the Trades and Labour Council, and sent to Superintendent Woodward on the night of May 7.²⁷ Neither side would back down and on May 8 the fifty men did not report for transportation to Regina but announced that they intended to remain in the Saskatoon camp and would be at the dining hall for supper as usual at 5:30 p.m. Meetings were held at the camp during the day to solidify support for their position. The Superintendent called in the police and at 5:30, city police and RCMP, mounted and on foot, arrived at the camp. Saskatoon Police Chief G. M. Donald announced that the fifty men scheduled for transfer would be allowed to eat supper at the camp only if they agreed to board the train for Regina immediately afterwards. This they refused to do and a fight broke out between inmates and police in the waiting room of the dining hall. Simultaneously with this mounted police attempted to disperse a crowd of from 200 to 300 men in front of the dining hall and a riot ensued. "Wheeling their horses again and again, the policemen chased the fugitives all over the grounds, striking right and left."²⁸ During the riot Inspector L. J. Sampson of the RCMP was struck by a flying rock and fell from his horse; he was killed when the horse dragged him about 100 yards and his head struck a telephone pole. About thirty people were arrested during and after the riot. Of twenty-six people eventually brought to trial eleven were convicted of rioting, eleven of unlawful assembly and four were acquitted. Four of the twenty-two were also convicted of one or more charges of assaulting a police officer. A man charged with manslaughter in connection with Sampson's death was acquitted. The twenty-two convicted were sentenced to prison terms ranging from five to twenty-one months.

The reaction of the provincial government to the May 8 disturbance was to demand that the federal government provide more accommodation for the single unemployed in work camps and to attempt to whip up anti-Communist hysteria in the province. Premier Anderson wired to Hon. Wesley Gordon, federal Minister of Labour, the night of the riot relating the seriousness of the situation and stressing the urgency of getting at least 200 additional men into National Park camps.²⁹ The Deputy Minister of Labour telephoned General McNaughton the next day "to say he was in receipt of a rather hysterical telegram from Premier Anderson of Saskatchewan" and asked McNaughton if it would be possible to construct a relief camp at Dundurn without delay.³⁰ The DND agreed to this and arrangements were forthwith made with the provincial government for the transfer of men from the provincial camps as quickly as facilities could be made available at Dundurn. When Premier Anderson publicly announced the establishment of Dundurn relief

²⁷Archives of Saskatchewan, S.R.C., Letter (illegible signature) to Superintendent Woodward, May 7, 1933.

²⁸*Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, May 9, 1933

²⁹P.A.C., Department of National Defence (DND), Unemployment Relief, Vol. 23, File No. 44, Anderson to Gordon, May 8, 1933.

³⁰P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 48, 331A, McNaughton memo., May 9, 1933.

camp he used the occasion to describe Saskatoon as the headquarters of Communism in the province and to rededicate himself to the destruction of Communism and all its works. "As long as I live in public life I shall do all in my power to drive those disciples of the 'Red Flag' out of Saskatoon and out of the province."³¹ The Premier announced that initial accommodation at Dundurn would be for about 600 men and that about two-thirds of these would be transferred from Saskatoon camp. "If the men from this camp refused to go (and he thought the majority would go) the city would be advised to furnish no relief and the police would be ordered to deal severely with begging and vagrancy."³²

Dundurn relief camp, known to the Department of National Defence as Project 44, was originally planned for a twelve month period with the intention that it would employ up to 1,000 of the physically fit single unemployed. The plans were later extended by successive orders-in-council and Dundurn developed into one of the half dozen largest relief camps in the country and was not closed down until July, 1936, when the entire relief camp system was abandoned by the federal government. Dundurn was used to service most of Saskatchewan and to accommodate most of the single unemployed who were not taken care of by the farm labour scheme and the National Park camps which continued to be operated by the Department of the Interior. Only two other small projects, each accommodating fifty to sixty people, were operated by the DND in Saskatchewan. One was a project at White Fox where men were employed at Forestry conservation and cutting ties for a railway spur at Dundurn. The other involved building a provincial airport at Ladder Lake. Dundurn was made capable of accommodating about 2,000 people and there were seldom fewer than 1500 during the peak winter months.

Much of what presently constitutes Dundurn military training camp was built by relief labour between May, 1933 and July, 1936. The construction done in this period included forty-five permanent buildings of a residential or service nature, several miles of road and a railway spur, a landing field and a rifle range, power and telephone lines, sewer and water lines and bridges. The total expenditure, including the cost of machinery and building materials, came to \$1,287,215.11. The number of man-days of relief provided was 1,043,984 which meant an average expenditure per man-day of \$1.23. It must be remembered that the \$1.23 per man-day included the cost of materials and machinery used, board and room, medical care, clothing and personal essentials and 20c *per diem* for labourers as well as salaries and expenses for supervisory staff and some specialized labour. Captain N. I. Fraser of the Royal Canadian Engineers, Officer in Charge of Dundurn Camp in September, 1936, estimated that the total cost of the construction and improvements, if they had been carried out by contract, at \$556,391.00.³³ That the government expenditure was over twice this amount (assuming Fraser's estimate to be reasonably accurate) is probably due partly to the fact that the work was done with the use of as little machinery as possible. It was DND policy

³¹Regina *Leader-Post*, May 11, 1933.

³²*Ibid.*

³³P.A.C., DND, Captain N. I. Fraser to N.D.H.Q., September 4, 1936.

to do as much work as possible by the most primitive methods so as to avoid heavy expenditures on machinery and maximize the number of man-days relief which could be provided.³⁴ The excavation of earth and gravel, clearing of brush and many other jobs which would ordinarily be done by machines was done largely by hand. The actual extra cost to the government of building things the primitive way, at least in the short run, was much less than might appear at first glance given that the government would have to provide relief in any case regardless of whether the men were working. The relief camp scheme was, in fact, used by the Department of National Defence to construct military facilities which the government would probably not have financed otherwise.³⁵ It did not add to the morale of the men to be doing make-work jobs at 20c a day, which they knew could be done more efficiently by machines and this was reflected in their work efficiency. There are no figures specifically for Dundurn camp but the labour efficiency of the relief camp workers across the country was found to be 48.7% that of ordinary labour employed at prevailing rates and it was found that overall efficiency dropped as time passed.³⁶

In Dundurn, as in camps across the country, the single unemployed were provided with food and lodging, medical care, necessary clothing when they had none of their own, and an issue of tobacco. They were required to work eight hours per day five and one half days per week. The pay of 20c *per diem* became one of the chief grievances of camp inmates and one of the major criticisms levelled at the camp system by the Opposition political parties, the press and the public. Where it was possible skilled tradesmen among the inmates were encouraged to work at their trade to maintain their proficiency but would be paid at the same rate as if they worked at common labour. In some instances skilled tradesmen from the locality who were married were employed at regular union rates. This was the case in Dundurn where a few skilled tradesmen from Saskatoon were employed. Where horses were needed nearby farmers might be hired as teamsters who would supply their own horses and this was also the case at Dundurn. Civilian engineers at Dundurn as elsewhere were hired from among unemployed engineers who were recommended by the Engineering Institute of Canada. Likewise, the College of Physicians and Surgeons were consulted about the hiring of medical personnel.

The senior supervisory staff at Dundurn consisted of both civilians and regular army personnel and the camp was run as a civilian operation with no military drill and no uniforms worn by members of the military. The junior supervisory personnel, under which category was included specialized workers like cooks, were chosen where possible from the inmates of the camp. They were paid a monthly salary which was somewhat more than 20c *per diem* but much less than would have been received in regular employment. Some idea of the proportion of staff to labourers can be seen from the plans proposed for Dundurn camp for the period April 1

³⁴John Swettenham, *McNaughton*, (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968), I, p. 271.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶G. M. LeFresne, *The Royal Twenty Centers: The Department of National Defence and Federal Unemployment Relief 1932-1936* (Unpublished B.A. thesis, Royal Military College, Kingston, 1962, p. 179.

to September 30, 1935.³⁷ These plans called for 1,711 labourers, 45 teamsters and 129 supervisory personnel for a total of 1885 men. Included among the supervisory personnel were 4 foremen, 18-sub-foremen, 51 gang bosses and 19 cooks. Also included in this category were four truck drivers, a machinist and a tractor operator. Examples of monthly salaries paid to junior supervisory staff were: Cooke—\$10; gang boss—class I—\$25; cook, Class IV—\$25; clerk, Class III—\$20; gang boss, class II—\$10; first aid man—\$10.

The fact that the relief camp system was operated under the Department of National Defence meant that the camps were probably run more efficiently and at less cost to the government than might have been the case otherwise. The use of army officers at regular army pay as administrators (and they would have been paid anyway if there had been no relief camp scheme) meant a financial saving. The experience of DND in handling large numbers of men under circumstances similar to relief camps was also a factor adding to efficiency. There was also generally less crude political patronage in terms of hiring personnel and granting contracts largely because the system was administered under the supervision of the Chief of the General Staff and National Defence Headquarters (N.D.H.Q.) which minimized interference from party politicians. Career army officers had a vested interest in not unduly favoring either of the two major political parties. There was, however, some patronage in letting contracts for supplies and services. Lists of businesses eligible to bid for contracts were supplied by F. R. MacMillan, M.P. for Saskatoon who occasionally made suggestions on the hiring of personnel as well.³⁸ After the change of government in 1935 the same privileges were extended to A. MacG. Young and D. A. McNiven, M.P.'s for Saskatoon and Regina respectively.³⁹

There were also many administrative problems encountered at Dundurn camp including the incompetence of some members of the senior supervisory staff and corrupt practices on the part of others. An investigation by the DND and RCMP in April and May, 1934, indicated that rations had been stolen and that the Sergeant in charge of Fuel, Light, Rations, and Mechanical Transport at the camp had defrauded the government of \$1,001.10 by arranging, in conjunction with the employees of a Saskatoon produce company, payment for 100,110 pounds of potatoes which were never delivered.⁴⁰ The Sergeant was discharged and convicted in civilian court of defrauding the public. The investigation also revealed inadequate accounting procedures by camp officials. On January 4, 1935, a Court of Inquiry composed of the Quartermaster General and the District Accountant of Military District 12 (headquarters at Regina) conducted an inquiry at Dundurn camp into irregularities concerning the preparation of allowance (wage) sheets for the project.⁴¹ It was

³⁷P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, H.Q. File 1376-11-10-1, undated.

³⁸P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Vol. 155, F. R. MacMillan, M.P. to Col. D. M. Sutherland (Minister of Defence), May 7, 1934.

³⁹P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Vol. 158, Quartermaster General to D.O.C. 12 November 16, 1935.

⁴⁰P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Vol. 168.

⁴¹P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Project 44, Proceedings of Court of Inquiry.

discovered that the officer in charge of administration who was also the camp accountant had, in collaboration with a clerk, been collecting pay in the name of labourers who were no longer at the camp. The amount involved was only \$39, and the guilty parties had not kept the money personally but had used it to cover up for funds which had been stolen from the petty cash fund because of the carelessness of the Accountant. The Court of Inquiry found the Accountant and the clerk responsible for the irregularities and the Camp Superintendent, Captain E. J. FitzHenry, negligent in his duties because he had known of previous irregularities but had not reported them.

What was important about the Court of Inquiry and follow-up investigations was not the minor irregularities uncovered but the evidence of much more widespread incompetence. A report from Brigadier H. E. Boak, District Officer Commanding of M.D. 12, to the Adjutant-General on January 17, 1935, was extremely critical of the administration of the camp.⁴² Boak claimed that FitzHenry was incompetent and that the discipline and administration of the supervisory staff was greatly inferior to what it should be. He recommended that FitzHenry be relieved of his duties and that other administrative personnel, excepting the Medical Assistant, be retained pending a test of how they operated under a new Superintendent. FitzHenry was replaced as Superintendent and some other positions were changed by demotion of the occupants and matters seemed to improve somewhat, at least temporarily.

One of the serious problems at Dundurn, and a cause of much dissatisfaction among the inmates, was the quality of medical care provided. There was a 24-bed hospital at the camp designed to be used for minor illness, minor surgery and convalescence, with the more serious cases being handled by Saskatoon hospitals and doctors who then billed the DND for their services. It was intended that there would be a full time doctor at the camp but the DND had great difficulty obtaining one at the salary they were prepared to pay. The Saskatchewan College of Physicians and Surgeons were of little assistance in this regard and appeared more interested in assuring that any doctor hired must, even if fully qualified elsewhere be registered with the College and pay the \$100 registration fee.⁴³ The result was that for most of the time until February, 1935, the camp was serviced by a part time doctor who had a full time practice elsewhere. Between visits by this part-time doctor the camp hospital was left in charge of a non-qualified Medical Assistant whom DND officials knew to be incompetent.⁴⁴ "The hospital [before March 1, 1935] was not clean and was badly run; there was excessive consumption of drugs and rubbing alcohol, and I received numerous complaints affecting the interior economy of the hospital."⁴⁵ The DND might have resolved the situation in July, 1934, when they

⁴²P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Project 44, Brig. H. E. Boak, D.O.C. of M.D. 12, to Adjutant-General, Jan. 17, 1935.

⁴³P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Vol. 167. Young to Blair, March 1, 1935, and Young to D.O.C. 12, June 2, 1933. See also File H.Q. 1376-11-10-2 Volume 1 on medical arrangements in Vol. 167.

⁴⁴P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Project 44, H. E. Boak to Adjutant-General February 14, 1935.

⁴⁵P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Vol. 167, D.O.C. 12 to Adjutant-General, December 4, 1935.

had a chance to hire Dr. Phyllis L. Steele but she was rejected by the Director General of Medical Services on the grounds that a woman would be inappropriate.⁴⁶ The Medical Assistant was not fired until January, 1935, and then the grounds given were not medical incompetence but "using obscene and threatening language to the Camp Superintendent."⁴⁷ The situation improved on February 1, 1935, with the appointment of Dr. W. K. Blair who became the full-time doctor until he resigned to accept another position on December 7, 1935. After some difficulty and delay another full time doctor was appointed and remained until May 20, 1936, by which time the relief camps were in the process of being closed down.

Unrest among inmates in the DND relief camps was general across the country from the spring of 1933. A chart compiled by General McNaughton indicated that between June 27, 1933, and March 31, 1934, there were 57 disturbances in relief camps, which were large enough to be reported to N.D.H.Q. in Ottawa.⁴⁸ One large camp, Long Branch in Ontario, had to be closed and the nearly 700 inmates discharged because they refused to work and the supervisory staff could not maintain control. In the same period at least 21 inmates received prison sentences resulting from their involvement in the disturbances. Another of McNaughton's charts reveals that up to December 31, 1933, a total of 3,379 men (including the whole Long Branch camp) had been expelled from the camps for disciplinary reasons.⁴⁹

As people were expelled from the camps they went back to the cities where they would often demand relief from the municipal authorities and if this was refused would sometimes be maintained through the efforts of the unemployed associations. They could be imprisoned for up to six months for vagrancy but as their numbers increased the provincial authorities discouraged the courts from imposing long sentences because this would mean more expense to the province and virtually turn the gaols into relief camps. General McNaughton complained of what he considered to be the undue leniency of the courts and argued that they should impose maximum penalties as a deterrent but this policy was seldom followed.⁵⁰ The federal government even prepared legislation and plans for special prison camps known as "Camps of Discipline" for the incarceration of agitators and people who did not co-operate with relief officials.⁵¹ The intention was that these prison camps would be established in any province where they were requested by provincial Order-in-Council.⁵² This request was never made and the country was spared establishment of Camps of Discipline. What the situation revealed, however, was the length to which the federal government was prepared to go and the fact that the DND relief camps were far from successful as a stabilizing political influence. The struggle of the single unemployed for a better deal had merely been transferred from the cities to the relief camps.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, District Medical Officer of M.D. 12 to Director General of Medical Services N.D.H.Q., July 24, 1934, and the reply of D.G.M.S. to D.M.O. 12, July 31, 1934.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, D.O.C. 12 to A.G., December 4, 1935.

⁴⁸P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, File 359 (Vol. I).

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

⁵⁰P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Series II, Vol. 57. McNaughton to A. E. Millar, March 2, 1934.

⁵¹P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 41, File 314 (Vol. 1).

⁵²*Ibid.*, Vol. 41, File 314 and File 359 (Vol. 1).

An analysis of why the DND relief camps were unpopular among a large segment of the single unemployed should begin with an examination of the rules and regulations which N.D.H.Q. insisted be strictly enforced in all camps. These rules were extremely authoritarian and, in effect, deprived camp residents of their most elementary civil rights. Section 353 of the Policy and Instructions for the administration of Unemployment Relief Camps for Single Homeless and Unemployed Men reads as follows:⁵³

The following rules regarding complaints will be observed:

- (a) One of the fundamental and most necessary rules for the administration of Unemployment Relief Camps is to forbid anything bearing the appearance of combination to obtain redress of alleged grievances. Appeals for redress by means of any document bearing the signature of more than one complainant, or by organized committees combining to make a complaint, are strictly forbidden.
- (b) If any man has a complaint or accusation to bring against a member of the supervisory or administrative staff, such complaint should be laid before the Camp Foreman, who, if necessary, will transmit it to District Headquarters or Camp Superintendent.
- (c) If the Camp Foreman neglects or refuses to attend to a complaint, the complainant may bring the matter to the notice of the District Headquarters or Camp Superintendent.
- (d) The Department will not countenance any steps to bring accusations before the tribunal of public opinion, either by speeches, or letters inserted in the newspapers, by men actively employed on Relief Work. Such a proceeding is a glaring violation of the rules and shows a contempt for properly constituted authority.
- (e) It is the duty of the Camp Foreman to investigate all complaints, and, when receiving complaints for transmission to superior authority, to point out to the parties concerned any irregularity in the means they employ in seeking redress. In hearing complaints or statements, etc., Camp Foreman are advised to invariably have another member of the Supervisory Staff present as a witness to all proceedings. The complaint, when forwarded to District Headquarters or Camp Superintendent, is to be accompanied by a statement and recommendation if any, of the Camp Foreman.
- (f) No application or complaint should ever be made to the Civil Power, except through the Camp Foreman or with his sanction.

The above quoted rules were strictly enforced and supervisory personnel who disregarded them were promptly dismissed. Anyone refusing to work, disobeying the rules or deemed an agitator could be "discharged for cause" whereupon he would be blacklisted from all government camps and often denied relief in the cities as well. Men expelled from the camps were given no transportation back to the city and this was an added incentive for good behaviour, especially during the winter months. The rules were invariably defended by R. B. Bennett and his Ministers on the grounds that they were no stricter than those which would apply in "any well conducted lumber camp" which perhaps reveals something about their concepts of the proper relationship between capital and labour. The other argument used constantly by government leaders, and which they knew to be true only in the

⁵³P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployment Relief Camps for Single Homeless and Unemployed Men.

most legalistic sense, was that the camps were not compulsory and men who were dissatisfied could leave at any time.

The actual physical conditions in the camps, and this was particularly true of Dundurn, compared favorably with privately operated work camps of the time and were frequently better in terms of sanitary conditions. The same was true of the food (based on the standard army ration) which was sufficient to maintain the men in a healthy condition though good food was sometimes ruined by poor cooks and there were many complaints about both the quality and the quantity of the food. The food costs per man-day were exceptionally low, ranging from 19c to 22c, and for a small additional cost the DND could have improved upon the army ration. Many of the men were familiar with camps run by the Department of the Interior where the food was generally greater in quantity and of better quality and it was a frequent demand of inmates that the DND camps be brought up to these standards. General McNaughton, obsessed with the need for economy, attempted to solve the problem by complaining of the "unnecessary extravagance" of the Department of the Interior camps and requesting that they reduce their rations to conform with DND standards.⁵⁴ It was also the policy of N.D.H.Q. that, if extras were to be provided for special occasions such as Christmas, it would have to be done either by donations from the public or by cutting regular rations so as to accumulate some surplus.

The primary cause of dissatisfaction in the camps was not, however, the petty stinginess of the DND or the condition of the physical facilities though these were often the type of specific grievances which would provoke a strike or a demonstration. The fundamental reason for unrest and militant action, plain to anyone except the federal government by 1935, was the sense of indignation felt by the men at the denial of their rights and the waste of their lives.⁵⁵ A large percentage of camp residents were men in their early twenties who, under normal circumstances, would have looked forward to obtaining jobs, marrying and raising families. At a time when they were just getting started in adult life there were no jobs available and the government of the day, unable or unwilling to provide them with work and wages, pushed them aside and decreed that they should be satisfied to live in work camps at twenty cents a day and with few rights and little hope. This might have been tolerated for a time but as the "temporary" camps continued for months and then years (provincial camps had been established in 1930) and it appeared they might become permanent, the indignation of the single unemployed increased—directed by the more politically sophisticated among them and spurred on by the arrogance of the authorities. The relief camps became fertile areas for militant organizers and perhaps the most dedicated organizers in the country were the supporters of the Relief Camp Workers' Union, one of the many branches of the Workers' Unity League.

⁵⁴P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, File 377.

⁵⁵P.A.C., *Bennett Papers*, Microfilm pp. 495782-88. By 1935 Bennett was receiving dozens of submissions and letters from the most respectable sources on what the men and the public thought of the camps.

The amount and intensity of unrest in Dundurn relief camp appears to have been, until the prolonged strike of December, 1935, on a lesser scale than in most Alberta and British Columbia camps. One of the reasons for this was because Dundurn was a permanent militia camp and as facilities were constructed they could be used by the relief workers. The accommodation, dining, recreational and other facilities were designed as permanent structures and were greatly superior to those in most camps where the buildings were temporary and of a more rudimentary kind. The recreational program was, for instance, one of the best in the relief camp system and athletic teams from the camp often competed in Saskatoon and surrounding towns. This kind of program helped to maintain the morale of the men. Another factor was that many of the men could find employment on farms for perhaps a month in the spring and another month in the autumn and then return to the camp. This helped to relieve the tedium and to provide the men with some extra pocket money. Dundurn, unlike many DND camps, was not in an isolated wilderness area and had some social intercourse with the surrounding communities. At the same time it was far enough from Saskatoon that collaboration with radical unemployed associations in that city was difficult. Dundurn was also easy to police because of it being the only major DND camp in the province. In British Columbia agitators sometimes entered camps under assumed names after they had been blacklisted. Once an agitator was expelled from Dundurn he was neutralized in Saskatchewan outside of the cities.

The authorities kept a watchful eye on Dundurn with the help of the RCMP from Hanley and Saskatoon and by means of camp constables appointed to patrol the area and police spies who were placed among the men. Most militants and potential militants were spotted and expelled before trouble could erupt. On August 14, 1933, the regular report from M.D. 12 to the Adjutant-General noted that discipline was good, and "all cases of insubordination, refusal to work, etc., have met with instant dismissal from the camp."⁵⁶ The report of November 20, 1933, stated that a Communist organization had attempted to introduce agitators into the camp but the situation had been dealt with by police authorities. This report also mentioned a rumour that there was a plot to burn down the entire camp so that it could not be resurrected before winter and the men could go into Saskatoon but concluded that there was no organization within the camp capable of such a feat. Dismissal for cause appears to have been used frequently during the initial period of the camp. From May to December 31, 1933, there were 115 inmates expelled for disciplinary reasons.⁵⁷ Insubordination could take many forms. One man was dismissed when the supervisors found a socialist book among his belongings. The vigilance of the authorities combined with other factors seems to have kept the camp free of major disturbances for the first two years of its existence and the inmates appear to have had some antipathy to radicals. A letter from Attorney-General M. A. MacPherson to R. B. Bennett on February 12, 1934, mentions the latest group of alleged agitators who were put out of the camp

⁵⁶P.A.C., DND, Unemployment Relief, Project 44, D.O.C. to A.G., August 14, 1933.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, Vol. 47, File 328.

a few weeks previously and relates a story told to him by Assistant Commissioner Wood of the RCMP about a police spy who posed as a Communist and was told by the inmates that if he did not keep quiet they would put him out of the camp themselves. MacPherson concludes in a burst of optimism. "I understand there is some opposition to the camps in Ontario, but certainly this story which is absolutely true, indicates that we are not having any difficulty at Dundurn and that the men there are most appreciative."⁵⁸

As time went on dissatisfaction increased at Dundurn as it did almost everywhere and during the On-to-Ottawa Trek of June 1935 about 200 inmates left Dundurn camp to join the trekkers in Regina. The walkout from Dundurn was organized mainly by members of the Trek indicating the lack of organization within the camp itself. A delegation from Regina addressed a meeting of Dundurn inmates adjacent to the camp on June 15. The 200 men left the camp on June 18 in an exceptionally quiet manner by legally discharging themselves as was their right under the regulations.⁵⁹ They proceeded to Saskatoon and were transported to Regina in trucks hired by their supporters. The Dundurn recruits played no prominent part in the events surrounding the Trek in Regina. They did not comprise a unit by themselves but were dispersed among the existing units to allow them to learn the tight discipline, which was a notable feature of the Trek, from the seasoned veterans from British Columbia. The Dundurn trekkers of 1935 do not appear to have had a list of grievances specific to Dundurn to add to the grievances common to all camps which were included in the list of demands publicized by the On-to-Ottawa Trekkers. These demands included:⁶⁰

1. Work and wages at a minimum rate of 50c per hour for unskilled workers and trade union rates for all skilled work.
2. That all camp workers be covered by the Workmen's Compensation Act and adequate first aid supplies be carried on the job at all times.
3. That the camps be removed from the control of the DND and all blacklisting be abolished.
4. That democratically elected committees be recognized in every camp.
5. That there be instituted a system on non-contributory unemployment insurance.

When the Trek was disbanded in Regina after the riot of July 1, the Dundurn recruits returned to their homes or to the camp according to the agreement worked out with the provincial and federal governments.

During the months from July to December, 1935, unrest among the unemployed in Saskatchewan, inside and outside of Dundurn camp, appears to have been building up. The organized unemployed in the cities objected to attempts to force them to accept lower than standard wages for farm harvesting work or be cut off relief and the struggle against this helped to develop contacts between

⁵⁸P.A.C., *Bennett Papers*, Microfilm page nos. 495029-30, M. A. MacPherson to R. B. Bennett, February 12, 1934.

⁵⁹P.A.C., *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 61, File 380 B. An outline of the events of the On-to-Ottawa Trek.

⁶⁰P.A.C., *Manion Papers*, Minutes of meeting of Manion and Weir with Evans.

unemployed in the cities and the single unemployed in Dundurn camp and on farms. Many of the single men who took part in protests over this issue in August would be back in the Dundurn camp in late autumn and more inclined to be militant than previously. There was, during the summer and fall of 1935, considerable public discussion of conditions in Dundurn camp and criticisms by organizations like the United Farmers of Canada.⁶¹

One of the grievances of the men in Dundurn, or in most camps, was the procedure for voting in federal elections. Under existing electoral procedures a majority of inmates in relief camps were, in effect, disfranchised because they had not lived in the camps for a long enough consecutive period to meet residential qualifications (most men leaving camps for varying periods during the summer months) and the government refused, despite repeated attempts by the Opposition and demands by the Relief Camp Workers' Union to extend the right of absentee voting to relief camp inmates so that they could cast ballots for candidates in their home constituencies.⁶² The right to vote had been one of the chief demands of the On-to-Ottawa Trekkers in June and was an issue which was of particular interest to Dundurn inmates because of the federal election campaign and the fact that they had been allowed to vote in the 1934 provincial election. This and other issues added to the resentment against the authoritarianism of the camp system and made it possible for the Relief Camp Workers' Union (R.C.W.U.) to become organized in a really effective manner for the first time in Dundurn camp.

Growing unrest among Dundurn inmates and the resulting increase in strength of the R.C.W.U. was reflected in a major strike which began on December 12, 1935, and was not completely terminated until January 23, 1936. For at least four days the strike was actively supported by about 800 of the 1526 men on strength and the authorities lost effective control of the camp for about 10 days.⁶³ The strike was set off spontaneously when the camp authorities attempted to evict two young men, aged 18 and 19, on grounds of insubordination and refusal to obey camp regulations. They resisted eviction and about seventy men congregated to prevent their removal. On December 13 warrants were issued for the arrest of the two men for allegedly assaulting members of the supervisory staff while resisting eviction. They took refuge in one of the huts where their supporters refused to give them up and 800 of the camp inmates came out on strike in their support and began picketing so that the work of the entire camp ground to a halt.

What had begun as a spontaneous protest quickly became a well organized strike with the R.C.W.U. playing a prominent role. Camp authorities claimed that about 50% of the men could be persuaded to work but were prevented from doing so by pickets and that at least 100 police would be needed to protect any of the men who went back to their jobs. As it turned out some of the men did go back to work on December 14 with no violence reported but over half of the men

⁶¹Regina *Leader-Post*, August 15, 1935.

⁶²House of Commons *Debates* 1935, Vol. II, pp. 1124-25, 672, 980-88, February 11, 1935.

⁶³The account of this strike is based on a diary of the strike kept by the C.G.S. as well as memos and correspondence in DND Papers, Unemployment Relief, Vol. 168.

stayed out until December 17 and there were still 596 reported on strike on December 20 with many of those who were working employed at the hospital or on camp fatigue by consent of the strikers. The authorities were faced with a situation where they either had to make concessions or resort to the use of police force which would have almost certainly resulted in bloodshed.

There was a similarity between the situation in Dundurn camp in December and the situation in Regina which preceded the Riot of July 1 in that the provincial government authorities took a conciliatory attitude towards the strikers. The difference was that the government at Ottawa had changed hands and was more willing to listen to the advice of the provincial government. Had the situation been left to the discretion of DND officials there would almost certainly have been bloodshed at Dundurn in December. On December 13 the strikers decided that they would not return to work until the two men in question had been reinstated and the Superintendent agreed to negotiate grievances concerning the food, the tobacco issue and the 20c *per diem* allowance. The strike leaders also requested a telephone conversation with Saskatchewan Attorney-General Davis, who was at that time in Ottawa, indicating that they had more faith in the provincial than in the federal and particularly the DND authorities. Davis played a key role in how the strike was handled because of his authority over the police. On December 13 Davis ordered the RCMP not to attempt to forcibly arrest the two men or to take any other action until they had fully investigated the situation.

After a meeting between Davis and the Minister of Defence it was decided to send the Rigg Committee, previously appointed by the federal government to investigate and report upon the relief camp system, to Dundurn to attempt to negotiate a settlement with the men.⁶⁴ The Committee returned from Alberta where they had been investigating camps and began negotiations with strike leaders at Dundurn camp on December 15. The strike committee stood firm on its demands that the two men be reinstated and the Rigg Committee, over the objections of the Superintendent, suggested that this might be a suitable compromise. A mass meeting of 100 men was addressed on the night of December 15 by Rigg and by John Young of Saskatoon on behalf of the R.C.W.U. and the Workers' Unity League but no decision was made on the Rigg proposals. On December 16 General Ashton, C.G.S., urged the Minister of Defence not to reinstate the men or make any other concession even if it meant using force to restore order.⁶⁵ On the same day Brigadier Boak, D.O.C. 12, suggested swearing in 150 special constables from the men within the camp who opposed the strike and using them to restore order or as an alternative bringing in a large force of RCMP on the railway spur by night. On the morning of December 16, the Rigg Committee had presented proposals for ending the strike to a mass meeting of 700 strikers. These proposals included the reinstatement of the two men and the promise that the committee would include the men's complaints in their report to the government on the camp system as a whole. This was

⁶⁴Chaired by R. E. Rigg, senior civil servant with Department of Labour.

⁶⁵General Ashton to Minister of Defence, December 16, 1935. Vol. 168, DND.

rejected by the mass meeting and a new list of demands were presented, which included:

1. Investigation of the canteens and the monthly reports signed by a chartered accountant,
2. Allowances on days when work could not be done,
3. Retaining of sufficient clothing when leaving camp,
4. Demotion of straw bosses and foreman when there was just cause,
5. A man on trial (presumably for dismissal with cause) should be notified and allowed to bring witnesses,
6. No man over 55 to go to work unless he wants to.
7. Better food facilities and investigation of cooks,
8. New clothing instead of second-hand,
9. Free cigarette papers with tobacco issue,
10. Camps pay fare of individuals with just reason to leave camps.

The Rigg Committee left the camp failing to reach a settlement and recommended that no further concessions be granted on the grounds that it would undermine the authorities of the camp supervisors and encourage organized resistance elsewhere.

The DND officials proceeded with preparation to use force. On December 18, Brigadier Boak informed Attorney-General Davis that he had been instructed to restore order and requested that the necessary police be provided by dawn on December 19. The Attorney-General declined to send police and on December 19 Boak began applying pressure by referring to the Federal-Provincial Agreement under the Relief Act, under which the Province had agreed to supply police in the event of disturbances. Boak also argued that the regular pre-Christmas allowances should be paid on December 20 and it was unsafe to bring the cash to the camp without a large police guard. Simultaneously with this, the C.G.S. was bringing pressure on his Minister in Ottawa. The Attorney-General still refused to send police and argued that the extent of the strike was gradually declining anyway. The Chairman of the Strike Committee had, in fact, deserted the strike and gone back to work after the Rigg proposals were rejected and all necessary work around the camp was being done. Only the non-essential work such as construction was still included in the strike which now involved about 675 men. The rejections of the Rigg Committee proposals had caused a split in the strikers. It was pointed out that the strike had been free of violence and the Acting Attorney-General cautioned the DND against provoking violence. "May I recall to you the riots experienced at Estevan, Saskatoon, and Regina and urge upon you that you seriously reconsider the necessity of immediate police action before a move is made which may result in similar consequences."⁶⁶

The DND, having ruled out further significant concessions to the men, proceeded to exert further pressure on both the men and the Attorney-General. On December 20 the men who were still on strike were informed that those who returned

⁶⁶Vol. 168, DND, J. W. Estey (Acting Attorney-General) to Brig.-General H. E. Boak, December 19, 1935.

to work immediately would not suffer the deductions from pay commonly used in relief camps to compel men to work. Under this system men who refused to work were charged 60c *per diem* for board and room for each day they spent in camp and this was deducted from their pay. While offering to free the men from this penalty the DND refused to pay the 20c *per diem* to men who had been on strike. The Attorney-General was informed that this might cause a disturbance and police would be needed. A mass meeting of 800 men rejected the new proposal but more men did return to work and on December 21 there remained only 474 actually on strike. In keeping with the policy of the strike committee an undetermined number of strike supporters were working at camp fatigue duties. The project was still out of the control of the authorities in that a large proportion of the men refused to work and yet had to be fed and could not be ejected until the provincial government agreed to send the necessary police. The DND authorities kept up pressure on the federal Ministers and the provincial government for forcible action. Boak again demanded that police be supplied under the federal-provincial agreement and this time set the latest possible date for police action at December 23.

The provincial government still refused to send police and began working on plans to transfer men to Prince Albert National Park where they could be accommodated in Department of Interior facilities. By December 23, the strike was beginning to lose much of its strength anyway. Men who had relatives nearby were taking Christmas leave, a few were returning to work and on some days it was too cold for anyone to work so that a strike became less relevant. By December 27 only 140 men were listed as being on strike and by then the DND officials had decided to wait until the number declined more and then pressure the Attorney-General into sending police when the number of strikers had reached an irreducible minimum. By now arrangements had also been made to transfer up to 500 men to National Park camps on a voluntary basis. It was thought that some men who objected to Dundurn camp would not object to a National Park camp where conditions were generally somewhat better and discipline less rigid. The transfer to the National Parks camps began in early January, 1936. Only men in particularly good physical condition or with some bush experience were chosen for these camps and of 260 who volunteered on January 7 the Superintendent of National Parks, who was at the camp to choose them personally, rejected 100. By now only 102 men were on strike and more pressure was applied to the Attorney-General to use force. He still refused and worked out an agreement whereby about 60 of the remaining 100 agreed to go to Prince Albert National Park. Part of the agreement was that the accrued board and room of 60c *per diem* would be dropped and that those men who had gone to work at Dundurn after the deadline for abrogation of accrued charges (December 21) would also have their charges dropped and would not have to work them off. The only other concession from DND was that strikers refusing to go back and who would leave camp voluntarily would be given transportation back to the point from which they were admitted to Dundurn. A few left camp under this agreement. By January 16 the Attorney-General had agreed to use force if necessary to get the remaining strikers evicted if they did not return to work or leave voluntarily. Police arrived in the camp on January 22 and of

40 men still on strike 39 returned to work and one was evicted. On January 23 sixteen of those who returned to work the previous day were evicted for refusing to perform the normal amount of work.

The long December-January strike revealed a number of things about the way the DND chose to operate relief camps and about how the single unemployed viewed life in the camp. The DND made no concessions of significance other than agreeing to reinstate the two men whose dismissal had provoked the strike and agreed to this only under pressure from the Rigg Committee and the provincial government. Later they made the other minor concessions under pressure from the provincial authorities and perhaps federal Ministers. They made no concessions on the list of demands of the camp workers mainly on the grounds that the men should never gain anything by organization and militancy. The relief camp inmates, as the regulations clearly stated, had no rights except those decreed by the Department of National Defence. The other notable thing about the DND handling of the strike was the insistence upon the use of force when it was plain that the strike could be settled and even defeated, as it eventually was, by other means.

The fundamental causes of the strike are equally revealing. The Rigg Committee report looked mainly at the superficial causes, citing such things as Communist agitation and too many people in one camp, though their report on the camps as a whole saw them as less than desirable institutions which should be closed down as soon as possible. Nor were the primary causes individual grievances of a minor nature such as inadequate dining facilities, a lack of cigarette papers and other annoyances. These things merely added to frustrations and were not important enough in themselves to spark a strike. An examination of the contents of *The Agitator*, official organ of the R.C.W.U., which was illicitly distributed fairly regularly in Dundurn camp in the winter of 1935-1936 and was designed for use in the Dundurn camp only shows that very little attention was paid to grievances about food, clothing, cigarette papers, etc., though they were mentioned. Most of the space was devoted to attacks on the indignity of working for 20c a day, demands for work and wages and attacks on the entire camp system.⁶⁷ When the strike was provoked by the attempted eviction of two men the strikers had no list of demands. The list was produced later when the authorities agreed to reinstate the two men and it appeared the strike might be settled. A *Star-Phoenix* reporter who covered the strike and interviewed many of the men found that their grievances were more general than specific. "But whether an acquiescence to all their demands would settle the trouble is doubtful. They are rebelling against the condition of society in and out of the camps."⁶⁸ By 1935 men in the camps did not need specific reasons for rebelling. The fact that they were in the camps was enough in itself.

After the end of the strike in January, 1936, there were no more major disturbances at Dundurn camp though men continued to be "dismissed for cause" at frequent intervals. The new Liberal government instituted a policy of bringing the

⁶⁷DND, Vol. 168.

⁶⁸Saskatoon *Star-Phoenix*, December 27, 1935.

camps more directly under the Department of Labour. Previously the Labour Minister had been nominally in charge of the camps but the N.D.H.Q. had been given a blank cheque for their administration and all the major decisions were made by Order-in-Council on the advice of the Chief of the General Staff. Few significant changes were made under the new regime. One change was that the pay for laborers was raised to 50c *per diem* on March 1, 1936. Two months later the camps were in the process of closing down altogether as had been suggested in the Rigg report. Nearly all the camps including Dundurn were closed down by June 30, 1936. Most of the Dundurn inmates found jobs, though often only temporarily, on farms or with extra gangs on the railways as part of a plan worked out by the federal and provincial governments. In the autumn of 1936 the struggle was continued in the cities.

Lorne A. Brown

Contributors

Lorne A. Brown is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus.

Mrs. Jean Larmour is a graduate in history from the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus.

Mrs. Irene M. Spry, author of *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition* and other works on Palliser is now lecturing at the University of Ottawa.

R. Carter is Dean of Law, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus.