

Estevan Riot 1931: Weighing the Causes

A. Setting the Background

Prior to working with students to establish historical significance of this event, some background knowledge about the Estevan Riot should be provided.

- "Strike of Coal Miners at Estevan, Sask., & Appointment of Royal Commission of Inquiry," *Labour Gazette*, October 1931, located at McMaster University Labour Studies Programme Online Learning Centre:
<http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/oldlabourstudies/onlinelearning/article.php?id=455>
- The Canadian Encyclopedia: "Estevan Coal Miners' Strike 1931":
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/estevan-coal-miners-strike-1931/>
- Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan: "Estevan Coal Strike": Included in this learning package, courtesy of University of Regina Press.
- History 30 curriculum : Unit 3 pages 328-344
https://www.edonline.sk.ca/bbcswebdav/library/curricula/English/Social_Studies/History_30_1997.pdf

B. Review the relevant historical thinking guideposts for considering causes to events in history.

- Change happens due to multiple causes and results in multiple consequences. These causes and consequences are interrelated and vary in duration.
- The causes that lead to a particular historical event vary in their influence. Some are more important than others.
- There is an interplay of historical actors taking action to cause events and the social context within which the actors operate that impact analysis of cause and consequences of an event.
- The events of history are not inevitable. Changing an action or condition and the event might have turned out differently.

Adapted from The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013.)

C. Prepare the student tasks cards provided to use in the learning task.

- Nine student task cards have been provided at the end of this document.

Options:

- Students can be given the entire set of cards to work with individually.
- Students can be grouped in teams of 9, with one student getting one card each
- Partnered or small grouped to work with the entire set

NOTE: A SMART notebook file can also be used to display and move the cards as required for the learning tasks suggested in this lesson. File available upon request from Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, info@archives.gov.sk.ca

D. Prepare/locate primary resources to use for student inquiry related to the topic on each card.

- The primary source documents for this package are all located and available for viewing or download on the website of the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, at http://www.saskarchives.com/Estevan_Evidence.

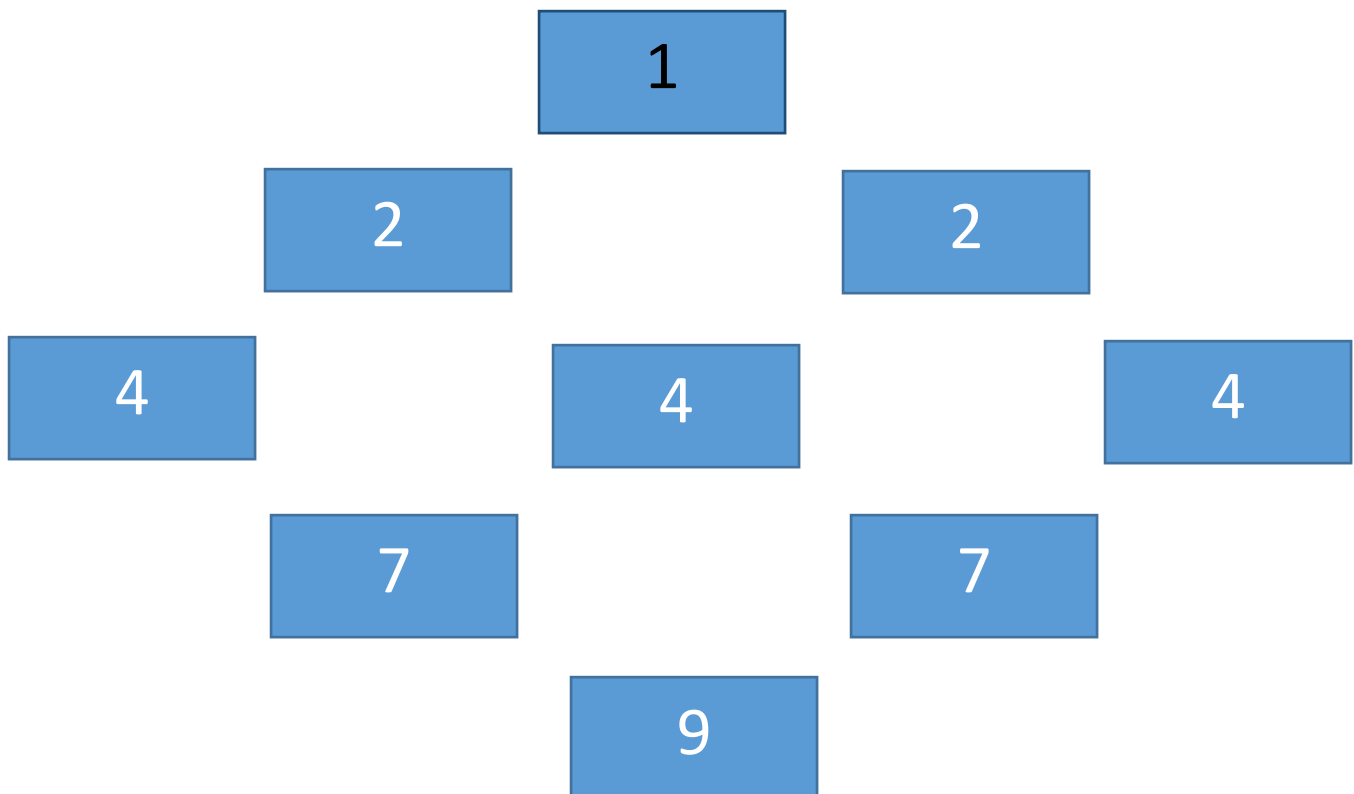
A summary of these documents is provided in Appendix A.

- If computer access is limited, copies may need to be printed for student use.
- A list of primary resources related to each task card has been included in Appendix B of this document.

E. Research and view the primary source documents to learn more about the specific persons, event or action represented on the cards.

1. Allow time for students to view the primary source documents connected to each card to help them learn more about the particular person, event or action. Targeted material that has direct connection with the card topic is suggested on the card as a starting place.
 - See the **Source Reference Summary** that has been provided in Appendix A, which outlines what primary resources best connect with each task card.
2. The students may find it helpful to keep track of key ideas and summarize what they learned from the resources by keeping summary notes. A note taking guide is included at the end of this document.

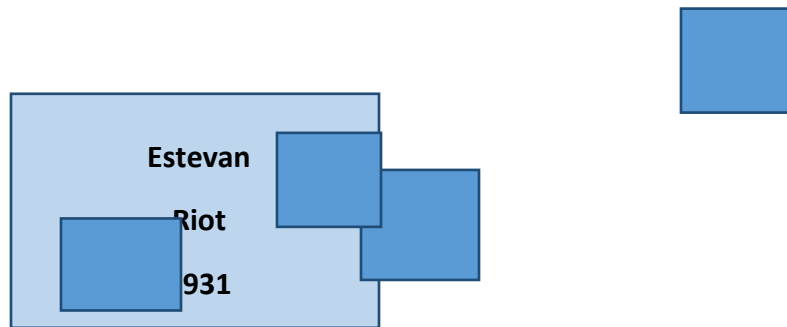
Diagram 1



F. Explain how the process of diamond ranking works.

1. Explain that each student (or pair/group) will be given 9 different cards.
2. Each card represents a key person, event, group or action that could be considered a CAUSE connected with the event of the Estevan Riot of 1931.
3. The task will be to rank the causes of the Riot represented on the cards in order of their importance - with the most significant cause forming the top of the diamond and the least significant forming the bottom.
4. Show them a simple diagram like the following to help them visualize how to represent and lay out the cards. See Diagram 1 (previous page).
5. Another option students could use to help determine and display their thinking would be to have the Estevan Riot as the central "card". Students then would place the individual cause cards closer to the middle if they think these are the most significant causes, and further away from the middle of the Riot card or outside of it entirely if they think it is not as significant a cause. It might look something like what is shown in Diagram 2 (below).

Diagram 2



- G. Determine the most important cause in relation to the larger topic of the Estevan Riot of 1931 and place the cards in the order they think they should go.**

H. Discuss placement decisions and reasons with other individuals/partners/groups. (Think-Pair-Share)

1. Try to negotiate a consensus ranking of the causes for the entire group.
2. Share your larger group ranking with the whole class.

Extension Tasks Related to Cause and Consequence

To summarize student understandings after researching the primary documents, rank ordering the causes of the event and discussing their choices with others, students could reflect on the following prompt choices:

CAUSES

- The underlying causes of the Estevan Riot were...
- A contributing factor to the Estevan Riot was...
- The problems of the miners were exacerbated by...
- Ultimately, the trigger for the Estevan Riot was...
- What was the *real* cause of the Estevan Riot?
- Why did the Estevan Riot happen in 1931?
- Why was the Estevan Riot so surprising and shocking?
- Why did the Estevan Riot happen so violently?

CONSEQUENCES

- The immediate result of the Estevan Riot was...
- A long-term effect of the Estevan Riot was...
- An unintended consequence of the Estevan Riot was...
- What if the council had not passed a motion to prevent the parade?
- What if Annie Buller had not come to the area to speak to the miners the week before?
- What would have been the impact if
- What alternatives did the town council have (or the police force have) and what might have happened if...

DIGGING DEEPER...

The following resources are available online, from libraries or from Saskatchewan Archives Board:

Steve Hewitt, "September 1931: A Re-Interpretation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Handling of the 1931 Estevan Strike and Riot," *Labour/LeTravail* 39 (Spring 1997), 159-78:

<http://iltjournal.ca/index.php/ilt/article/viewFile/5066/5935>

Stephen L. Endicott, *Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners' Struggle of '31* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, Micro. R-2.926, Records of the Estevan-Bienfait Mining Dispute (Wylie Royal Commission)

Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, R-284, L.1 (M.1), Records of the Saskatchewan Department of Labour, Deputy Minister's Office, File 1. Estevan Coal Strike, 1931

APPENDIX A

Estevan Riot 1931: Weighing the Causes Source Reference Summary

From Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, R-284: L-M1 – Saskatchewan Department of Labour,
Deputy Minister’s Office – Estevan Bienfait Coal Mine, 1931

Document Number	Document Title
Document 1	Short Chronological Review of the Labour Dispute – Saskatchewan Lignite Coal fields – September-October 1931, 28 October 1931, signed by Thomas M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Labour
Document 2	Open Letter to the Miners of the Sask. Coalfields, from Saskatchewan-Manitoba District council of the Workers’ Unity League
Document 3	Letter to T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Labour, from Edw. Pierce, Eastern Collieries of Bienfait, Ltd., 16 October 1931, with enclosed leaflet entitled “Protest Against Brutal Murder of Miners in Estevan!” issued by the National Executive Committee, Canadian Labour Defense League [no date]
Document 4	Letter to Chas. Wm. Locke, Esq., President B.E.S.L., Bienfait, Sask., from T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Labour, 17 October 1931
Document 5	Draft agreement between mine operators and employees to re-open the mines and return to work, Estevan, 6 October 1931
Document 6	Letter to T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Railways, Labour & Industries, from F.E. Harrison, Western Representative, Canada Department of Labour, 28 September 1931
Document 7	Letter to G.A. Calvert, Esq., Managing Director, International Clay Products, Ltd., Estevan, SK, from T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Railways, Labour & Industries, 22 September 1931
Document 8	Letter to T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Railways, Labour & Industries, from G.A. Calvert, Esq., Managing Director, International Clay Products, Ltd., Estevan, SK, 18 September 1931
Document 9	Notes “Re: Estevan Coal Strike”, 9 September 1931, by T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Railways, Labour & Industries
Document 10	Copy of Telegram Sent to Hon. G.D. Robertson, [Canada] Minister of Labour, Ottawa, from JohnA. Merkley, Regina, 9 September 1931
Document 11	Copy of Canadian Pacific Railway Company’s Telegraph Day letter to Jas. Sloan, President Miners Union, Estevan, SK, from Thos. M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Labour, Regina, SK, 7 September 1931

Document 12	Newspaper Clipping: Winnipeg Free Press, 1 October 1931, "Estevan's Black Day"
Document 13	Newspaper Clipping: Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, 1 October 1931, "The Estevan Fray"
Document 14	Newspaper Clipping: Winnipeg Free Press, 1 October 1931, "Sloan Is Blamed for Estevan Trouble"
Document 15	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post, 30 September 1931, "Twelve Injured Seriously When Police and Miners Wage Battle In Streets"
Document 16	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post, 26 September 1931, "Judge Wylie Delays Probe of Estevan Strike Tangle; Awaits Word From Ottawa"
Document 17	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Star, 24 September 1931, "Operators Ask for Police Protection; Will Use Any Labor"
Document 18	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post, 17 September 1931, "Mineworkers Union Scores Efforts to Break Coal Strike"
Document 19	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Star, 15 September 1931, "Recruit 600 Men to Stop Sask. Strike"
Document 20	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post – Noon Edition, 8 September 1931, "South Mine Area Workers Stage Strike"
Document 21	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Star, 8 September 1931, "Alberta Agitators Cause of Troubles Officials Declare"
Document 22	Newspaper Clipping: Estevan Mercury, 3 September 1931, "Molloy Will Study Situation In Mines"
Document 23	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Star, 24 October 1931, "Complaints of Miners Heard"
Document 24	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post, 14 October 1931, "Complaints of Bienfait Mine Workers Heard"
Document 25	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post, 13 October 1931, "Tells Probe Miners' Pay Is Not High"
Document 26	Newspaper Clipping: Regina Leader-Post, 9 October 1931, "Head of Mine Tells of Deep Seam Plight"
Document 27	Newspaper Clipping: Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, 6 October 1931, "Miners Describe Their Grievances at Hearing"

Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, oral history project Towards a New Past, “Documentation of Industrial Unrest in the Estevan-Bienfait Coalfields, 1928-1935.”

Document 28	Tape R-320: Excerpts transcribed from interview with Harry Nicholson, Estevan City Council member at the time of riot. Interviewed 24 August 1973 in Estevan by Larry Johnston
Document 29	Tape R-357: Excerpts transcribed from interview with W.D. McKay, Estevan City Policeman involved in riot. Interviewed 2 September 1973 in Regina by Larry Johnston
Document 30	Tape R-325: Excerpts transcribed from interview with Peter Gembey, miner in Bienfait area at the time of riot. Interviewed 18 July 1973 in Bienfait by Larry Johnston and Ron Adams
Document 31	Tape R-326: Excerpts transcribed from interview with Howard A. Babcock, local resident and mine cook in the 1930s, discussing miners’ working and living conditions, and organization of the miners. Interviewed 19 June 1973 in Regina by Larry Johnston
Document 32	Tape R-326: Excerpts transcribed from interview with Howard A. Babcock, local resident and mine cook in 1930s, discussing actions of the Estevan town council and the police. Interviewed 19 June 1973 in Regina by Larry Johnston

Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan, Newspaper (on Microfilm) Collection

Document 33	Micro R-1.160, Reel 7 (1930-1931): Estevan Mercury, 24 September 1931, “The Truth About the Strike in the Bienfait and Estevan Coal Fields,” p. 8
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APPENDIX B

Estevan Riot 1931: Weighing the Causes

**Cause and Consequence Task Cards
with List of Related Documents for Each Heading**

<p>Coal Mine Owners Coal Operators Association</p> <p>“Company Towns”</p> <p>Company Stores Company Housing</p> <p>Document 1 Document 3 Document 5 Document 9 Document 10 Document 11 Document 17 Document 18 Document 20 Document 22 Document 23 Document 24 Document 25 Document 26 Document 27 Document 31 Document 33</p>	<p>Saskatchewan Government T.M. Molloy, Deputy Minister of Labour</p> <p>Document 1 Document 2 Document 4 Document 5 Document 6 Document 7 Document 8 Document 9 Document 11 Document 22 Document 33</p>	<p>Police and Law Enforcement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RCMP • Estevan Police <p>Document 3 Document 9 Document 15 Document 16 Document 17 Document 18 Document 29 Document 30 Document 32</p>
<p>Canadian Government Conciliation Board, M.S. Campbell</p> <p>The Wylie Royal Commission</p> <p>Document 1 Document 3 Document 5 Document 12 Document 13 Document 16 Document 21 Document 23 Document 24 Document 25 Document 26 Document 27 Document 33</p>	<p>Working Conditions</p> <p>Wages</p> <p>Workplace Practices</p> <p>Document 3 Document 5 Document 8 Document 20 Document 21 Document 23 Document 24 Document 25 Document 26 Document 27 Document 30 Document 31 Document 33</p>	<p>Estevan Mayor and Town Council</p> <p>Document 1 Document 9 Document 15 Document 28 Document 29 Document 32</p>

<p>Outside Supporters and Union Organizers Visit Estevan Area</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annie Buller • Sam Scarlett • James Sloan <p>Red Scare / Fear of Communism</p> <p>Document 1 Document 6 Document 8 Document 9 Document 10 Document 12 Document 13 Document 14 Document 18 Document 22 Document 30 Document 31 Document 33</p>	<p>Red Scare – Fear of Communism</p> <p>Miners Affiliate with Unions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mine Workers’ Union of Canada • Workers’ Unity League <p>Workers from known Communist countries</p> <p>Document 1 Document 2 Document 3 Document 4 Document 7 Document 8 Document 14 Document 18 Document 19 Document 21 Document 22 Document 30 Document 31 Document 33</p>	<p>Strike Action Summer – Oct 1931</p> <p>Document 1 Document 9 Document 10 Document 11 Document 12 Document 13 Document 14 Document 15 Document 16 Document 17 Document 18 Document 20 Document 21 Document 30 Document 33</p>
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Estevan Coal Strike



Funeral for three miners killed during the Estevan Coal Miners' Strike, 1931.
Saskatchewan Archives Board R-A18508

In the summer of 1931, 600 men and boys worked in the almost two dozen underground mines of the Souris Coal Fields of southeastern Saskatchewan. They laboured ten hours a day in subterranean coal seams sometimes not big enough to allow a miner to stand up. In the Crescent Mine and Eastern Collieries, one to two feet of water routinely collected in the work areas. Western Dominion Collieries was notorious for not replacing damaged or rotted timbers, and roof cave-ins were frequent. Many of the underground mines had totally inadequate ventilation; smoke from blasting hung in the air like a fog. “Black damp”—high concentrations of carbon dioxide—plagued

many of the mines and regularly made the workers seriously ill. “Refuge holes,” which offered miners some protection during a fire or cave-in, were few and far from the coal face.

For working in these harsh and dangerous conditions miners were paid 25¢ for each ton of coal that they dug, hand-loaded on coal cars and pushed to the main shaft. An experienced miner working hard for the whole of his ten-hour shift could earn \$1.60. Dockage for rocks, clay and small-sized coal further reduced his take-home pay. Miners were also obliged to do extra work such as laying track, timbering, pumping water, and clearing up roof falls, for which they were not paid. Coal miners’ wages in Alberta and British Columbia exceeded those paid in Saskatchewan by 50% in the decade between 1921 and 1929. Despite this, the Estevan–Bienfait area mine owners implemented sizable wage cuts in 1931.

Living conditions were as bad as the work environment. Only two mines had shower facilities. The company houses and “bachelor bunkhouses” were tar paper shacks with no insulation or indoor plumbing; as often as not, these dwellings were infested with lice, bedbugs and cockroaches. The larger mines had “company stores” where employees were expected to buy everything from food and clothes to miners’ supplies.

In July and August 1931 miners from several collieries met in secret to talk about organizing. They decided to contact the Workers’ Unity League (WUL), a militant, left-wing labour federation centred in Toronto. The WUL affiliate with jurisdiction over mining was the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada (MWUC). The WUL sent organizers Martin Forkin and Sam Scarlett into the Souris Coal Fields, and a sign-up got underway.

Scarlett addressed a crowd of 1,200 miners and family members at a union picnic at Taylorton on August 23. Two days later, MWUC president James Sloan spoke to a meeting of over 1,000 in Estevan and announced that the union had obtained a 100% sign-up. The mine owners, however, absolutely refused to deal with their employees’ choice of union, citing as their reason the fact that the leaders of the MWUC were Communists. The MWUC had negotiated with coal operators in Alberta; but the Saskatchewan mine owners repeatedly refused to recognize the union, even when the Deputy Minister of Labour tried to get negotiations started. Finally, with no other real option, the miners voted to strike and walked off the job at midnight, September 7, 1931. The mine owners still

refused to bargain, and instead brought in scabs (replacement workers) to reopen three of the biggest mines on September 16. Mass picketing by hundreds of striking miners sent the scabs away, and the mines once again closed.

On September 28, the strikers decided to hold a parade through coal country from Bienfait to Estevan to dramatize the miners' plight and encourage public support. In the early afternoon of September 29, the motorcade set off with miners, their wives and children, all packed into old cars and on the backs of trucks. As the cavalcade entered Estevan, they unfurled Union Jack flags and banners reading "We will not work for starvation wages," "We want houses, not piano boxes," and "Down with the company store." Before the motorcade reached the centre of town it was stopped by a cordon of two dozen Estevan police. An argument erupted when the police insisted that the peaceful demonstration must disperse. When the strikers refused, police chief McCutcheon grabbed striking miner Martin Day and tried to pull him down from the truck. This set off a pushing and shoving match, during which the police summoned the fire brigade, apparently to hose down the demonstrators. When the fire truck arrived, McCutcheon began ordering arrests and the struggle escalated. Strikers and their family members began throwing stones and wielding picket signs. The police, bolstered now by RCMP officers, began firing their guns in the air or into the ground in front of the demonstrators.

A group of strikers climbed on the fire truck, and one was shot dead by the police. Two other miners were killed by police bullets. Eight more unarmed strikers, four bystanders, and one RCMP officer were wounded by police gunfire. Those fatally wounded were Peter Markunas, Nick Nargan and Julian Gryshko. The following morning, police raids on homes led to the arrest of thirteen strikers on charges of rioting; others were apprehended later. A number, including several of the leaders of the union, were convicted and sentenced to as much as a year of hard labour.

Even with the death of three co-workers, the miners refused to give in. On October 6, the mine owners finally agreed to implement an eight-hour day, a minimum wage of \$4 a day, payment for timbering, a reduction in the rent for miners' houses and the price of blasting powder, the appointment of check weighmen, and an end to the company store monopoly. Because of the employers' stiff opposition towards the Mine Workers Union of Canada, the miners dropped their demand for union recognition. It was not until the end of World War II that the United Mine Workers were able to establish a lasting trade union presence in the Souris Coal Fields.

Garnet Dishaw