

Forty-Five Years Ago: The Oshawa Strike

Eric A. Havelock

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Forty-Five Years Ago: The Oshawa Strike

Part One

Eric Havelock

AS LATE AS 1937, the labour force in the factories and mines of Ontario, as also of Quebec, was for the most part unorganized. This reflected a situation which had been general in the United States as well. Previously to that year however, remedy in the U.S. for this condition had been undertaken by the organization of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) under the leadership of John L. Lewis. In 1937 the CIO undertook the task of organizing the manufacturing plants of Ontario. Aside from any desire to help the Canadian work force, the Americans had self interest to consider, an interest to some extent shared by both management and labour. They were not prepared to see their now successful efforts at raising wages and also prices in the auto and steel industries, meat packing, mining, and the like, undercut by competition from cheap Canadian labour, cheap because unorganized.

The initial effort was fiercely resisted by the Canadian companies involved. The machinery of propaganda available in the Ontario press in papers friendly to the manufacturing and mining interests was mobilized to convince the general public that the CIO represented on the one hand communism; it was a little difficult to make this accusation stick, since the CIO was now firmly established in the United States in a society committed to capitalism; or on the other hand, an invasion by paid agitators who were foreigners into concerns which were purely domestic and Canadian and British. This was the more effective line to take so far as the Toronto public was concerned. It must be remembered that I am speaking of the old Toronto, not the transformed and partly cosmopolitan city it has become. The good honest Canadian working man did not want to be corrupted by manipulators from across the border who had only foreign interests and their own pockets in mind. This of course conveniently overlooked the awkward fact that most of the businesses involved while ostensibly Canadian functioned as branch subsidiaries of U.S. corporations. The foreigners were already in position at the top where it mattered and could rely on the full cooperation of their Canadian colleagues at the management level. Sam McLaughlin, the titular chairman of General Motors (Canada) Limited,

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the firm which cast itself as chief actor in the unfolding drama of industrial conflict, acquired this title after going to New York in 1918 to arrange for the merger of his Oshawa motor car company with General Motors of America. It would be about this time, or soon after, that the Canadian survivors of four years of trench warfare were awaiting repatriation with impatience that turned to violence, because of the lack of shipping to bring them home. But Sam was a pious man and the Lord smiled on him; he lived to be a hundred.

In April 1937, the workers at the Oshawa plant of General Motors, having balloted under the auspices of the United Auto Workers, petitioned the company for recognition, and when it was refused, struck the plant to back up their demand. Oshawa was then for the most part a one-company town. The local population including the storekeepers solidly backed the strike. The mayor wisely declared total prohibition of alcoholic beverages in the town for the duration of the strike, and shut down all of what were then known as beer-parlours. The strikers, under strict discipline, enforced by the large contingent of World War veterans in their ranks, convened nightly in a mass meeting, to listen to speeches, to conduct organizational business, and to maintain collective morale. They met in the auditorium of the Collegiate Institute, the only structure in town large enough to hold them. To this day, I can still see them: The front four rows on the ground floor filled with veterans wearing berets (this was before the word beret, badge of an old soldier home from the wars, had been downgraded by its use to designate murder-squads in South Vietnam). Quite a few were wearing medals and wound stripes; many were accompanied by wives; the whole assembly had something of the atmosphere of a huge family party; the auditorium was jammed; more veterans parading the aisles, keeping watchful order; the balconies overflowing with men young and old, the feet of those in front hanging through the balustrade; the whole assembly tense but attentive. At the first sign of any disturbance, however minor, even a question asked or some small movement or interruption, the ushers swiftly closed in on the culprit and escorted him from the hall. There was good reason for these precautions. The provincial authorities headed by the Prime Minister and supported by two of the three Toronto newspapers had declared war on the union, and showed signs of using tactics which might lead to provocation and the excuse to use force. A special police contingent was enrolled to deal with what was supposed to be a threat to civil order, and if my recollection serves, there was talk of using some aged tanks of World War I vintage, perhaps in imitation of measures taken by Winston Churchill during the General Strike in Britain 11 years earlier. All this threatened a confrontation which the strike leaders were determined to prevent, and which despite the great pressure imposed they succeeded in preventing. The strike ended peacefully with union recognition granted.

In the meantime, however, two members of the provincial cabinet, the attorney general and the minister of labour, holding views more generally liberal than those of the titular leader of the Liberal party, Mitchell Hepburn,

had resigned in protest against government policy, the latter summing up his own situation in a memorable epigram: "I would rather walk with the workers than ride with General Motors." All this is history now, I suppose taken for granted and largely forgotten.

To assist morale and rally whatever public support was available — and it was needed, considering the hysteria surrounding the press campaign — the strike committee looked around in Toronto for any speakers or public figures who would care to drive down to Oshawa in the evening darkness and address the massed audience with some sympathetic words. Someone on the strike committee — it may have been Charlie Millard, at that time the union's president — must have mentioned the members of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order as a possibility. All I know is that on the afternoon of Wednesday, 14 April, I received a call from John Line, professor of theology at Victoria and Emmanuel College, and a close friend: Some members of the executive of the FCSO were by invitation going down to Oshawa that evening to sit on the platform and say a few words; he had a previous engagement and could not make it; but would I go? It was short notice but I said yes and in fact five of us went: Salem Bland, W.B. Smith, Arthur J. Eagle, Walter Almack, and myself. I was the one layman in the group. At the meeting Charlie Millard read a message from Father Morrow of Oshawa, who was not a member of the Fellowship, regretting his absence due to illness.

We were ushered in, I think by a back door, on to a platform confronting this enormous and intense audience, for the meeting had already been in session for some time — we were late — and the chief union organizer — a CIO official from the States — was giving a low-keyed harangue. I remember being struck by his restrained style and careful choice of words. The chairman then turned to the new arrivals, explained their presence, and invited us to do our piece. What the contribution of my colleagues was on this occasion I do not now recall, largely because they were not reported at the time. On the next day and succeeding days the Toronto press concentrated upon me and what I had said, and perhaps with good reason. The circumstance which prompted me to bring off an oratorical coup — something I am not otherwise very good at — was fortuitous. That day's morning *Globe and Mail*, then edited by George McCullough, had carried a quotation from Premier Mitchell Hepburn which I will give verbatim: "If the CIO wins in Oshawa, it has other plants it will step into. It will be in mines and demoralize that industry and send stocks tumbling." I still had the paper in my hand when I got up to speak. The statement had infuriated me, and when my turn came I read it out to the audience, and then added a rejoinder as follows: "I am an elector of this province and also a taxpayer. Am I to be told that the Prime Minister has enrolled special police and thrown his weight behind General Motors in order to keep the price of stocks from tumbling?"

So far so good. Such words were strong but probably too general to excite undue attention. But then I turned to particulars: "What stocks or other financial interest has either the Prime Minister or other members of the cabinet in

General Motors? What stocks or other financial interest has the Prime Minister or other members of the same body in mines or other heavy industries which the CIO proposes to organize? I do not know the answer but I suggest to you that these are questions to ask not on behalf of the stockholders but of the people of this province."

The audience roared. They recognized a foray, whether judicious or not for myself, into the heart of the enemy's camp. I had carried them with me, and they carried me. As I had sat there before speaking, I had felt the electricity in the meeting, and had responded to it. I had noted the careful, controlled discipline which kept it within bounds. I saw what a strike was all about or at least what I felt it was all about, and I broke out with the words "Can you stand a siege? Can you stand together if this goes over the weekend?" Their reply was thunderous, and I sat down. The union organizer later expressed some astonishment at my effort, which he did not regard as typical of professors, least of all of professors in the United States where he came from.

The bench below the platform with a long table in front of it was filled with a row of reporters from the Ontario and national press, including my friend Graham Spry. Their upturned faces showed a kind of delighted curiosity and anticipation, even as their fingers scribbled. In recollection of what occurred and was said 45 years ago, I have been aided by the fact that the *Toronto Star* was at that time a political foe of the Prime Minister, and took the opportunity to report these particular words of mine within quotation marks with appropriate headlines: "Government given blame if any violence develops." "What stock do Cabinet Ministers hold, Prof. Havelock demands; Scores Hepburn." My questions had in fact cut to the quick. According to my private belief formed in retrospect, they may have had some influence in persuading the government during the next few days that it might be prudent to beat a cautious retreat. At that time, during a depression which still lay heavy upon many areas of industry, something like a boom was on the way in the mining of non-ferrous metals in Northern Ontario, at Sudbury, Kirkland Lake, and Timmins. Unionization of the work force in the area served by the Temiskaming and Northern Ontario Railroad (later rechristened the Northland) was very much at issue, of great immediate concern to investors on the Toronto Stock Exchange. To raise a question of possible financial interest on the part of individuals in the stocks of this comparatively new frontier industry, stocks which in the nature of things were bound to be speculative, was to touch a sensitive nerve, which triggered a swift reaction. Later research has I believe established that the Premier in fact did have some personal involvement in these matters, but that was not known at the time.

The *Toronto Star* report appeared on the Thursday, a day after. On the Friday afternoon the *Toronto Telegram* offered what it called a "suggestion" that the Ontario Government "intended" to make some investigation into what I had said. The *Globe and Mail* of Saturday morning then carried a banner headline: "Investigation ordered of Professor's remarks on Automotive strike"

under which a news story related that the Provincial Secretary, Harry C. Nixon, had announced on the evening of 16 April that "charges" made against the Hepburn Government by Professor Eric Havelock of Victoria College were being brought immediately to the attention of "whatever governing body of the university is responsible for paying the man's salary." This last clause was placed within quotes as Mr. Nixon's actual words. The despatch went on to report that I "had suggested that the government's backing of General Motors in the present strike possibly had been influenced by the shares or stocks which the Prime Minister and members of his cabinet held in the motor company." A statement by Mr. Hepburn himself was then quoted, as being issued the day before: "Neither I nor any member of my government hold a single cent of shares or stock in General Motors or any of its subsidiaries. I have made a careful check and my statement is correct." Duncan McArthur, deputy minister of education, so the despatch continued, had been instructed by Nixon to take up the matter with the university authorities at once, and it ended with a parting shot, one more Nixon quote: "This is one of the most despicable things I have ever heard of."

The noon *Telegram* of that day repeated a summary of the *Globe* story, but the evening edition toned it down considerably. Reference to Nixon was omitted, and the statement was added that while no official action by the government had yet been taken, "it is understood that an official protest of the Professor's remarks is to be forwarded to the Chancellor of the University." These modifications were probably significant, as I shall later explain. It should also be remembered that the *Telegram* was a political supporter of the Tory opposition.

Overall, the precise terms in which the Premier and the news media had responded to my remarks offered an instructive lesson in the difference between a classroom exercise and the rough and tumble of political debate. A successful political operator, of what I might call Grade Two standing, does not use the media for communication but for manipulation. The whole thing had begun with a statement made by the premier himself about mining stocks. All reference to this in the subsequent controversy was avoided, obviously by design. It was this in turn which had prompted my own remarks, in the form of a question, to which I had no answer myself, but which invited a reply by way of information and clarification. The question was then manipulated into the form of an accusatory statement and consistently reported as such, being represented as a "charge" hurled against the government. But I had also given a handle to the government which was eagerly grasped, for by holding firmly to it outraged innocence could be asserted, and my own good faith impugned. I had asked not one question but two. Were any members of the cabinet involved in any way financially with General Motors? Were they involved in any way in mining stocks? To concentrate on the first offered an opportunity to evade the second. How often have I seen a similar situation develop during exchanges on television at presidential press conferences in the United States. The corre-

spondent of the *New York Times* or the Associated Press or whatever, seeking adequate coverage of some current issue or crisis, has two, perhaps three related questions to ask in their logical order. That is his mistake. One of them is awkward, and the respondent cannot afford to reply to it directly. He carefully but eloquently exploits his answers to the other two, the real one gets lost, and the reporter sits down, his allotted time having been used up.

In the nature of things, there was no allotted time for me to point out what was happening and in fact all subsequent treatment of the episode in the press, friendly or hostile, and elsewhere (as I shall narrate) consistently avoided any mention of the mining industry and its possible influence affecting government decisions, even indirectly. Yet this was precisely the issue which the premier's own statement had interjected into the political atmosphere surrounding the Oshawa strike. I fancy that in hindsight he came to regret that impulse which prompted the indiscretion of mentioning it, but this is guesswork on my part.

The *Toronto Star's* original report of my remarks, which had also quoted the Prime Minister, was faithful as far as it went, and provided the spark for the fire which was built under me by the *Star's* competitors in the newspaper field. To do this they made those significant omissions and distortions I have described. But one change they made was in the nature of a correction which was to point towards an area of further complication for myself. The *Star* had described me as a professor of the University of Toronto. Later accounts were careful to note that I was a professor of Victoria College. Both statements were true, taking into account the constitution of the university and the provisions under which Victoria had joined the original confederation. But the second furnished the information pertinently sought from his point of view by Mr. Nixon, namely, who was paying my salary, with the obvious implication that whoever did also had the power to discontinue payment by firing me. The heat of the controversy was now bound to redirect itself to focus on Victoria and its governing authorities, and on my own personal fortunes as a member of the Victoria College teaching staff. What happened next belongs to a second part of this narrative, and will be reserved for later treatment.