

Work, Workers and Working-Class History: A Review Essay

Robert A. Campbell

Volume 23, 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt23re01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Campbell, R. A. (1989). Work, Workers and Working-Class History: A Review Essay. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 23, 221–234.

REVIEW ESSAYS/ NOTES CRITIQUES

Work, Workers and Working-Class History:

A Review Essay

Robert A. Campbell

Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working Class History, 1850-1985* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1986).

Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1986).

The Working Lives Collective, eds., *Working Lives: Vancouver 1886-1986* (Vancouver: New Star Books 1985).

WITH GOOD REASON SCHOLARS now prefer the term "working-class" history to "labour" history. Too much of the history of working people, written by men about men, has been a numbing list of craft unions, strikes, and obscure political organizations — common components of traditional labour history. A few years ago Bryan Palmer still had to insist in italics that "*working-class life extends beyond labour organizations and labour politics.*"¹

¹Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983), 3. Palmer dedicated *The Character of Class Struggle* to the late Herbert Gutman who, fifteen years ago, said the emphasis on union history "encouraged labor historians to spin a cocoon around American workers, isolating them from their won particular subcultures and from the larger national culture." See Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, 78 (1973), 536.

Robert A. Campbell, "Work, Workers and Working-Class History: A Review Essay," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 221-234.

The majority of Canadian workers have been, continue to be and likely will remain outside of the ranks of organized labour. Moreover, while these three books show that wage labour remains the foundation of working-class experience, a fuller understanding of that experience must include both the rhythms of life on and off the job, and the often neglected fact that "the working class is made up of both men and women." (*On the Job*, 26)

In regard to these books two immediate questions come to mind. First, in general is each worth reading? Second, and more specific, what do these books tell us about current directions in working-class history?

I

HERON'S AND STOREY'S *On the Job* (OTJ) has much to recommend. Its dozen original essays look at the evolution of the labour process in a variety of work settings from the 1850s to the 1980s, from the railways of Canada West to a Burger King in Ontario. While the book has a central Canadian focus, some of the articles consider other areas of Canada. Better represented than the regions, however, are women. Four of the articles discuss the work of women in the factory, the office, the restaurant, and the home.

As well as solicit some fine articles, the editors have contributed an essay on the steel industry and another that serves as a comprehensive introduction. In a surprisingly fresh way, the editors discuss four distinct periods of capitalist development over the last 150 years, as well as analyze the relationship of economic development to changes in the labour process. The introduction also includes their key concepts for a general theory of the labour process.

On the Job is good, but it has some flaws. First, I was surprised at what is not included. Except only briefly in Veronica Strong-Boag's article on work in the home, nothing is said about the relationship between work and the increasing influence of mass consumerism after World War I. What goods were produced, how they were produced, and the relationship among work, home, and family were dramatically affected by the change in emphasis from capital to consumer goods. This major shift should warrant more than passing mention.

Second, this book seems somewhat removed from the real worlds of work and workers. A decade ago Ken Kusterer argued that "analyses of the work process must be grounded in the experiences of working people."² Yet even the two participant-observer articles in *On the Job* seem detached and abstract. One wonders if many workers would recognize themselves.

The abstraction in part stems from the relationship of labour process theory to Marxism. As Paul Thompson has noted, "labour process theory is strongly connected to Marxism, and Marxism is ultimately a theory of social change, as well as social structure." Marxist analysis is rooted in both theory and practice, the

²Ken Kusterer, *Know-How on the Job: The Important Working Knowledge of "Unskilled" Workers* (Boulder, CO 1978), 191.

participation in mass political movements. But in North America, Marxist analysis, in Kusterer's words, has been set "adrift in the abstract world of academic discourse" and is "detached from its only verification principle, political practice." In the rarefied atmosphere of the university, academic theorists "lack any institutionalized means through which workers can tell them they are wrong."³

Even if Marxist historians were to take to the barricades, most of the abstractions in their work would likely remain. Unlike sociologists, historians can only rarely interview their subjects of study. Past labour processes cannot be observed; they have to be reconstructed from whatever evidence is available. Further, as we all know, the past does not speak for itself. Its significance is the product of the analysis and theoretical frameworks that make sense of the data. Theory gives meaning to the past; without it we are left with anecdotal antiquarianism.

Finally, while *On the Job* goes a long way to correct the unrelenting grimness of Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, its editors and contributors still seem too taken with Marx's immiseration thesis, the inevitability of misery for workers under capitalism. Again, to rely on Kusterer, work is both constructive and destructive, alienating and affirming. People who take pride in their work are not necessarily fools displaying false consciousness. Job involvement reaffirms the value of labour and labourers; it is "a constant touchstone against which every worker can test the specific capitalist relations she experiences and find them wanting...."⁴

Like *On the Job*, *The Character of Class Struggle (CS)* covers a broad sweep of Canadian history in its eight articles. It has a better regional balance than *On the Job*, but the experience of women receives less emphasis. The general theme of the book is what editor Bryan Palmer calls in his introduction the "essential insight" of Marx and Engels, the continuous battle between 'oppressor and oppressed,' or the class struggle. (9) Unlike the Heron and Storey book, however, only two of the articles in Palmer's reader are original. The rest have been published elsewhere and five of those have been abridged for this book. One of the original essays is Palmer's analysis of the British Columbia Solidarity movement. He has also contributed a brief introduction that is both an explanation for the book's focus and an historical overview. But its few pages pale in comparison to the information and insights of the introduction in *On the Job*.

Judging from the articles chosen for this book, Palmer sees class struggle in fairly narrow terms. At least five of the eight articles deal with that struggle from the point of view of union/management disputes. Individually most of the articles are fine, but their grouping has resulted in a book that seems traditional in scope. *The Character of Class Struggle* is part of McClelland and Stewart's Canadian Social History Series. According to the backcover the purpose of the "innovative

³Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work: An Introduction to debates on the Labour Process* (London 1983), 91; Kusterer, *Know-How*, 190.

⁴Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1974); Kusterer, *Know-How*, 193.

series" is to increase "the general reader's appreciation of our past and [open] up new areas of study for students and scholars." General readers may appreciate the abridge articles, but those in the field will find little new.

Working Lives is different from the other two books, whose articles were written mainly by scholars for scholars. The nine university and community college academics responsible for *Working Lives*, produced in celebration of Vancouver's 1986 centenary, wanted their book to appeal to both professionals and the working people of Vancouver whose history it recounts. It is lavishly illustrated with photographs, and the 50 contributors include other academics, students, trade union activists, artists, and ordinary workers. The book opens with a comprehensive introduction that covers the period from the 1860s to the 1980s. Each of the book's three sections also has a short introduction. Following it are over 24, short one-page articles interspersed with an almost equal number of illustrations. To ensure academic credibility, the four main essays were written by university historians and three are footnoted.

Of the books under consideration *Working Lives* makes the point clearest, by showing not just asserting, that working-class history is more than trade unionism. With its sections on Working, Organizing, and Living, *Working Lives* joins traditional labour history with social history. As one might expect, the short articles, or "zingers," vary in quality, but collectively they are a wealth of information about many aspects of labouring life in Vancouver over the last century.

Yet the book also seems disjointed. None of the "zingers" can be comprehensive in a few hundred words, and the result is a barrage of information, in a variety of writing styles, the leaves one's head reeling. The introductions only partially compensate as they tend to be more descriptive than analytical, and are quite distinct from each other. Indeed, they sometimes are contradictory. Definitely this book is best read in bits, with plenty of time spent dwelling on the photographs. As Bryan Palmer has noted elsewhere,⁵ the photographs have not been used particularly critically, but they offer a variety of images of a century of working-class life.

II

TO ASSESS THE DIRECTION of working-class history from these books is not an easy task. None of the three is a monograph with a nicely developed argument, and the contents of each reflect the diverse interests of the numerous contributors. A ship's caulker defending his nearly obsolete craft on the Halifax docks in the 1880s, a Chinese child fleeing the taunts of white kids in Vancouver in the 1920s, and a 1980s teenage worker dunking french fries at an Ontario Burger King are far removed from each other. Still, if we look at the books together, some important themes emerge about work and the labour process, social life, worker resistance, and the state's role in capital-labour relations.

⁵See his review of *Working Lives* in *BC Studies*, 73 (Spring 1987), 65-7.

At a basic level all of the books deal with the impact of wage labour or "selling one's ability to labour to employers who view that labour-power as a factor of production to be used as intensively and cheaply as possible in their process of accumulation." Any good capitalist strives to obtain the most productivity for the lowest possible cost, that is, extract as much surplus value as possible from labour. How much value can be extracted partially depends on how much control employers exert over the labour processes of their employees.⁶ Workers, however, usually have had their own notions about a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. According to Heron and Storey, a "frontier of control," has emerged from "the ongoing process of initiative and resistance between workers and their bosses." (OTJ, 3)

Explicit in many of the articles in *On the Job* is a reevaluation of Harry Braverman's assertion that the labour process under monopoly capitalism has been one of continual deskilling and increased managerial control. Gregory S. Kealey argues that Canadian printers between 1850 and 1907 represented "the extreme example of the successful skilled workers who to a large degree maintained their societal positions, despite the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution." (OTJ, 75) Their industry was transformed by steam-powered presses and typesetting machines, but the "printers...won many of their struggles with capital" (92) in part by means of a vigorous trade union movement that allowed workers to retain control over the new technology. Similarly, David Frank concludes that the "persistent local tradition of workers' control" among Cape Breton coal miners enabled them to pursue "an aggressive strategy" in the 1920s, when labour was in general retreat. (OTJ, 75, 92, 102, 119)

In light of many of these articles a simple deskilling thesis will not hold up either, for "the arrival of new technology did not necessarily translate into mindless, unskilled, machine-paced assembly lines...." In their analysis of the twentieth-century Ontario steel industry Craig Heron and Robert Storey emphasize that mechanization eliminated the most skilled and the least skilled jobs, but it created many, semi-skilled positions. According to Graham Lowe, wholesale deskilling cannot be applied to office mechanization between 1900 and 1930. He argues that mechanization usually increased office staffs, that machines eliminated some monotonous work, and that the skill degradation applied to a small group of "office machine operators" (virtually all women) was confined to large corporate and government offices. Ian Radforth goes even further. He claims that northern Ontario bushworkers and their union hailed mechanization after World War II because, while it eliminated jobs, it made their work easier and produced "higher and steadier" incomes for those left. Mechanization also allowed bushworkers to acquire new machine-oriented skills to replace those hand-related ones they lost. (OTJ, 29, 218, 198, 267)

To make matters more complex, skill has social as well as technical com-

⁶ Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1979), 11-16.

ponents. For example, in the 1920s the "semi-skilled" steel workers required less than 90 minutes of training. Compare that to the Ontario bushworkers whose traditional cutting and skidding abilities were difficult to learn and allowed for a great deal of autonomy, features usually associated with skilled labour. Yet, because so many men possessed these skills and because their work was outdoors and manual in nature, loggers were regarded as "unskilled" and their talents went "largely unrecognized and unrewarded." (*OTJ*, 210, 251)

Even more significant has been the gender component of skill. Heron and Story point out that "the considerable skills of women have been systematically downgraded within the the particular ideology of industrial-capitalist society." Two articles on the clothing industry in Quebec add precision to that generality. Mercedes Steedman argues that "the notion of skill in the clothing industry" between 1890 and 1940 "often had less to do with the job itself than the sex and bargaining position of the worker...." The role of women in the industry reflected the patriarchal structures of society. Women were paid very low wages and simply denied access to the most skilled jobs of cutter and presser, which suited both male bosses and workers. Male workers saw women as peripheral to the workforce and at times a threat to their jobs. Those fears meshed nicely with the employers' desires for a flexible pool of unskilled labour. (*OTJ*, 29, 152)

In the Palmer book Gail Brandt also looks at the sexual division of labour in the clothing industry in roughly the same period and concludes that it was the result of the "interrelationship between ideas about gender" and capitalism's need for a cheap, reserve labour force. Moreover, she argues that the gender hierarchy was immutable; the "highest-ranking production positions" remained a male preserve. (133) But gender identification of jobs was flexible. Deskilling and feminization often went hand in hand, although not necessarily in a linear way. Before the factory system, for example, spinning was women's work, but the heavy, complex factory machines of the early nineteenth century masculinized the trade. As those machines were replaced with faster, simpler ones later in the century, women again became spinners, and the status of the job declined.

The experience of women in the clothing industry underscores Heron's and Storey's assertion that because of patriarchy, women "have always experienced class differently from men." This difference is most apparent in domestic labour whose rhythms are removed from industry but are structured by it. Homemakers must adapt to the patterns of wage workers. In one of the more imaginative articles, Veronica Strong-Boag attempts to define the work processes associated with domestic labour, an area dismissed by most historians as "relatively insignificant and essentially uninteresting." That disinterest, however, only emphasizes the contradiction between the low status of the housewife and her role in the maintenance of the "structures of social and economic power." Strong-Boag maintains that since "domestic labour of all kinds lies at the core of human relationships" it must be studied seriously to "help restore awareness of the complications of woof and warp that unite the various worlds of labour." (*OTJ*, 3, 125, 145)

Strong-Boag also wrote the introduction to the "Living" section of *Working Lives*. Working-class life "has always meant a good deal more than reporting for paid work. Gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion and health all helped determine what happened at home and in the neighbourhood." (89) Strong-Boag and Andrea Smith commissioned a nicely balanced set of "zingers" for the "Living" section. They include both the expected and unusual themes of social history. Courtship, marriage, and family life are prominent as are child care, education, and recreation. These topics are enhanced by the effort to give some sense of the experience of Chinese, Japanese, Greek, and Indo-Canadian Vancouverites.

What stands out in *Working Lives*, however, are the oddities such as Elizabeth Lee's discussion of "smoking concerts," for men only, organized by the Great War Veterans Association, and Ian Hunt's inspiring description of night schools promoted by the Socialist Labor Party. Having attended the tenth annual Vancouver Folk Music Festival, I was pleasantly surprised to read Marjory Lang's tale of Nellie McCay's efforts in founding the Vancouver Folksong Festival in 1933. McCay's purpose was to "encourage the preservation of folk traditions" and "to reduce radical intolerance." The local press referred to the festival as "Vancouver's Little League of Nations," with no pun intended. (139,125, 135)

To mix social history with traditional labour history does more than give us a broader view of working class life. It helps us understand what Heron and Storey call the "dialectic of resistance and consent" on the job. (30) Bryan Palmer points out that while "there has been more to history than class war," the "dependency on wage labour has rooted workers in common experiences that have often resulted in class confrontations pitting labour against capital." (9-10) This is the essence of the class struggle.

Confrontation, however, has been varied, flexible, and often subtle. What Palmer calls "overt confrontation" has rarely been a practical option in Canada. Heron and Storey emphasize the mistake of characterizing "workers simply as either passive victims of seething rebels." Their attitudes are more complex, and they "bring to their jobs...some kind of gut-level spirit of 'them and us,' nourished in working-class communities...." Religion, family, and traditional politics — reinforced with economic insecurity and outright coercion — have promoted generally a so-called consciousness of "consent." But "there has not been a single, permanent shift in working-class consciousness that resulted in complete submission and deference to capitalist authority." (30-1) Since Confederation, mass confrontation between labour and capital has surged and receded; the explosiveness of 1919, for example, gave way to the quiescent 1920s. But confrontation also occurs through various types of worker resistance, what Paul Thompson calls "informal *and* organized opposition to management and employers in the labour process."⁷

For most workers, especially the unorganized, the main form of resistance has

⁷Thompson, *The Nature of Work*, xvi.

been quitting. In his article in *Class Struggle*, Craig Heron argues that one reason Hamilton steel owners turned to more machinery in the early twentieth century was because of what a local paper called the 'large roving element in the labor market.' Moving on, to another job or possibly back home for immigrants, was an "informal form of working-class protest." (71-2). "Protest," yes, but little more. Quitting is usually an act of individual disinterest or frustration, not the product of collective resistance. More important, while quitting may have influenced the evolution of the labour process in the steel industry because of the rapid adoption of machinery, it certainly did not change who controlled the labour process. As Heron admits, "unlike many craftsmen in the metal trades [Hamilton steelworkers], never contested the fundamentals of workplace organization and authority...." (89)

Quitting takes on a different perspective if we examine its relationship to women workers. Until after World War II the dominant values of Canadian society dictated that women were a peripheral part of the wage-labour force. Full-time wage labour was for unmarried women, a precursor to a woman's real job as wife and mother. Once married, women were expected to quit or were fired, and they returned to the workforce usually only because of financial necessity or national emergency. In the wage-labour economy woman's role was to provide a flexible supply of cheap labour. Male workers saw women as both an ideological and an economic threat to their well being. While women workers were not powerless, their structural relationship to the wage economy and patriarchal values made collective resistance difficult. Women workers were divided from men and often from each other.

The changes after World War II were both social and economic; in short, fewer married women left the wage workforce, and more women in general became full-time wage workers. These changes were at the core of the revitalized women's movement of the 1960s. Heather Maroney takes this interpretation one step further in an article that is admittedly more polemical than analytical. She argues that in the 1970s the "radicalization of working women" produced a "working-class feminism" that was distinct from the middle-class, "university-based feminism of the sixties." Maroney sees working-class feminism "rooted in the workplace" and oriented to the "practical achievement" of "more limited goals." (CS, 160). The foundation of working-class feminism was the "dramatic increases" in the number women over 25 with children who worked and their consequent union involvement. Most important, she links permanent wage labour and union militancy. Permanent work had enhanced the collective resistance of women.

Political activity also has constituted a form of worker resistance. According to Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, the Knights of Labor were active in federal and provincial politics as soon as they entered Canada in the early 1880s. Political action was part of their growing "movement culture of opposition and alternative." The Knights enjoyed "some success," certainly enough for Prime Minister John A. Macdonald to say in 1886 that the threats to the Tories were "Riel, Home Rule, the Knights of Labor and the Scott Act." Yet the Knights "did not

overcome all the tensions in the working-class world. Partisan politics had established a deep hold on Canadian workers...." In other words, workers continued to vote mainly Liberal or Tory. (CS, 46, 55, 52)

But the knife of political opposition did not always cut just between "workingmen's" and mainstream parties. In the introduction to the "Organizing" section of *Working Lives* Keith Ralston states that not only did many Vancouver workers continue to support Liberals or Tories in the late nineteenth century, but that working-class political groups were divided between "labourist" and "socialist" elements. Labourists essentially accepted the tenets of liberal democracy and wanted a better economic and political deal for workers. Socialist, more with words than deeds, demanded the fundamental restructuring of society. The result by 1900 in Vancouver was "fierce competition" between the two groups. The labourists had more provincial and federal electoral success, but the socialists dominated the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council. Mainstream candidates continued to win the elections.

The most successful form of worker resistance to capital, at least in terms of better wages and working conditions, has been the trade union movement. Particularly with craft unions, however, that resistance often has been narrowly defined. In a thoughtful study of Halifax waterfront workers in the 1880s, Ian McKay compares the lot of skilled craftsmen, "labour aristocrats," with the unskilled longshoremen. Faced with a surplus of labour and increased competition from steam technology, sail workers — riggers, shipwrights, caulkers — organized to create an artificial labour scarcity and to retard the growing obsolescence of their trades. In the short run, they were fairly successful, but their unions were never "progressive, outward-looking bodies." (CS, 25) They showed no interest or sympathy for the plight of the longshoremen, who, because of the dominance of casual labour, had no control over the labour market. The exclusive craft workers greeted the doomed 1884 longshoremen's strike with absolute silence.

In addition to the assertion that no evidence exists on the Halifax waterfront of skilled workers acting as a progressive vanguard of the "culture of control," McKay emphasizes the unique features of class struggle under merchant capitalism. He sees local, merchant capitalism as conservative and fragmented, and "fragmentation made unified opposition impossible." Opposition tended to be "tragically isolated, short-lived, and non-cumulative." Monopoly, industrial capitalism may have degraded skills (or at least rearranged them), but it also allowed the joining of "masses of workers in a far more aggressive search for political and social alternatives." (CS, 36) The alternatives were often posed by industrial unions, which, particularly in western Canada, tended to be more militant and radical than the conservative craft unions.

The argument that industrial capitalism offered more possibilities for collective resistance is supported by Gregory S. Kealey's reinterpretation of the events of 1919. He harshly regards the traditional view of 1919 as a western revolt as one of the "dead ends of previous Canadian interpretation." (CS, 107) The labour

upheaval, symbolized in Canada by the Winnipeg General Strike, was an international event, neither confined to Canada nor one region in Canada. The underlying cause of the revolt was the "structural transformation of the working class" before World War I. The "concentration and centralization of capital" in the early twentieth century "stimulated an enhanced capacity for collective resistance at the workplace." (112) The resistance was not only collective, culminating in the Winnipeg strike and numerous sympathy strikes; it was also radical, resulting in the One Big Union.

With his dismissal of regional variations, Kealey overstates his case as much as those who have argued the western revolt thesis.⁸ More significant, though, is his view of the colossal failure of 1919. The "great silence" (to use Yves Lequin's phrase) of the 1920s was not unique to Canada. Kealey argues that "the seeds of industrial unionism would survive the defeat of 1919 to sprout later.... Defeats should thus not be confused with failure." (113, 114) Later proved to be the 1930s when disenchanted groups of farmers, workers, and socialists formed the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which was dedicated to the democratic demise of capitalism. In addition, the Congress of Industrial Organizations came north to organize Canadian workers. That led to the 1940 creation of the Canadian Congress of Labour, an often militant federation of industrial unions. The labour shortage of World War II enhanced worker resistance, and, most important, led to a new relationship among capital, labour and the state.

All of these books are concerned with the actions of the state in capital/labour relations. In fact, Heron and Storey see the role of the state as a key concept in any comprehensive theory of the labour process. They argue that governments have "facilitated employers' innovation and transformation of work processes...." (32) with immigration, education policies and direct financial assistance. Often more immediately obvious, however, have been the state's coercive powers; courts and cops have traditionally aided capital, not labour.

While "coercion has overshadowed legitimation," during times "of intense class conflict" the state has mediated between capital and labour "to restore social harmony." (*OTJ*, 32) Such was the case during World War II when the federal government was determined to prevent labour strife. The government's main weapon was compulsory conciliation, which in theory was meant to achieve a settlement before a work stoppage occurred. Yet, in his analysis of conciliation during World War II Jeremy Webber concludes that the government's primary concern became the prevention of "all strikes, even those after the normal conciliation procedures." (*CS*, 158) That desire and continued pressure from the CCF forced the government, reluctantly, to intervene more directly between employers and workers. The good result for labour was P.C. 1003 (February 1944), the cabinet order which legitimized union recognition and collective bargaining with a com-

⁸For examples of the western revolt thesis see David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations and the General Strike* (Montreal 1974); and A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement* (Toronto 1978).

prehensive labour code.

P.C. 1003 was the beginning of a post-war consensus among organized labour, capital and the state. Created in an expanding economy, the essence of the agreement was a loose net of social welfare services and the "rule of law" in the workplace. The rules were embodied in the 1948 Industrial Relations and Disputes Investigation Act. The legitimization of collective bargaining helped unions establish themselves, negotiate higher wages and better working conditions, and create grievance procedures to reduce the arbitrary whims of foremen and supervisors. As Robert McDonald notes in the "Working" introduction in *Working Lives (WL)*, the post-war years were "unusually beneficial to wage earners," and to organized labour for that matter. (30)

But the attitude expressed in all of these books is that the contract was a mixed blessing. McDonald states that it "did not diminish the essential vulnerability of workers within the capitalist system." (31) Higher wages and better conditions gave workers no more control over the labour process; management rights clauses in collective agreements were explicit about that. In addition, the contract bureaucratized and restrained union activities. Often the grievance procedure proved to be "slow, insensitive, expensive, and ineffective in meeting workers' concerns." (*OTJ*, 22) The general policy of work now, grieve later meant a suspended worker remained suspended until the grievance was resolved. Union leaders often found themselves in the awkward position of policing workers and suppressing wildcat work stoppages. In retrospect, Palmer argues, the "benefits of the 1940s were as much attempts to control and rationalize the labour market as they were humanitarian innovations...." (*CS*, 178)

The post-war consensus began to break down in the 1970s because of economic recession and renewed worker militancy. Just as important, McDonald argues that government and business never really developed "new attitudes concerning workers' rights." (*WL*, 31) By the mid 1970s labour was again under attack, first with federal wage controls, and then increasingly with the "restraint" of social services and the undermining of trade union rights. Particularly hard hit have been women, who never benefited as much during the relatively good years and have paid a higher price since then in lost jobs, lower wages and fewer social services.

The most vivid example of the abandonment of the post-war settlement has been the "new" economic and political reality of British Columbia's Social Credit government. In July 1983, the Socreds launched a frontal assault on organized labour — particularly in the public sector — and a variety of minority, women's and welfare groups. The attack provoked a strong response that culminated in the creation of the Solidarity movement with its labour (Operation Solidarity) and community (Solidarity Coalition) wings.

The Character of Class Struggle includes Bryan Palmer's controversial analysis of Solidarity's rise and fall. By his own admission this article is a "politically subdued version" (*CS*, 243) of his more recent *Solidarity: The Rise an*

*Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia.*⁹ His Trotskyist interpretation is far more prominent in the book.

Palmer argues that Solidarity was “created within a particular historical context, a product of a specific economic and political conjuncture.” (CS, 177) Solidarity’s labour leaders matured during the post-war settlement and ultimately were trapped by concepts and policies that no longer applied in the 1980s. They “carved up the class struggle into its economic (trade union) and socio-political (electoral) halves.” (199) But they were not just unperceptive; they were opportunistic “reformers” who would not risk a political general strike. Labour leaders used the escalating militancy of the movement to bargain a compromise that benefited only trade unionists, and even those gains were minimal. The issues important to the community groups of the Solidarity Coalition — from welfare rates to bus fares — were abandoned. In the so-called Kelowna accord a “movement was bartered for two bills and a contract;” “Solidarity’s failure was a failure of leadership.” (199)

Palmer’s harsh condemnation of the Solidarity leadership has been challenged.¹⁰ Moreover, his implicit argument that the broad coalition of trade unionists, professionals, and community activists wanted a general strike is open to question. But there is something more important than naming those who should be (or should not be) skewered for the lack of a general strike. Palmer shows that BC’s labour leaders were not very good at their supposed expertise — the art of the possible, negotiating the best deal by playing the right cards at the right time. The *threat* of a general strike was a good hand that was abandoned; labour folded. The extent of the 1983 defeat has only recently become apparent. After another electoral victory, the Socreds again attacked in spring 1987 with a new, anti-union labour code and a backdoor assault on the BC Teachers’ Federation. While labour was able to organize a one-day, province-wide walkout, its success was limited to winning some amendments to the legislation.

None of these books offers a particularly bright portrait of working life in recent years. *On the Job*, for instance, contains two participant-observer articles. In the late 1970s Don Wells worked for nine months at an unidentified Canadian Ford plant. As car skeletons came by on the assembly line he ground bubbled welds at a rate of “two hundred and sixty an hour, two thousand, six hundred a day....” (348) He worked “Ford Time,” the constant repetition of a simple task at a pace set by the machinery. Wells found only minimal worker resistance to Ford Time: minor sabotage, collective absenteeism and wildcat strikes that nearly always led to suspension or firing of the leaders. He also found a workforce fragmented by ethnicity, race, language and apathy. As a result, he is quite critical of Marx’s assertion of emerging class struggle at the point of production. Although at his Ford

⁹Vancouver, 1987.

¹⁰See for example, John Shields, “The Solidarity Experience: Challenges for B.C. Labour in the 1980’s,” unpublished paper presented at the Fourth B.C. Studies Conference, November 1986, 20-3; Cliff Andstein, “Fantasy — not History” *New Directions*, 3 (August-September 1987), 30-1.

plant "worker resistance has never been eliminated, it has largely been contained within a pattern of little victories and big defeats." (345)

Ester Reiter's description of technology and the labour process at an Ontario Burger King, where she worked in 1980-81, is a capitalist's dream come true. Restaurants used to involve a "complex hierarchy" of jobs with various levels of skill and training. But in fast-food restaurants "machines...assume a central place" in the production process. (*OTJ*, 312) Workers require few skills, and most jobs can be learned quite quickly. For fast-food outlets cross-training is important, so that workers can do all or most of the jobs. The goal is to make workers as similar as possible in skills, "attitudes, disposition, and appearance." Labour costs are kept down with the use of minimum-wage, part-time workers who work many short shifts. At Reiter's Burger King 75 per cent of the workers were teenagers and the rest were married women of mixed backgrounds.

Reiter saw little worker resistance at Burger King. Quitting was the dominant form of protest; 11 of 94 employees quit every two weeks, and Reiter's boss offered workers \$10.00 bounties for employment referrals. Replacing workers, however, was not a serious problem. This meant the company did not have to improve wages or working conditions. Reiter claims that more attention was paid to maintaining the machinery than the workers. She concludes that the Burger King worker is "an increasingly typical kind of worker, in the one area of the economy that continues to grow — the service sector." Moreover, the "Burger King system represents a major triumph for capital: it...has succeeded in reducing its work force to a set of interchangeable pieces." (324)

Even *Working Lives* has some grim conclusions. In the general introduction Allen Seager considers Expo '86 significant because it threw "into bold relief...the looming problem of reduced living standards and structural unemployment caused by the 'technological revolution' under unplanned capitalism." In BC "relentless technology had become the new religion, or, in the words of Premier Bill Bennett — the New Reality." (23)

Robert McDonald assesses the serious consequences of a "new wave of technological change" based on the "semiconductor revolution," and especially the microprocessor, the heart of calculators, bank machines, and home computers. Microprocessors accelerate automation, and control over machines is thus transferred from people to other machines. Echoing Braverman, McDonald argues that "the final degradation of labour" occurs when "workers become little more than machine tenders." Those are the lucky with jobs; for thousands of others automation means unemployment. The effects of technological change on workers shows that the "the basic relationship between employees and owners has endured" and the "essential powerlessness of Vancouver's working people continues." (*WL*, 33)

The tone of Seager's and McDonald's comments is understandable for this decade has not been kind to working people, particularly those outside of central

Canada.¹¹ The rapidly expanding economy that allowed for at least some redistribution of wealth in the post-war years has stagnated. Neo-conservatives with political power have used continued economic malaise to champion a deregulated marketplace and shrunken public sector, and to promote divisions among various groups of working people. Their success has been more muted in Canada than in Britain or the United States, but they have been continually on the offensive.

Still, as far as historical writing about working people is concerned, we should be optimistic. Particularly with the analysis of the evaluation of the labour process, Canadian working-class history has left behind its limiting trade union emphasis. Moreover, we are slowly acquiring a better sense of the participation of women, as wage workers and as home workers, whose lives were separated from the rhythms of industry but ultimately controlled by it. The coalescence of traditional labour history with social (more specifically, family) history is encouraging, for it should help give more precision to notions of working-class culture and the relationship of specific subcultures to the larger society. Finally, we have a better sense of worker resistance, which certainly includes both informal and organized opposition to management. Ultimately these books show that the working-class experience is subtle, rich, and complex. But then, workers are people first.

¹¹On the other hand Veronica Strong-Boag concludes her essay in *Working Lives* with the optimistic assertion that "Vancouver's working people have a long history of solidarity. Their courage, ingenuity and co-operation holds promise for the future." (97)