Acadiensis

ACADIENSIS

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Volume 23, numéro 1, autumn 1993

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad23_1re04

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Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)
1712-7432 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Leier, M. (1993). Labour Struggles. *Acadiensis*, *23*(1), 180–187.

Labour Struggles

LABOUR HISTORY PLACES CLASS and class struggle at the heart of its subject matter. Because it is possible to interpret class struggle in many ways, and to draw very different lessons from it, the discipline has been the most contentious and ornery field in Canadian history. Its practioners study and sometimes support every conceivable political strain from Toryism and Lib-Labism to socialism and syndicalism, and the early polemical battles within the field have set the tone for a generation. Even labelling the subject labour history provokes an argument from those who prefer to be called historians of the working class. But partly because labour history is so heated and diverse, it continues to be innovative and lively. The books reviewed in this essay demonstrate a wide range of theoretical perspectives and an equally wide range of historiographical perspectives, ranging from biography and oral history to social and institutional history, and written by both academic and popular authors.

James Naylor stakes out his theoretical assumptions and methodology clearly and concisely in *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914-1925* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1991). In a well-written introduction, Naylor attacks the notion of western exceptionalism, that is the idea that conditions in western Canada produced a labour and political movement that was unique in its radicalism and protest. In the rest of his book, Naylor draws upon several recent themes in labour history to explain and analyze organized labour in this region, demonstrating that Ontario workers too fought against the yoke of capitalism.

The author shows considerable skill in combining the strongest elements of the old and the new labour history. As with the so-called first generation of Canadian labour historians, Naylor focuses primarily on labour's institutions, its unions, leaders, councils, newspapers and parties. But he examines these institutions through the prisms of the new labour history. Drawing on the theoretical insights of the second generation, Naylor shows that the 1919 strikes were much more than localized attempts to win higher wages. They were part of a national and international wave of revolt spawned by monopoly capital's attempts to control and deskill the work process. Ontario workers, like their counterparts in the west, built on their traditions and organizations, and in certain conditions were able, even keen, to move beyond craft unions and pure and simple unions to militant and radical forms of protest on the job, in the community and at the polls. After laying down this material base for labour's revolt, Naylor analyses the discourse of workers to demonstrate how language and rhetoric framed their demands. Told by employers and governments that the war was fought for democracy, labour in the post-war period insisted that democracy be extended to include the workplace. As the author puts it, the definition of democracy "was itself an object of struggle" in the post-war reconstruction (p. 5). Particularly interesting is Naylor's discussion of women and the new democracy, where he outlines both the advances and setbacks in the struggle for women's rights.

Despite its attention to the relatively recent themes of language, work process and gender, the book offers few arguments that are new or provocative. The work

Mark Leier, "Labour Struggles", *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 1 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 180-187.

process/deskilling argument is probably the accepted model by now, and the sections on language and women in the labour movement do not break new theoretical ground. Nor is it clear why Naylor explicitly sets out to joust with the straw man of western exceptionalism. The work of several historians over the last 15 years has demonstrated that class consciousness and class conflict do not fit neatly into regional and occupational patterns. Instead, they spill across the Canadian landscape in ways that defy simple description and analysis as awareness of class and class conflict varied considerably over time, industry and location. But by focusing our early attention on the dated claims of western exceptionalism, Naylor invites comparison between east and west. In making this comparison, the contention that the two regions were similar is weakened. For Naylor's chief argument is that Ontario workers kept well within the bounds of labourism in this period; no strong socialist movement emerged; syndicalism was almost non-existent. Although the labour movement pressed hard on the job and at the polls for reform, there is little evidence of a revolutionary consciousness. Yet this was precisely the point that western exceptionalism tried to make — that the west was more radical, more revolutionary and more socialist than the east. Instead of destroying this claim, Naylor seems to have reinforced it.

Apart from this minor criticism, *The New Democracy* is an insightful, well-written and extremely useful book that deserves a close reading. One of its strengths is that it shows that it can be a very long way from reformist demands for better wages and job control to revolution. This observation has been blurred by the attention paid by historians to the work process. The blurring stems from the tendency of many labour historians to interpret the struggles over the work process as a kind of implicit revolutionary activity. When left-wing historians stopped asking "why was there no socialism?" they turned their attention to what workers actually did. By examining the shop floor and the politics that sprang from it, they were able to demonstrate that workers did have a kind of class consciousness and were not quiescent. But in emphasizing the battles for control of the work process, these historians have tended to conflate protest with revolutionary consciousness. This is accurate to a point, as struggles for control over how the job will be done go to the root of managerial authority. But it is easy to take this too far. After all, the Gompers philosophy of "more, more, more" and the pure and simple union demands for higher wages and shorter hours can also be interpreted as radical demands for the redistribution of wealth. The issue of workers' radicalism, however, is not decided by whether historians can interpret a particular set of demands as having revolutionary implications. It is whether workers can be shown to have drawn the inferences themselves.

That a socialist movement did exist outside of the west is certainly demonstrated in Nicholas Fillmore's *Maritime Radical: The Life and Times of Roscoe Fillmore* (Toronto, Between the Lines, 1992). Fillmore has crafted a biography that contributes much to our understanding of early Canadian socialism. A journalist by trade, the author has based the book on the papers and autobiography left by his grandfather. He has also drawn upon academic labour history to provide the wider context and analysis. The result is an entertaining and

insightful study not only of one man's life but also of the nature of Canadian radical politics from the early 1900s to the 1960s.

Born in New Brunswick in 1887, at age 19 Roscoe Fillmore travelled to the western provinces in search of work. There he worked as a railway navvy and harvest hand. In the cities and towns, he came across organizers for the Socialist Party of Canada and the Industrial Workers of the World speaking on street corners and at public meetings. When he returned to New Brunswick, Fillmore helped organize an SPC local, spoke at public meetings and planned tours and speaking engagements for socialist organizers such as Wilfred Gribble and the IWW's Big Bill Haywood. With the decline of these organizations after 1917, Fillmore joined the Communist Party of Canada. He supported the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and in the 1920s went there to participate in the great, ill-fated industrial experiment in Kuzbas, Siberia. In subsequent chapters, the author outlines Roscoe's involvement with the Farmer-Labor Party and his candidacy under the banner of the Labor-Progressive Party. By the late 1940s, however, he was, like so many others, disillusioned with the Soviet Union. Around 1950, he left the LPP, but continued to be an independent radical, always critical of capitalism and the authoritarian left. The author does an excellent job of recreating the events of the tumultuous political world from 1906 to 1950. Unlike many academic historians, he gives the reader a sense of the enthusiasm and hope of those years, a gut feeling of what it must have felt like to participate in the heady swirl of revolutionary politics.

But this book is more than entertainment. We are given an insider's look at the SPC and learn a great deal of how it functioned at the local, personal level. In some ways, it challenges some of the accepted wisdom on the SPC. For however much Roscoe Fillmore's life may have resembled a fiction writer's conception of the archetypal radical, in fact it was hardly typical of the Canadian working class. Fillmore had 11 years of schooling, and this alone made him rather different. As late as the 1950s, the average Canadian male received only eight years. His father was a farmer and logger for a time, but bought and ran a nursery when Roscoe was in his late teens. Though it was a struggling small business that suffered the ups and downs of the marketplace, it did generate enough money to send Roscoe's two half-sisters to college. Roscoe himself left New Brunswick not out of economic necessity but for adventure. After his *Wanderjahre*, he returned to help run the family business, and later managed a larger business before starting his own nursery. Thus Roscoe, and many of his SPC comrades in New Brunswick, were members of the petite-bourgeoisie rather than the working class. In an odd way, the book complements Naylor. While Naylor outlines the labourist response that was more typical of the working class, this biography suggests that early Canadian socialism was as much a project of the petite-bourgeoisie as of the working class. Fillmore does not address this idea in the book, for it is not his intent to provide an analysis of class theory. What we get is something rather more interesting and gripping, for *Maritime Radical* is a warm and well-crafted account that blends labour history, biography and journalism.

Less successful is the collaboration of J.K. Bell and Sue Calhoun on *"Ole Boy": Memoirs of a Canadian Labour Leader* (Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1992).

The book is Bell's reminiscence of his career as a Maritime labour leader, as told to the New Brunswick writer Sue Calhoun. If the revolutionary climate of pre-war Canada defined Fillmore's radicalism, it was the Depression of the 1930s that defined Bell's. Moving to Ontario to look for work, he took part in the campaigns to organize the unemployed and the relief camp workers. Joining the Workers' Unity League and later the LPP, Bell was impressed with the Communist Party of Canada and leaders such as Tim Buck and A.E. Smith. Like many CPC supporters, Bell seems to have been attracted less by the politics of the party than by its militancy and willingness to take on employers at a time when most of the Canadian labour movement was retreating and regrouping.

Returning to his native New Brunswick during the Second World War, Bell helped shipyard workers form their own union, the Canadian Dry Dock and General Workers Union, in 1940. Chartered directly to the Canadian Congress of Labour, the union went on, in best CIO fashion, to organize the unorganized. Bell was made a business agent, and thus began a new career, that of labour leader. Under his leadership, the union expanded through the Maritimes. He continued to exert a left-leaning pressure on the Maritime labour movement, pushing for workers' housing co-ops, solidarity with other unions and changes in workers' compensation and labour law. Redbaited, eventually purged from the executive of the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour during the Cold War hysteria of the 1940s and 1950s, Bell was one of the most influential and progressive Atlantic labour leaders in this period.

Unfortunately, this book does not do him justice. It is filled with anecdotes, as befits a personal memoir. Some of these are tantalizing, such as Bell's observation that he "always had a lot more trouble among labour people than I ever did with politicians and business people, about all this red stuff". Coming from a man who had his legs broken by the goons of the Seafarers' International Union, this is a powerful indictment of a conservative labour movement and the liberal reform state. But this episode, like most of the others in the book, hangs in the air. Its implications are never drawn out. Few of the anecdotes have enough of the context supplied to be self-contained, and too often the reader wants to know why events happened, what the causes were, or who the main characters were. The book also prompts many unanswered questions about the labour movement and about Bell. How radical was the man who in the 1970s could call Liberal Premier Gerald Regan friend? What was his relationship to the rank and file members of the union, few of whom surface in the book? What did they think of his politics and his reform unionism? Did his commitment to socialism make any real difference in his day-to-day work as a labour leader? In making the decision simply to relate stories, the editor has missed an opportunity to create a really useful book. By themselves, the stories do little more than entertain. The non-specialist reader needs more background to make sense of the anecdotes, and labour historians may lose patience with a reminiscence that does not much advance our knowledge.

Bell's particular brand of unionism was forged in the 1940s, when unions had certain legal rights and liabilities spelled out originally under Privy Council Order 1003 in 1944 and reinforced by federal and provincial labour codes. These included the dues check-off, union recognition and compulsory collective bargaining. To Bell

and his generation of labour leaders, these were most often seen as progressive moves that legitimized unions and made it easier to organize and bargain with employers. In Sue Calhoun's *A Word To Say: The Story of the Maritime Fishermen's Union* (Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1991), it becomes apparent that without the support of the state, organizing inshore fishery workers would probably have been impossible. Started in 1977 by an alliance of fishermen, Acadian nationalists and left-wing students from the middle class, the union has done much to improve conditions for its members, and Calhoun tells its story competently. In a straightforward account of the union and some of its leaders, she shows how the union pressed for collective bargaining, set up insurance programmes and gave these workers a united voice. In this sense, the union fostered class conflict under the protection of the post-war industrial relations system. But as the fictional character Mr. Dooley pointed out, "A right that is handed to ye f'r nawthin' has somethin' th' matter with it". Even as it gave them a voice, the union was also a means to regulate and control the rough and turbulent fishermen. As former Liberal fisheries minister Romeo LeBlanc remarks in the book's foreword, the MFU contributed to the "professionalization" of the fishery. As a result, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans is now quick to admit that it "couldn't manage the fishery" without the active participation of the union (p. 254). This participation needs to be "responsible", defined by the state to mean legally accountable and ready to compromise. In this way, government policy has restrained and restructured unions to ensure that class conflict is minimized and diverted.

This contradictory nature of a labour relations system that encourages unionism but restricts its scope and impact is the vital theme addressed in Michael Earle, ed., *Workers and the State in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton, Acadiensis Press, 1989). In return for some guarantees of the right to organize, bargain and receive dues, union leaders became responsible for policing the workforce. If workers staged a wildcat strike, it was the union leader who was now charged under the law with ordering them back to work and upholding the "sanctity" of the contract. Increasingly unions became an integral, state-regulated part of capitalism, rather than a force to overthrow it. In nine articles, historians assess the effect of this industrial relations policy on the Nova Scotia working class.

Their work reflects a trend to examine legal history and to "put the state back in" in Canadian and American labour history. But unlike many studies that examine government policy and the law, these writers do not fall prey to the blandishments of the state. Some, including Michael Earle and Herbert Gamberg on Cape Breton coal miners and C.H.J. Wilson and A.M. Wadden on the Windsor gypsum strike of 1957, are openly critical of government intervention and the reformist labour politics they have encouraged. These authors are well aware that the state is not neutral and that class politics are at the root of its policies. While governments pretend to serve a general interest that transcends class, labour law has always limited and channelled workers' militancy and protest. As Kirby Abbott suggests in his article on coal miners and the law, at best "the modern Canadian legal framework for collective bargaining remains based on stabilizing a system of unequal power and economic disparity" (p. 45).

Yet it is difficult to know what else workers could have, or should have, done. In her analysis of Halifax labour relations between 1917 and 1919, Suzanne Morton points out that many workers had to fight very hard simply to maintain the status quo. When under the combined attack of government and employers, reformist demands within the system may be all that can be achieved and the guarantee of any rights at all may seem a real victory. Certainly workers' compensation falls into the category of mixed blessings, as employees lose a great deal in return for the protection they receive. They lose, for example, the right to sue employers for negligence, and they must put up with the scrutiny of government doctors whose chief business is to get people off of compensation claims. Worse, they must live with a system that assumes a certain level of injury and death is inevitable and that compensation, rather than the elimination of all workplace hazards, is the only issue. Yet as Fred Winsor's examination of workers' compensation in the 1920s shows, workers who were not adequately covered by workers' compensation still lost the same rights and received nothing in return. Similarly, the articles by Jay White on the strike for the dues check-off in Halifax shipyards and by Jean Nisbet on the fishermen's strike of 1946-47, remind us that unions always fight against huge odds. If they fail, they may be destroyed, and with them goes the ability to offer even marginal protection to workers.

This reality goes some way to explain the creation of a labour leadership that is less militant and less radical than it might be. But it is an oversimplification to blame the union leadership for the ills of the labour movement, for it is not always the case that the union leadership is less radical than the rank and file. As Anthony Thomson's article on the Nova Scotia Government Employees' Union points out, "trade union ideology...is not a simple thing but a fluctuating index of structural contradictions, class consciousness and leadership" (p. 239). In this context, it is difficult to decide whether labour has lost more than it has gained in its Faustian bargain with the state. This collection is of great value for the complicated questions it raises about labour bureaucracy and labour relations as a whole. Furthermore, the book deserves praise for insisting that legal history cannot be examined outside of the class relations that the law reflects.

If the proliferation of books and themes on labour history speaks well for the vitality of the field, the lack of adequate synthesis is cause for alarm. The difficulty of pulling together useful generalizations is illustrated in the collection of essays in Deian R. Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (Wales/St. John's, Llafur/Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1989). No common theme emerges from these papers, which were first given at a joint Canada-Wales labour history conference in 1987. The articles range from overviews of the political economy of the two former colonies to union and political activism in specific sectors to women in work and the labour movement. Among the Canadian material, Craig Heron on the second industrial revolution and Greg Kealey on strikes between 1891 and 1930 are thorough and skillful overviews, although their general arguments will be familiar to most Canadian labour historians. Bruno Ramirez on migration and regional labour markets in Quebec between 1870 and 1915, Linda Kealey on women in the 1919 labour revolt, and Allen Seager on miners in western Canada offer up essays

that both add to our fund of empirical knowledge and push the edges of theory and analysis. All of the Welsh contributions are well-written and thoughtful. But the reason for the collection remains unclear. None of the articles is an exercise in comparative history and there is no obvious common ground that would allow labour historians in one country to be informed by the work being done in the other. In that sense, the book resembles many academic conferences where specialists talk to others in the same field and talk past those in different fields. Specialization, like Taylorism, has increased the output of historians, but has also robbed the craft of some of its vitality. Increasingly it is difficult for experts to provide a general understanding of history as they are reluctant to go much beyond the conclusions of their own specific research.

Bryan Palmer sets out to draw the big picture and make wider generalizations in the new edition of *Working-Class Experience* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1992). Subtitled *Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, the book has been enlarged to include the decade that has passed since the first edition. However, the author has done more than simply tack on a new chapter at the end. The book has been significantly revised and, as the author puts it, "rethought", to reflect the changes in the theories and fields that labour and working-class historians have wrought in recent years. The valuable insistence from the first edition, that labour historians pay attention to the 19th century, is still there, and the period from 1800 to 1900 takes up a third of the book. Much more attention is paid to gender, language, the state and the legal system, as the author acknowledges the changes in theory and emphasis in the historiography of labour and the working class. But Palmer refuses to substitute these categories of analysis for class and culture and the economic structures that shaped them. Nor has his commitment to politics more radical and critical than social democracy wavered. This political stance makes the book lively and polemical. It also gives it the virtue of avoiding, indeed demolishing, the Whiggish assumptions built into the texts written by Craig Heron and Desmond Morton.[1] Never urging a romantic return to the 19th century, Palmer does insist that we understand what has been lost as well as what has been gained as Canada industrialized and as class relations became harsher, more formal, bureaucratic and authoritarian. In placing working-class culture in the forefront, he demonstrates that class conflict means much more than strikes and revolutionary politics: it extends to all aspects of workers' lives. Yet Palmer avoids reading into working-class culture an ongoing, consistent, class-conscious resistance to capital. He is aware of the intricacies and paradoxes of culture and avoids the oversimplification of arguing that the existence of a class *in itself* leads to a class *for itself*. The book also pays careful attention to the economic and political frameworks that shaped culture and class to demonstrate how the struggles between classes both mirrored and shaped Canadian society over time.

1 See Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto, 1989) and Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (3rd edition, Toronto, 1990).

There are some problems with the book, however. The emphasis on culture means that many things must be left out. While we learn a great deal about Joe Beef's tavern, for example, we learn little about the 1876 strike on the Grand Trunk Railway. Arguably the strike is as important to our understanding of class and conflict in this period as the associational life of workers. Another difficulty is the writing style. Palmer often makes use of jargon and assumes a high degree of sophistication on the part of the reader. The book should be written in a more accessible fashion. That it is not means that a subtle and important study will be tough going for many undergraduates and trade unionists who would benefit from it.

A point on which reasonable minds may differ is Palmer's argument that mass culture explains the patterns of working class resistance and acquiescence over the last few decades. Though he is careful to indicate that he is making suggestions and inferences, not hard conclusions, the sections on mass culture are a little jarring, for they tend to go against the grain of the rest of the book. Throughout *Working-Class Experience*, Palmer takes the working class as it was, rather than as someone might wish it were. Therefore, it is surprising to see the argument made, albeit tentatively, that the politics of the modern working class is somehow unnatural, that it would have been different but for the *deus ex machina* of mass cult.

The final chapter of the book is perhaps the most exciting. Here Palmer is at his polemical best. His warnings, probably Cassandra-like, against social democracy, union bureaucracy and the politics of identity are well-founded and stinging. His argument that the social unionism represented by Bob White of the Canadian Auto Workers and the business unionism characterized by Jack Munro of the International Woodworkers of America are essentially two sides of the same coin is apt. Style, not substance, separates the presentable, slick White from the cussing, portly Munro, and neither is much interested in empowering the working class. Equally important is Palmer's call to return class to the centre of historical inquiry and left-wing politics. In his words, despite the important and competing claims of gender, race and environment, "it will be class that counts, in the end, if the end is to come in ways that improve life for all Canadians" (p. 414). In different ways, from different perspectives, and to different ends, each of the books under review makes the similar point. As a result, labour history will continue to be the most fractious and creative field in Canadian history, precisely because it tries to make sense of this most fundamental aspect of Canada's past.

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