

Editors' Note

Joan Sangster et Charles Smith

Volume 88, automne 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084977ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/ljt.2021v88.0002>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Sangster, J. & Smith, C. (2021). Editors' Note. *Labour / Le Travail*, 88, 9–11.
<https://doi.org/10.52975/ljt.2021v88.0002>

EDITORS' NOTE

PANDEMICS HAVE A WAY of sharpening class contradictions. The 1918–19 flu pandemic laid bare glaring ethnic, racial, and class divisions in Canada; who lived and died, the experience of illness, and how survivors coped were all shaped by economic inequality. Similar disparities were visible over the past eighteen months, both globally and within Canada, as those who live in tight housing, whose health was already diminished by social conditions, and whose jobs necessitated close personal contact were affected disproportionately. Meanwhile, the wealthiest made record gains, widening the wealth gap to levels unseen since the robber barons of the 19th century. In Canada, racialized communities, and people offering the very care we needed in a pandemic, were especially hard hit and now face the continuation, if not intensification, of austerity. If Indigenous peoples have not experienced the same overwhelming death rate as in 1918–19, this has much to do with more recent Indigenous activism; anticolonial voices pointed to a long history of inadequate and unequal provision of health services for Indigenous peoples, demanding that we not repeat a shameful history.

Our current pandemic has cost us immeasurably in terms of suffering and loss of human life. This was made personal for many of us through the loss of friends and family. In December of 2020, the scholarly and socialist communities lost an irreplaceable, brilliant voice when Leo Panitch died of COVID-19 in a Toronto hospital. An obituary and roundtable in this issue pay tribute to Leo's life and contributions as a socialist activist, academic, writer, and political instigator.

The presentation by Larry Savage in this issue explores writing on Canadian social democracy and the union movement, an issue that preoccupied Leo Panitch too, in his scholarship relating to Canada, the United Kingdom, and global politics. Our articles in this issue underscore the importance of exploring all forms of labour and organizing as they are transformed in modern times. Both argue for research methods – whether workers' inquiry or participant action research – that begin with workers' views and experiences. Benjamin Anderson explores modern craft breweries, puncturing the myth of this work as rewarding “artisanal” labour, while Ian MacDonald and Manek Kolhatkar look at the work and organization of “precarious professionals” in the field of archaeology.

The pandemic underscores the importance of the journal's intellectual project: analyzing work in all its forms, paid and unpaid, across history and contemporary times, with a critical view of the social relations of class, gender, "race," and colonialism, could not be a more prescient endeavour. We have always claimed a broad mandate that facilitates a critical view of society, extending from the highest level of economic structure down to the most intimate, daily experiences of working-class life. Now, as we face a burning planet amid increased economic inequality, our research voices are needed more than ever.

As the pandemic unfolded, there was debate in the mainstream media over many "discoveries" long discussed in labour history and labour studies: working women need child care, caregiving labour is shamefully undervalued, and the unemployment benefits system is highly inadequate. For those working in the post-secondary educational sector, the pandemic accelerated a longer-term restructuring project that has led to job losses and an even tighter neoliberal ideological grip on education that values "market-driven" over critical humanities and social science education.

The disgraceful example of Laurentian University is particularly alarming. Mismanagement and lack of transparency led to the university successfully claiming insolvency – for the first time in Canadian history using the federal *Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act*, legislation that allows companies to deny workers their negotiated benefits, pensions, and severance pay. Research grants, scholarship funds, private donations, even some pension benefit funds had already been pilloried by the administration. About 65 programs were cut, 200 faculty and staff fired, and of course, collective agreements abrogated. The labour studies program was cancelled by a short-sighted and ruthless administration little interested in the social sciences and humanities.

We mourn the loss of that program, but its demise is part of a larger, longer-term social problem in Canada and beyond, as the United States and Australia are facing similar job losses and wage retrenchment under the "crisis" cloud of the pandemic. As former Laurentian labour studies professor John Peters noted in *The Bullet*, the Laurentian situation represents the intentional shift away from provision of "public services," increasingly starved by governments that simultaneously extend a generous hand to the private sector. Part of a larger, indeed global, "inequality virus" vis-à-vis public services, it also reflects the long-standing underfunding of post-secondary education and an increasingly corporatized university, driven in Canada by competition for tuition (especially international tuition) as well as increased administrative costs and marketing pressures. Radical change, including funding of public services and free tuition, has been endorsed by some unions, a challenging political goal. Laurentian is the proverbial canary in the coal mine: a dire warning, but one that represents already existing unhealthy conditions for workers and society alike.¹

1. John Peters, "Shock Therapy: Public Funding and the Crisis at Laurentian University,"

Amid such dire news, we have one very good piece of information. A new *Labour/Le Travail* co-editor, Kirk Niergarth, has been welcomed to the editorial team. Joan Sangster will retire out of the co-editor position over the next months, with a complete handover by the spring of 2022. Kirk is an accomplished historian of Canadian working-class, cultural, and political history, whose many publications have dealt with art and class, political tourism, and the Canadian left. The editorial board has welcomed him enthusiastically.

Joan Sangster and Charles Smith

The Bullet, 20 February 2020, <https://socialistproject.ca/2021/02/shock-therapy-public-funding-laurentian-university/>; David Leadbeater, "Laurentian University Insolvency Reflects a Structural Crisis in Ontario's Neoliberal University System," *The Bullet*, 2 July 2021, <https://socialistproject.ca/2021/07/laurentian-university-insolvency-structural-crisis-ontario-neoliberal/>; Rueben Roth, "Subjects of the New Corporate University: The Sabotage of Laurentian University," *The Bullet*, 5 May 2021. <https://socialistproject.ca/2021/05/subjects-of-the-new-corporate-university/>.