

Pioneers of Feminism and Unionism: Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

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These transcriptions were extracted from footage shot during the filming of *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

DECISIVE ENCOUNTERS AND THE CHOICE OF UNION ORGANIZATION (1937- 1942)

Meeting Léa Roback and Union Organization During World War II (1937-1942)

Madeleine Parent: Later, I had some problems with my parents because I became interested in union work. Back when I was a student, I had the opportunity to meet Léa Roback, who was 15 years older than me. She was very active in the unions. There had been that big women's strike in the women's clothing industry, the International Union, in which she had played a big role, even though she would never have acknowledged that. But I know it was probably the key role, the one that made the difference.

In the clothing industry, there were a lot of Jewish immigrant workers who had come from Europe, or whose parents had come from Europe during the pogroms. They were people with a sense of social responsibility and social justice, but they had great difficulty connecting with the French-Canadian women, who were much more strongly influenced by the parish priests. And those women had been convinced that joining a neutral, non-Catholic union was a sin. So there was a lot of work to do there, and it was Léa, through her activism, her understanding of Francophone women, and her perfect command of the language, who listened to the women and who succeeded, within the International Union, in convincing them that they had to ally themselves with immigrant women and lead the battle. And in the 1937 strike, they had that first big win. I first met Léa around 1938 or 1939. I asked her to tell me about her battles and her continuing involvement. Not only had she been appointed as an organizer, but she had also developed an adult training and education department within the union, which was mainly, or exclusively, intended for the women. She had a lot of trouble with the union's American management, who didn't want women to become educated and be able to criticize them. That would be dangerous for the management. So poor Léa, she had had so many problems with that union that she was no longer with them. But for me, her story, and her understanding of the issues, really appealed to me and upon reflection, especially after the defeat of our student movement, I decided that that's what I wanted to do. So I confided in Léa, because no one else understood or empathized with me. And she said to me, "Of course! If that's what you want to do, do it."

So it was . . . The idea took hold, and that was the direction I was heading in. That was only in '42. I taught some classes with the adult education association. It wasn't much, but it put me in contact with women workers, despite the ever-fearful leadership of the International Union. But in 1942 I was married. My husband had just joined the armed forces, and I was able to work for the International Union organizing committee for wartime industries, as a technical secretary. This was in the middle of the war. Canada had become an arsenal for the Allies, especially Great Britain. There was a lot of work. Aircraft factories were springing up like mushrooms, the shipyards were growing and were very busy. As the were the communications, the radios, an entire industry was under development. Also machinery, even tanks. There was also more work in the domestic industries than there had been during the Great Depression. So all these people were in demand. And they weren't afraid of being fired, because shrewd Mister C.D. Howe, who had given his all to the company, still knew how to mobilize people. And he had passed a law under which industry workers could not be fired, except for serious reasons. And of course, he also passed a war measures law, which made strikes illegal and froze wages.

At the time when union organization began to develop, the movement roughly doubled in size in just a few years. And the power balance was mostly in our favour. And yet, salaries were frozen and strikes were illegal. However, it was a very interesting period. People came, contacts were made, and at that time, Léa Roback went to work in the war industry, at RCA Victor in Saint-Henri. And the committee she had formed came to our offices to make reports, to discuss strategy, and to ask us to prepare leaflets for the next morning. For distribution at 6:30 the next morning!

And I had the opportunity to be involved in that very interesting work. In a few months' time, we consolidated the organization of the war industries, under the Metal Trades Council. So I went to the regular organizing committee, 'regular' meaning we were able to organize the war industry if it came, but it was mainly the domestic industries. And then the tobacco workers became unionized, and it's really them who did all the work. They weren't organizers by trade. And the first president of the biggest union, the one at Imperial Tobacco, was a Mohawk man from Kahnawake, which is an interesting but little-known fact. And when it came to protecting his members against the bureaucratic union heads who could betray them, he had a sixth sense. So I got to work with them a lot. It was a very interesting experience. With the union organizing committee, I discovered that two of the committee heads were stealing initiation money. That was a difficult situation. I said to myself, if they're stealing from the workers, what are they going to do if they negotiate on behalf of those people later? So I had to report them, which I did. And very tense period followed, until the report was written up and the chartered accountants arrived with a sheriff to pick up the books and confirm that it was true, and then we were able to get rid of them. But it meant that I had to change local offices to continue the work of organizing. So I did.

Women's Work in Wartime (1939-1945)

Madeleine Parent: The war brought about a lot of changes. Before it started, there was a lot of unemployment. As Léa said, women were restricted to certain types of jobs: domestic service, teaching—which was very badly paid at that time, unlike today—taking care of the sick, things like that. Or to become a nun and do one of those three types of work. But there were a lot of unemployed people, unemployed men, and the government seemed incapable of doing anything to get the economy going. “Oh, we have no money. There’s nothing we can do.” People were living in extreme poverty. Except that when the war broke out, they were suddenly able to find what they needed to build factories and modernize the existing ones, to expand them, to train the workforce and, as Léon Leclerc put it, to create a new economy. So the big pool of cheap labour was women. They were needed everywhere: in the aircraft factories, in the manufacturing plants like the one where Léa worked, in other heavy industry sectors, and in the domestic industries.

Production demands were high in the textile industry, the food industry, in tobacco. So everything was in motion. And the economy was booming. It modernized the Quebec economy, and since women were required, they worked and they learned. They did work they had never done before, and they were needed all over. They gained more independence, and everyone was proud of them. So that was a big change. And with it came changes in unionization. Now it wasn’t just the men who were unionizing, as had been the case with the railroads, but women were too, because they were working in industry.

Sophie Bissonnette: There’s something paradoxical about the fact that it was a war that allowed the economy to thrive, enabled women to acquire independence, and led to the creation of unions.

MP: Yes, it’s too bad. Nowadays it wouldn’t be the same, because in those days, a lot of manpower was required. Today’s technology didn’t exist then. There was no automation. But in addition, you have to remember that Canada wasn’t in danger, so Canada under Mackenzie King and C.D. Howe became the arsenal of the Allies. And it was very profitable for Canada’s big businessmen, because they were given whatever they needed to modernize and to build new factories, all for nothing. And after the war ended, all those big factory owners found themselves even wealthier. They continued to appropriate the factories, which the taxpayers had paid to build or modernize or equip.

SB: One of the things that struck me when I looked at the statistics on women’s work in the munitions factories was that in Quebec, very few married women worked in the munitions factories during the war. Was there any opposition to married women working?

MP: Personally, I wasn’t that aware of anything like that, but I have to say that there were a lot of women in tobacco, in textiles, in food . . . in the permanent industries, where the wages were low. And when those women had babies, they left their jobs, and they had no seniority rights. So then they had to beg and make deals with their foremen to get their jobs back. But those industries were doing very well at the time. So there was a lot of work for those women. But given the lack of security in terms of seniority, it’s possible that the employers themselves entered into some sort of secret agreement wherein the war factories would take on the younger women, or the women who weren’t married, while the other women would keep working in the tobacco, cotton, and food industries. And women knew that if they had another baby, they would have to quit again and then come back, and many women, for example in the cotton industry, didn’t dare go work in a war industry, because they were

afraid that their employer in the textile industry would resent them when they came back. So that may have been how things played out. There was also the fact that the employers in the war industries, particularly in the munitions factories, ran things a bit like strict nuns in a convent. They were almost regimented until the union came along and shook things up a bit. And in order to be able to control them, I imagine they preferred to hire younger women and train them upon hiring. But there were also some widows. And women who were separated . . . in any case, there were single women working in the war factories, as well.

Meeting Kent Rowley and Organizing the Cotton Textile Industry in Valleyfield (1942- 1943)

Madeleine Parent: So I found myself on the committee, without the right to vote, but with the right to speak! And it just so happened that the people who had been in the wartime internment camps for opposing conscription in Quebec were being released. And there was one, whom I didn't know, but whom I met at that time upon the recommendation of a team leader. It was Kent Rowley, who had enlisted in . . . as a volunteer in the army at the start of the war, but had been discharged at the final triage. When his regiment left to go overseas, a few were left behind because . . . for health issues, or for other reasons, and he was one of them. A little later, Mackenzie King announced national registration and Kent, who had returned to his job as a delegate to the Trades and Labour Council of the International Unions in Montréal, stood up in the middle of the meeting to criticize Mackenzie King and Minister Lapointe for reneging on their promises to French Canadians. Well, it didn't take long before the RCMP picked him up and brought him to the internment camp in Petawawa, where he spent almost two and a half years. And upon his release, he went and volunteered for military service again, but he was turned down, and he joined the union organizing committee to offer his services as an organizer.

The reps knew him, and while some of them were wary of him, others said he was an excellent organizer. So he was offered the task of organizing the war industries. But what he really wanted to do was organize the workers in the cotton textile industry, who had a long history of attempts at union organization, going all the way back to the girls in the 1880s, but who had never really succeeded. That was where he wanted to organize. There was a heated debate among the union leaders, all men, of course. They said, "Oh, the cotton industry is nothing but women and children. There's nothing to be done there!" But there were some union officers, the plumbers' union, and me, so we joined Kent in the debate. And finally, after two meetings, or maybe three, they asked him to go organize what is now Expro in Valleyfield, which was a war factory at the time. So he asked . . .

Kent agreed to organize Expro, on the condition that he be allowed to do whatever he wanted during his free time. They agreed, not understanding exactly what he wanted to do. At Expro, there were two workers in the factory who had been excellent organizers, so Kent's role wasn't so much to go door-to-door to recruit people, it was more of a coordinator and union advisor role, to answer legal questions, procedural questions, etc. So he was free in the evenings, and during his free time, he went out to make contact with the cotton workers. And so, after asking around and calling on his contacts at the munitions factory, he was given the names of some people to meet at the cotton mill, which was the largest in the country. It was called Montreal Cottons, but it was part of Dominion Textile. And he had the opportunity to meet Trefflé Leduc, who had been vice-president when the Catholic unions went on strike in '37.

And it's important to remember that in '37, Alexandre [sic] Charpentier was the president of

the Catholic unions. And he was nothing like those who came after him, for example Gérard Picard, Jean Marchand, and the rest. And in '37, Maurice Duplessis, Cardinal Villeneuve, and Charpentier had insisted that the workers return to work after one month, with no collective agreement. As vice-president, Trefflé Leduc had warned everyone that they shouldn't accept that. That they must continue to strike, at all costs. But of course he lost, because the people obeyed the Cardinal, and Trefflé was banned from the factory. He lost his job because of that. They only took him back on during the war because C.D. Howe did not look kindly upon companies that threw out expert industrial mechanics. He got his job back, and when Kent met him, they talked, and he said he would come visit the union hall. So he came, and he looked around, he checked everything out, and then he said, "All right, give me a card, I'll sign up and I'll pay." So Kent recruited him, of course, and then he asked him, "Mr. Leduc, why did you look through everything like that?" It was because he wanted to make sure the priests weren't in charge. And for the rest of his life and the rest of our union's life, except for one year after he had been widowed and he had to set his affairs in order, he was a formidable leader, with great wisdom and a militant spirit that transcended his age, because he was already an older man. But that didn't affect his judgement, nor his activism. He was magnificent.

So they secretly got organized. There was no public announcement, because they had to recruit a core base before they could openly launch operations. And once they felt they had a sufficient base, they announced two meetings. There were two shift teams: a daytime team and a nighttime team. And Trefflé and Kent decided that they needed a woman to speak to the workers as well, and to make the public announcement, to announce the meeting so that the women would understand that they were welcome, and they wouldn't be afraid to attend. Kent asked me to go on behalf of the organizing committee, so I did. The meetings weren't huge, but they were good meetings, with 35, 40, 45 people in attendance. And an interesting fact was that the men entered one at a time. For those who came straight from work, they were a bit more numerous, but they still had an air of independence about them. But the women arrived in groups. That is, they wouldn't enter a union hall alone. It took some courage, given the existing traditions and practices and the Church's views on neutral unions. So they arrived in groups. And what was interesting was that when people asked questions, I found that the women's questions were more well thought out, because they consulted each other before having a spokesperson ask the question, whereas the men just asked their questions straight out. That was very interesting. I went to see them after the meeting, and one of those who had served as spokesperson said, before leaving with her group, "So now, once we've won, we'll have seniority. And the bosses' favourites won't get all the best jobs. They'll have to respect our rights!" And I found that very interesting! It hadn't been on my list of demands, but it was . . . It was based on their experiences. Anyway, the work got organized. The company was impossible when they received a notice from the government saying the majority of their workers had signed up for union membership and paid their initiation fees and that the government needed the company to send its payroll list for verification. They refused to cooperate on every front, and at the same time, there were terrible attacks on us. So then, given that we had a majority, Kent thought, "We'll have to attack from another angle as well. We'll organize other workers from the same company."

The Repercussions of the Failed Textile Strike of 1937

Madeleine Parent: It was much more difficult in the cotton industry, because there had been a failed strike in 1937, and some of the people who had been on the blocklist afterward were still worried—even during the war, when everybody had work—that the company would exact revenge on them. So it required a lot of home visits. But there was a

certain advantage to that. Many of the families of the workers at Merchants in Saint-Henri lived south of Notre-Dame Street, between Notre-Dame and the Lachine Canal. And since I didn't have a car, like many . . . Like Léa and many of the others who did the work in those days, we went from door to door, after receiving certain directions and contact information from fellow workers. And they had two main issues. They were afraid of the company, which was very large and had influence on the governments, had fired activists in the past, and had successfully prevented its workers from becoming unionized since the 1880s. There was also a fear of . . . "We could be sold out. What's the point of making all this effort when the company could end up buying the people we unionize with?" Those were the two main issues. The first minor obstacle we encountered was that the men, the mechanics . . . when the union arrived, they felt it was up to them to get organized and form a union. And they weren't totally sure they wanted the women in the union with them.

So we had to make them understand that it was a big factory. It wasn't a question of unionizing just the tradesmen. It had to be everyone. And so, after we explained it to them, they at least thought about it, especially a few of the better ones, who understood. They helped convince the others. The other question was, "Okay, which women can we meet with?" "Oh no, women say too much, they repeat everything they hear, they're like children. Women and children, you can't rely on them." So we brought up the strike of '37, which was still relatively fresh in their minds . . . "What happened when the company wanted to break up the picket lines? Did any scab workers get in?" "Yes, but they had trouble." "They had trouble? What happened?" So finally, they told us that there were women who had fought on the picket lines, who had been excellent strikers, who had held the strike for a large part of the time. So we asked who those women were. Did they still work there? And so a few of the men realized what was going on [laughs]. They gave us some names, and by going to see those women, we started to visit them. And when they realized that some of the men had recommended them, they felt encouraged. But throughout the whole organizing process, everything had to be done through cooperation and participation, because everyone only felt confident about it when they were involved, when they knew what was happening, and when the decisions were made by everyone together.