

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.

DUPLESSIS (1944-1959)

Encounters with Duplessis (1945-1946)

Judith Murray: In your lifetime, did you ever meet Duplessis?

Madeleine Parent: Yes. I met him when he was re-elected after the Godbout government fell. In 1945, I think. Paul Fournier, one of the leaders of the International Unions, had requested a meeting with the premier, on behalf of the unions. So one Monday morning, I received a phone call at work, from Paul, who asked, "Are you free? Duplessis wants to meet with us in half an hour," or something like that. So I said, "Of course!" But I didn't like the fact that we were meeting him with no briefing, no preparation, no prior discussion, nothing. But I wasn't about to refuse. So they met us in a building on Notre-Dame Street, east of the Notre-Dame Basilica. There were about half a dozen of us, all men, of course, except me. And Paul opened . . . Paul started talking. Our goal was to talk about our demands. But Duplessis interrupted him right away and said, in his typical manner, "Listen, Paul, I'll tell you how you should be doing things." So I looked at all the guys, and I said, "We can't accept this. We came here to discuss our demands, not to ask him for advice." I looked at each of them, and none of them was willing to speak up. So I said, "Mr. Premier, we didn't come here to ask for your advice. We're the elected representatives of unionized workers, and we're here to tell you what they expect of you." So he looked at me for a long, silent moment. And I was expecting a reply. I said . . . It wasn't . . . There were six of us, plus Dr. Gatien, the MPP from the Hochelaga area, plus an assistant. It wasn't a formal meeting, but the topic needed to be addressed. But he had absolutely no desire to discuss it.

So after giving me his long look, he drank an entire bottle of Vichy water. Then he threw some money onto the table and said to Dr. Gatien, "Go get me some cigarettes." So we never discussed the topic. And as soon as he got his cigarettes, he declared, "All right, this session is closed." But he never forgot about it. But it just seemed to me that it needed to be said. Maybe it was the fact that it was said so directly, and by a woman, that he didn't appreciate, but it was what it was.

After that, I saw him more than I spoke to him during the strike in Lachute. A delegation of representatives from other unions had been assembled, in solidarity with us. And they said, "All right, we're going to Quebec City." So I went with them. And it just happened to be Duplessis' birthday [laughs]. Which I didn't know . . . The people I was with didn't know, anyway. Maybe someone knew, but . . . And we lobbied some members of the opposition, the Liberals, who made us feel welcome. We also lobbied André Laurendeau, who had the Bloc Québécois [sic], who also made us feel welcome. He also gave me two passes to the visitors' gallery. So I went to the gallery with a colleague, not on the Duplessis side, obviously, but to

see the Liberals. And I think the Bloc was on that side. But someone told Duplessis who was up in the gallery! So an usher came to say to me, "I'm very sorry, Madame Parent, but you have to leave. It's an order." And we hadn't said a word. So I went to a restaurant I had been to in the time of Godbout. A place I knew. And it was Duplessis' birthday party [laughs]. So my friend and I were sitting there, but they wouldn't serve us. Finally, when Duplessis' birthday party was winding down, I told one of the servers, "We're going to keep sitting here until we get served, so make up your minds." So they finally brought us our meals. But I think Duplessis thought we had done it on purpose, because it was his birthday. He was prone to being very sensitive about certain things, but what difference did it make to us if it was his birthday or not?

He was ferocious, and he fought us on everything. Especially since I'd supported women's suffrage, which Duplessis, as well as the upper echelons of the Church, were against. And the fact that I was in favour of it told him something. He was so successful on that front that after women obtained the vote, it took twenty years before a woman was elected. It was with the Lesage government. Claire Kirkland Casgrain, and she was appointed minister. But she was the only one in the chamber. And for as long as he lived, there were none at all.

Duplessis' Authoritarian Regime (1944-1959)

Sophie Bissonnette: I was watching TV last night, and there was a report on the attempts to vindicate Duplessis. Quebecers have a tendency to forgive and forget quickly. And it completely glossed over the role of the Duplessis government and the economic interests it had served. I'd like you to remind the public what that government stood for. Especially you, who experienced the final attacks of that government, and the interests it defended.

Madeleine Parent: Yes. Well, it's important to remember that women only obtained the vote in 1940, under the Godbout government. That Duplessis had continually fought against giving women the vote, and he had ensured it didn't exist the whole time he was in power, before the war. And when he came back into power, not a single woman was elected to the National Assembly for as long as he lived. And that was because of several people and certain powers. But it was also very clearly due to Duplessis' attitude. Only after his death, in the 1960 elections, did one woman succeed in being elected to the National Assembly: Claire Kirkland Casgrain, whose father had been a Liberal MNA. And I have to say that he had been much loved by the population, and she followed in his footsteps. But it still wasn't a lot. There needed to be many more, so that the debates in the legislature and the new bills that were tabled would reflect the rights and demands of women. But that only happened in part. And the fact that we still don't have equal pay for work of equal value is an example . . . is an example of that failure.

And in everything he did, Duplessis acted as if he were . . . as if the population were his family. But in a very specific sense of the word. The father as the head of the family, whose rule was law. And it was on that basis that he refused to give women the vote. Because people said, "But if a woman votes for a different political party than her husband does, it could break up the family." For goodness' sake! So the father could lead everyone wherever he wanted, and they had to follow him and obey. But with the unions, who were true activists and who couldn't accept his anti-union stance, he was ferocious. He spoke publicly, and personally, against militant unions. He named the representatives, and even when they had been arrested and were going to stand trial, he made public statements against them. In other words, he condemned them publicly before they were even tried in court. And when we were tried in the first-level courts, as attorney general and premier he saw to it that we appeared before judges who were under his control. So in that way, he controlled most of

the courts, or at least those before which unionists appeared.

I can't say the same thing about the appeal courts, but that was definitely the case in the lower courts, where we were tried. And as for the police, the provincial police, he ran the provincial police himself, with the police chief reporting to him every day—often several times a day—on what was taking place, especially if there were conflicts when workers were on strike against a company. And he gave orders. He stuck his nose in everything. And all those who worked on important issues, such as the rights of workers and certain rights of minorities, for example, and Jehovah's Witnesses, were subject to his orders. And the Jehovah's Witnesses suffered, because the upper echelons of the Catholic church wanted to get rid of them. So, as part of his pact with the upper echelons of the Catholic Church, he did them favours by battling Roncarelli, who helped free Jehovah's Witnesses when they were arrested, etc. And he ruined [Roncarelli] as a businessman. But his message was clear: In Quebec, we have an obedient population, hardworking people who don't ask for much in the way of salaries, and we invite big companies to come and set up here. And he promised to defend the big companies against their employees, should they happen to revolt. And so those men, including the judges, treated strikes as though they were revolutions. Which meant that essentially, we didn't have the right to unionize. And we had even less right to take joint action against the employer, who was against the union and didn't want to make any concessions. So it was a sort of dictatorship. And he used the witch hunts and the sentiments perpetrated by the Cold War campaign to call all militants "communists," and to make people afraid of them, while also urging people to be religious, submissive, and obedient. So we were to some extent a captive people, and those who dared to fight for people's rights were publicly condemned by him and separated from the workers, either by false accusations, rumours, the police, or the courts of justice, which he controlled.

SB: And who profited from all that? Who benefitted from his dictatorship?

MP: It benefitted the big businesses. To a large extent . . . For example, American companies who came here to exploit our resources and who paid very, very little. They were almost given away for free. Now, as for donating to his election fund on the side, that was a different story, of course, because Duplessis always had a well-stocked election fund. And big Canadian companies who were against unions, completely against them, like Dominion Textile. It didn't matter which union it was. And so of course, when a company was fighting a union that was supported by its workers, if they could find another union that would come in and divide the workers and follow the instructions of company management, they would suddenly be in favour of that union. But it was all done to fight true, honest unionism. And Duplessis would . . . He served his own financial interests in every possible way. And I found out . . . We know that Monsignor Charbonneau, who was Archbishop of Montréal for a number of years, had supported workers in their struggles. He had also supported lay schoolteachers in Montréal. He had supported our cotton-textile workers during the 1946 strike. He had supported our wool workers in Lachute in 1947. And he had supported the asbestos workers, the strikers, as everybody knows. And in the end, he was dismissed. And I found out that Duplessis had sent two of his ministers, including his minister of labour Antonio Barrette, on a pilgrimage to the Vatican, and that just a few weeks later, Monsignor Charbonneau was sacked. He went into exile in Victoria in a monastery, where he served as chaplain and forbade anyone to call him Monsignor.

SB: One of the methods Duplessis used, that you would have had to combat, and to fight against at other times too, was to use infiltration . . . which the police also used . . . to sabotage, to undermine union work.

MP: Yes. That was a true partnership, a collaboration between Duplessis, his police force, anti-union companies, and the RCMP. And we dealt with spies. One of the most

troublesome ones I knew had been hired by Dominion Textile in one of its Montréal factories, right after we won the strike in '46. And by coincidence—so we were told—she just so happened to be placed on the second shift, where . . . where there was the only known communist, and probably the only member of the Communist Party, in the mills—at least the only one anyone knew about. He was also his department's rep. She pretended to be very militant. She went and lived with him. And I heard that he recruited her to the Communist Party. She always spoke as though she was a big activist, she supported us, etc. But actually, she was there to divide the workers and get them riled up. One evening, during a very difficult period with the company—there had been some negotiations, which had lasted a long time, and it was important that people not be provoked, because that could have resulted in an illegal strike, which would have been a big problem— she went around the entire factory during the second shift, and said to everyone, “We’re going on strike at such-and-such hour, Madeleine said so.” And the foremen . . . She went around the entire factory, from department to department, using the fire exit stairways, and supposedly, not a single foreman saw her. And so at the appointed hour, the entire second shift went out onto the street. I received a phone call. They told me, “The entire team is on the street, and they’re asking for you.” They didn’t need to tell me who had done this; we already knew who she was. So I said, “I’m not going. Tell them to go home.” Because the idea was that they would stay on the street until midnight, and they would stop the third shift from going in, and so on with the first shift, and then we would have found ourselves with an illegal strike, at a very bad time. I said, “I’m not going, but tell them I’ll be at the gates tomorrow before 3:30, when they go in. When they go in through the main gate, I’ll meet them all there.” I went to see the superintendent at about 1:00 p.m., before the team arrived, and I said, “We didn’t want that strike to take place. It was a provocation. I ask that you take everyone back, with no reprisals. Otherwise, we’ll have to expose your agent.” So he excused himself and went to make a phone call, probably to the head office. Then he came back and said, “Fine, agreed.” But had we allowed her to continue, we would have found ourselves in a very, very bad situation.

There were others, too. And there was the incident at Manoir Richelieu, where the CSN was involved in a strike in Charlevoix, and one of the CSN organizers was an agent, a spy. There was a provocation, and the husband of one of the picketers died at the hands of the police, if you remember. And they tried to blame the entire union and its president, while it had in fact been provoked by a man who, until then, had gone unnoticed. And there was . . . I could give you many, many examples from the strike at Artistic Woodwork. There was a provocateur there too, and he was eventually outed as well, but it still takes place. Telephones are tapped, rooms are bugged, meetings are listened in on, always with the purpose of destroying the union or provoking union members to take action they shouldn’t take at that time. Or to misdirect them, or to attack the leaders. Whatever. So you always have to be vigilant. And a government that engages in union-bashing and provocation has no right to claim a partnership.

The Death of Duplessis and the Quiet Revolution (1959)

Sophie Bissonnette: So we’ll end off in the 1950s, with the revolution . . . with the death of Duplessis, and what we called the Quiet Revolution. It’s like a whole other . . . For feminists—I’m from that generation, the feminists—we had the impression that we were breaking new ground. But in fact, one of the things I learned was that many women who had come before us had done things . . . had invented many things.

Madeleine Parent: There was definitely a big push for more freedom, more rights. For unionization of the public sector, which affected many, many women. A lot of progress took

place after Duplessis died. I have to say that Premier Sauvé, who . . . When Paul Sauvé succeeded him, he already understood what was going on, and in the first few months he was premier, he made many changes. Our favourite words from him were “from now on” [laughs]. And then, with the election of Jean Lesage’s government and what they called the *équipe du tonnerre* [team of thunder], which included René Lévesque, the Liberal Party implemented many of the social reforms they had promised, and which were important to people, both young and old. And I believe that enormous progress took place during the Quiet Revolution: unionization, social reforms, social legislation, the right to unionize, and other rights. But I think that our resistance during the Cold War, akin to the resistance of patriots when their country is occupied, helped pave the way for the Quiet Revolution and the actions of others. And I’m very proud of that, and I feel that there’s a sort of continuity, just like nowadays, when things are much more difficult and people are trying to drag us backwards, our resistance to oppression is what will pave the way to better times.