

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 *Madeleine Parent, tisserande de solidarités* (2002), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

KENT ROWLEY (1942-1978)

Marriage to Kent Rowley (1953)

Judith Murray: During that time, you finally . . . You and Kent got married in 1953. Why did you wait so long?

Madeleine Parent: Well, there were a few reasons for that. First of all, I had to divorce my first husband. And he came back from the war in 1945. And it was out of the question for Kent and me to get married at that time, anyway. However, I had had some disagreements with my husband. He was a very fine man, but Quebec can be a difficult place to understand. And while that hadn't seemed like an issue to me at the time we got married, later on I had higher expectations about him understanding Quebec, and he was from the West Coast. And I was a unionist, and most of the people working in the cotton mills were French Canadians.

So it took a long time for us to make the decision, and because we were constantly on the alert, being attacked from all sides, and our members were being attacked, and people were trying to break our union, at that time it would have been bad for a woman to get divorced. And it would have damaged the union, I have no doubt of that. Only after '52, when we had been betrayed by the International Union, by the leaders in Washington during that very difficult strike, did I feel I was free to remarry. So we got married.

A Partner and a Companion for Life (1942- 1978)

Sophie Bissonnette: What attracted you to Kent? What kind of understanding did you have? What brought you together—of course you shared a vision—but on a human level, what did you see in each other, what made you respect each other?

Madeleine Parent: Well, after I had met so many union organizers in the International Unions and elsewhere, I realized that Kent would never, ever become a bureaucrat. It went against his nature. He was an outstanding organizer. He explained to people what he thought should be done, but more than that, he listened to them. He learned from them what their working conditions were like, what kinds of things went on in the factories, what they needed. And that, along with his experience as an organizer, despite the fact that he was still young, he could make recommendations about how to organize, how to build solidarity. Also, in Valleyfield, he had first met—because when he went to visit, there were some people who were uncertain, who told him, “Go see Trefflé Leduc.” He had been vice-president of the

Catholic unions during the strike of '37, he had refused the idea of returning to work, and he had been fired as a result. So Kent went to see Trefflé Leduc, and he and Trefflé—who was old enough to be his father, if not his grandfather—both understood that women had to be brought into the movement, and that they had to feel comfortable there . . . and that they had to be listened to.

SB: And that brought you closer to Kent?

MP: Definitely, definitely. So after doing a lot of work visiting and recruiting—and it was mostly mechanics that he recruited, but women also . . . Later, he held a meeting that was announced publicly. And he invited me . . . He and Trefflé wanted the female workers to know there would be a woman speaking, that the meeting wasn't only for men. Because up until then, unions had mainly been for men, not for women. So I went. Some women attended and asked questions. At that meeting, I learned some things I'll never forget. For example, in '42, they were very aware of sexual harassment at work, and they were drawn to the union to be able to defend themselves against sexual harassment in the workplace. And I could tell that he was proud to see that those issues were being raised, that women were happy to be participating. They felt like they were part of the movement. And elsewhere, in the International Unions, we had to deal with bureaucrats: "Oh! Women and children, they'll never make a good union," etc. Meanwhile, Kent didn't see things that way at all.

SB: How did your partnership, which was to last some thirty years, work? How did you divide up your tasks? And sometimes, you must have had differing opinions, no? How did . . . How did you resolve conflicts?

MP: He and I had many, many arguments about strategy, about tactics, about what needed to be done. But there was never any resentment between us. It was always about research. "Okay, that's your idea, this is mine." And we would have discussion after discussion. We were always trying to find the best way to do things. And, with our . . . Whether it was just the two of us, or whether we were with elected officials from other locals, it always ended up being a good result, and it would shed more light, even if we didn't come up with the solution right away. So it was never, "You have to listen to me," or anything like that. We worked together to search for the best ways to fight. And how to integrate the members into the search for strategies and tactics. And sometimes, we found ourselves in situations that were very tough, very difficult. That was quite an extraordinary experience. And for me, in my life, he was the kind of man I wanted to be associated with. And I loved him a lot. But I have to say that we weren't together very often, because once I started to do negotiations . . . First of all, he really helped me learn how to organize. I knew how up to a certain point, and I was just as good as some of the others, who had been organizing for a long time. But as an organizer, he was sensitive, and he consulted the workers he was organizing. He was also very systematic. Very organized, both in his ideas and in his paperwork. And that helped me a lot.

As for negotiating, for the first year, I shadowed him. So even though it wasn't my job, he would say, "Come on, let's go negotiate." And then, after about a year, he said, "All right, go take care of your negotiations." And with the help he had given me—and I could always talk to him—I became a negotiator as well as an organizer. And we presented our briefs to the governments, by lobbying, as part of delegations, and also before the Labour Relations Board, in both Quebec and Ontario. And there was always . . . well, not necessarily on the fly, when we had to change tactics in the middle of a negotiation and all that . . . that was done with the local negotiating committee, and they were the ones to provide the direction. But when we had the chance, we would discuss our experiences.

And so sometimes I would suggest ideas to him, or he would suggest some of his own, or he would accompany me when our committees met in Quebec, or I would accompany him to Ontario or elsewhere. And that enriched our work. And in later years, after we had lived through the attacks by the International Union, and McCarthyism, and the Cold War, and the witch hunts, and we started working with other unions that had also been tormented by the American bureaucracies, Kent became more and more involved with the . . . the Council, and then later with the Confederation of Canadian Unions, and I became more and more exclusively involved, not only with our organization, but with the negotiations.

And it must be said that when there was a strike, Kent was always there. There was only one strike where he was almost completely absent, and that was because he had had a stroke, and he was still recovering.

SB: He had to be there because he was a man of action.

MP: First of all, he was an extraordinary strike organizer. Which was a very, very rare thing.

SB: What does that mean? What qualities made him excellent?

MP: First of all, you have to be able to listen to people, not direct them. If they vote to strike, it has to be *their* decision. But at the same time, whether or not we made a recommendation, if we knew they were going to decide to strike, we had to prepare them, we had to tell them, "You don't have to go on strike, but here is what the company is offering. You decide." If it was completely unfair, and it was often unfair . . . although there weren't actually all that many strikes, but they were all impactful.

SB: But he was also your romantic partner. When you both had free time, what did you like to do together?

MP: When we could, we would go to the countryside. But for that, we needed a weekend where there were no meetings, no strikes, no urgent work to be done. Sometimes we read, and we talked about the things we read. He read a lot more than I did. These days, I sometimes read things he suggested to me forty years ago [laughs], that I never found the time to read. And, well, we were often quite tired. Sometimes, we needed to rest. I can't say we necessarily took our minds off things, we always thought about them. But we would be calmer, more rested. And that was very satisfying.

SB: His death must have been a big loss for you.

MP: Yes, it was, but unfortunately, I had seen it coming. He had been growing weaker. And although he didn't talk about it, he knew. The work had become too hard for him. It was difficult. Especially when we saw the beginnings of further attempts at bureaucracy within the movement. We would say to each other . . . For me, it didn't weigh quite as heavily on my shoulders, because I wasn't sick. But it weighed heavily on his shoulders. But he kept going. He died on a Sunday morning. And he had worked all the previous week. I had been in British Columbia for a union conference.

SB: What year was that?

MP: 1978. In February. But I already knew he was running out of energy. And he did too. There's no question about that. And even if I had argued with him about taking better care of himself, I don't think it would have made a difference. And I didn't want to argue. Except during the strike at Artistic Woodwork, when he was recovering from his first stroke. I said, "No, you're not coming." And I managed to recruit some young people who had worked with us as volunteers, who were very committed to the cause, who took over the work with me. And we carried out a very tough strike, and we were able to bring it to a successful

conclusion without him having to be in the thick of it.