

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.

CONFRONTATION WITH THE INTERNATIONAL UNION (1949-1952)

Attempts at Dismissal and the Raiding of the Textile Union (1949-1952)

Madeleine Parent: After the victory in Lachute . . . I mean in Valleyfield and Montréal, the Dominion Textile company refused to let it go. They had agents who talked to other union bureaucrats, to try to get rid of us. And even Duplessis, on one occasion when a delegation from the International Unions went to discuss their demands with him. In the middle of a meeting with the delegates, he said, “Get rid of Kent Rowley and Madeleine Parent. That’s your task.” But we also knew that there had been talks in the United States. Our international president and our secretary-treasurer, who were not the purest or most committed of people—they were much more interested in their own affairs—had been approached. And they were requested, they were ordered to fire us. At first, they tried to take us to court, but they couldn’t find any union members in Canada to take us to court. So a group of Americans came up. And so we met with the secretary-treasurer who was leading the trial, in private. We said, “We’re not going to meet with your committee. Do what you want, but we have nothing to say.” So they announced that they had done an investigation, and that we weren’t communists. Which goes to show that sometimes, the best approach was not to cooperate with them at all

But the pressure continued to mount, and the American Federation of Labor named our international president as the fraternal delegate to the annual convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, twice. Why? So that he would meet the bureaucrats from here and be told, “Get rid of them.” He was forced to admit that to us. So it seemed that there was nothing to be done. Then we were raided by the CIO textile union, under Sam Baron, who was a U.S. government secret agent from the CIA. And they raided several of our factories, but without success. They launched a big raid of our Montréal local in 1949 or 1950. And we had to . . . It ended with a vote by secret ballot, and we had to have the majority in each of the factories. Because if they won even one of them, there would be a rift. So the vote was held, by secret ballot. We made sure it was well-conducted, and we won in all the factories. But it had created some division among the workers. And after that, during the negotiations for the next collective agreement . . . We obtained the next collective agreement very quickly, but for the one after that, it was difficult, because the company had made an agreement with our leaders in Washington. And Duplessis still wanted our heads. And the raider . . . Even though he had lost the vote, he was still hanging around. So there was some division. And during the negotiations, the company had given us an ultimatum regarding the conditions. They wanted managerial rights, which would take away the workers’ real seniority rights, and a say in piece rates, and a say in all the important conditions. So that meant that even if they gave us a raise of 25 cents an hour—which was

a lot in those days—it meant nothing, because the company could make changes at any time. They wanted absolute managerial rights. And in our union, we always believed managerial rights clauses were a key clause, while a lot of bureaucrats in other unions said to the employees, “Keep your eyes on the wages, don’t bother about the rest.” And some of them got hoodwinked that way.

The 1952 Strike at Dominion Textile and the Expulsion of the UTWA/OUTA

Madeleine Parent: So, after lengthy negotiations, conciliation, and arbitration, we were forced to go on strike in ‘52. It was either we strike or we betray all the interests of the workers. And the company was ready for us. So about eight weeks into the strike, the union secretary-treasurer came up from Washington. He met with Kent and said, “You’re going to sign the collective agreement that the company has been offering.” And Kent said, “No collective agreement will be signed unless the members decide to sign.” So that night, the next morning, we were all fired. No formal process, nothing. The president of the International Union had exercised the authority that almost all international presidents had, which was to fire anyone they wanted and to put a local into trusteeship. And they had hired Sam Baron, who had been head of the local that opposed us. And of course, Blair Gordon only dealt with Sam Baron, as I came to discover. So eight weeks into the strike, we were ousted, and we lost the right to represent the workers. Our charters belonged to the International Union, and the union—the American union—sent notices to all the employers—not just the ones where there was a strike, but we had about 36 organized plants in Quebec and Ontario, as well as two in Nova Scotia—to suspend all payments, all remittance of workers’ dues collected at source, and to have nothing to do with us because we were no longer the representatives.

But despite all that, the strike continued in the Montréal and Valleyfield mills for another six weeks, even though we had no right to represent them. They refused to go back to work. And so, because the employees hadn’t gone back, the company plotted another move. So then the police arrived in Valleyfield in force. In Montréal it was the municipal police, and there were company guards everywhere, so they went in to work and the strike was over. But in Valleyfield, the symbolic event was that when the workers were at the gates and Kent Rowley was with them, Paul Benoît of the provincial police delivered a horrific blow to Kent with his club and threw him in the paddy wagon. So he lost consciousness, and when he came to, [he realized that] instead of driving straight to the courthouse, they were driving very fast in circles, so that he would keep falling over in the paddy wagon. Once they got to the courthouse, he was taken into custody, and one of the police officers came over and threatened him. He understood then that Benoît planned to finish the job and do him real harm. So he called over the governor of the prison, or maybe the sheriff, I’m not sure who. And he said, “I have a health problem. Call Dr. Macdonald right away.”

Dr. Macdonald was the company doctor, but I had gone to university with his daughter, and he wasn’t a bad guy. So Kent told him, “They’re planning to give me a blow to the head that could be fatal.” So Dr. Macdonald examined him, etc., and said to the sheriff, the governor of the prison, “Make sure no one touches this man, because he has a heart condition, and you could end up with a dead man on your hands.” So one of the police officers was sent to guard the cell, and he was very, very angry, like a frustrated rooster who wasn’t able to . . . So they broke the two strikes, and the group signed the collective agreement. For appearances’ sake, they obtained a secret vote by the government, but none of the strikers could serve as scrutineer. The scrutineers were only people from the company and from the group that had betrayed them. So they declared that the majority had voted to return to work and to sign the collective agreement. But at least the workers knew that if something bad

happened to them, it wasn't because they'd been betrayed by those they trusted. And that's why today, the victory of the 1946 strikers in Valleyfield is celebrated.