

# Pioneers of Feminism and Unionism: Léa Roback and Madeleine Parent

Special feature by the Cinémathèque québécoise, in collaboration with the RéQEF, 2023

These transcriptions were extracted from footage shot during the filming of *Madeleine Parent, tisserande de solidarités* (2002), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

## THE CONFEDERATION OF CANADIAN UNIONS (1952-1969)

### Independent Canadian Unions (1952-1956)

Judith Murray: In the 1950s—I think it was in 1952—Kent went to work in Ontario.

Madeleine Parent: Yes. Well, he always worked in Ontario. But right after the strike, we called in our representatives from Quebec as well. It didn't cost them much. They were already here. And those from the locals in Ontario, and two from the Maritimes, as well. And we decided to form an independent Canadian union. So we did. But it was very, very difficult. Kent and I talked about it. Kent wanted us to start all over again here, but I knew that under the Duplessis regime, people wouldn't think we stood a chance at that time. But I accepted to stay here, and I did what we called "rearguard action," i.e. the members in the mills here who had to file complaints about injustices, and believe me, there were a lot. After the strike, the company immediately increased the workload. For example, some of the women were doing twice as much as they had done previously, and it didn't take long before they became physically worn out. And many of them suffered.

So when people came in to discuss a problem, sometimes I'd make a leaflet with them and distribute it. Which embarrassed the company, and also embarrassed the union, which did nothing for the others. So it helped on that front. But there was no chance we'd be certified. But in Ontario, Kent succeeded. It was a modest beginning, but at the Harding Carpets factory in Brantford, for example, which was a major manufacturing plant in the industry, some of the people were very determined, and they recruited people into the new Canadian union. But the Ontario government didn't intend to certify us either, did it? Even though we had the majority. So it was quite a procedure to prove that it wasn't just the big conventions that could have unions, but that workers too could form unions, independently. And in the end, after many, many processes, we obtained a vote. But the vote we obtained was that the workers could either vote for their existing union or they could vote to have no union at all. But they understood that that was the only way for us to start over from scratch and certify our union. And it was about 98%. They voted for no union, and the American union was decertified. At that point, we were able to start over, and we obtained our certification. The people then said to the company, "You've made us waste a lot of time. Now we're going to negotiate, and we're going to do it quickly." And there was so much discontent that that's what ended up happening.

In Welland, we were immediately raided by the American union. And in Welland, there were ethnic issues. First of all, there were the French Canadians, who were with us. No problem there. And there were the Italians, who had come to Canada at the time of the rise of fascism in Italy, and there was no problem there. But there was also a whole new group of Italians from the

south, who had had no industrial experience in Italy, who were close to the Church, and who didn't speak to the more senior Italians. And the senior Italians said to us, "There's no way to get through to those people. They don't understand." And later, some Hungarians also arrived. And the company went to Europe to recruit people from the camps where the pro-fascists, the pro-Nazis, had been interned after the war, and they brought them to Canada as anti-unionists. And so, after being raided over and over, year after year, we were bound to lose a vote. And that's what happened, after I don't know how many successful votes. But we recruited other workers as well, and we formed our union in Toronto and Brantford. We had three unions in Brantford and we were successful, despite not being a big union or having a lot of money. Following the 1956 strike at Harding Carpets, four years went by before the company confronted us for real. And that strike was long, but we won. Despite everything the government, the company, the police, and the bureaucrats in certain unions did, we won that strike. And that was a turning point. We had the best conditions in the carpet industry in Canada. So that allowed us to demonstrate that, even though the international unions were bigger and supposedly stronger, we had obtained the best conditions. Which we had also demonstrated at the cotton mills in Welland. We had the best conditions there. But with so many people not having industrial experience and being under the influence of Cardinal Carter in Toronto, we eventually lost. And the union grew stronger. And then there were just the two of us, Kent and me. We had no more strength, when I was serving as rearguard here and he was in Ontario.

### **The Creation of the Confederation of Canadian Unions (1968-1969)**

Madeleine Parent: We found out that there were other groups of workers who had had the same types of experiences with the international unions as we had, and that they had ended up forming independent Canadian unions. For example, in the pulp and paper industry on the West Coast, several locals had separated from the International Union and formed a Canadian union. In Greater Toronto, there were the bricklayers, and this was at a time when there was a lot of construction taking place in Toronto. And some of it required marble. And as you can imagine, the contractors and the owners had no intention of letting people who didn't know anything about Italian marble do the work. So the bricklayers had fought to be accepted into the International Union, but once there, they had been victim of all kinds of prejudices, so they had left and formed their own independent Canadian union. So we approached them and said, "Could we work together? Maybe form a council so that we can consult each other?" And the same thing happened with the pulp and paper industry on the Pacific coast, and with the workers in Sudbury, where I had gone several times to help them when they were being raided by the Steelworkers' Union. Through those raids, they had lost the INCO—International Nickel—but they had kept Falconbridge, and the mines of Falconbridge, and all the other related work. So there was a union called Mine Mill, but it was the only one left.

We also contacted the miners from the Mine Mill in Sudbury who worked for the Falconbridge mines. And we all agreed that it was time to organize a conference of workers in Canadian independent unions who would be interested, especially those we knew. The first conference took place in Sudbury in 1968, and the founding conference of the movement took place in '69, also in Sudbury. And others came, too, for example the bricklayers, who were mostly Italian and who were highly sought after by the construction companies, especially in Ontario. There were workers from other sectors too, and people from the Montréal refineries also came to meet us and join us. There was a large group from Manitoba who had formed an independent Canadian

union, some of whom had formerly belonged to international unions, but who had also been betrayed during their strikes. Still others had organized independently with the former strikers. There were also groups in Vancouver. So the movement was founded, and it developed from there. And I think our biggest contribution was to prove that independent Canadian unions could perform just as well, in the interests of their members, as the big international unions. And that the bureaucracy that existed in a lot of the international unions didn't exist in our unions to the same extent, and that the people themselves had to look after their unions, because we didn't have a complex structure. And that they were proud that they made their own decisions, at home, in their own unions. Not in Pittsburgh or New York or Chicago or Washington. And that there was no need for all that costly, cumbersome organizational structure when you were in your own country and had your own unions.

There was also a very pleasant new development from the federal government. I don't think it was their intention, but it's what ended up happening. What happened was that it had adopted a new law under which American unions were henceforth required to report the revenues they received from affiliated Canadian unions and their expenditures in Canada to the government. And the reports were published annually. And it was very interesting to see that almost every year, except maybe for one, I think—I think it was 1969, when there were a lot of strikes—in any case, all the other years, the American unions had made profits from the revenues they received from the workers in Canada. So the myth that we needed international unions because we ourselves were too poor and too unequipped was finally exposed, and it showed very convincingly that we could do better here, on our own, by appointing our own representatives and having full power to replace them if we felt it was necessary. And also, because that had aroused people's curiosity—"How can this be?" etc.—the constitutions and regulations of the international unions were also exposed. For example, in those days, at almost all international meetings, the president who resided in the U.S. had full power to put a local, a region, or a group of its workers into trusteeship. The president could do it unilaterally, without consulting anyone. Which meant they had the power to establish a dictatorship over their Canadian workers. And tensions between the head offices of the international unions and the unions in Canada had been rising, especially during the period when the workers in Canada, who were unable to have their demands met, were preparing to strike. We would receive phone calls from Washington, New York, Pittsburgh, and other places. "What's going on there? What are you doing? Watch yourselves!" And the threat was that we wouldn't even be entitled to the strike fund, in places where there was one. Because not every union had one. But when things were going well and no strike was imminent, they took our money, they put it in the bank, and we didn't hear from them. So for them, the revenue they received from Canada was much more important than the interests of the workers in Canada. And so . . . At first, people were stunned. And year after year, the reports showed that we provided more money to the Americans than they did to us. Then everyone really began to understand. We could take care of our unions ourselves. We didn't need that big, heavy structure that gave us a false sense of security. We were able to manage our own affairs.

Now, some people thought that, by recruiting in that way, we'd end up with a big confederation. Personally, I never thought we'd be able to accomplish that. But it gave people confidence, and a lot of the unionized workers in the public sectors—in education, health care, and government administration, for example—organized themselves into Canadian unions that were affiliated with the big labour confederations, at the big conventions. But what this meant was that, on the one hand, more members were joining the unions of the labour confederations, but on the other,

they weren't fighting the ideological fight. Why? Because they were all attending the same conventions, the same meetings, as the workers who were in the American unions. And I guess they didn't want to start criticizing the American unions' methods and procedures. Because apparently, it would then have been more difficult for them to reach an agreement with them about other demands at the conventions. That wasn't how we saw it. We said we absolutely had to question the whole procedure and inspire people to have confidence in themselves. To get involved in their own unions, which they would also run. That would be healthier for the entire movement. So we began a campaign at a time when, even though there were Canadian unions in education and in the public sector, about 70% of all union members in Canada were in U.S.-based unions. And that included counting the Catholic Workers' Confederation of Canada as a Canadian union. Today, about 30% of unionized workers are in American unions, and at least 70% are in Canadian unions. So I'd say we were successful, even if not all of them joined us. But now they understand, they're aware and confident in what we can do on our own. And I think that's a big step forward.

Now when . . . And there's another thing. It's that when we joined together under the Council of Canadian Unions, and later the Confederation of Canadian Unions, the raiding lessened. I can't explain exactly why, but one thing I do know is that when a Canadian union in Winnipeg or Sudbury was able to say, "We have allies in British Columbia, Quebec, Ontario, the South, etc.," it was reassuring. They weren't alone. But also, it was as though the American unions were becoming . . . had become more defensive. And when . . . Before our Canadian union development campaign, when a union in Canada criticized its international union, it happened more regularly that the international president exercised his absolute power to put the group into trusteeship. Nowadays, it's much more awkward for them to put a Canadian group into trusteeship, because the workers have a choice. If things don't go well, they can do like others have done and form a Canadian union. So they kind of lost their bite. But there's another aspect too, and it's that the work of educating people and raising their awareness took place just before free trade came to Canada. And I believe that if we hadn't bothered, if we hadn't begun the debate and the initiative of creating Canadian unions, if the American unions still had almost absolute power here, we'd be in a much, much worse position to defend ourselves against free trade and all its harmful consequences.

### **The Confederation and its Links with the Student Movement, the Waffle and the CSN (1960s and 1970s)**

Sophie Bissonnette: Yesterday, we talked about your very important role, as well as Kent's, in the creation of the Council of Canadian Unions and the Confederation. And I think you wanted to elaborate a little further on some of the effects of the creation of the council.

Madeleine Parent: There were some effects that we hadn't foreseen, but that we were delighted with. One was that the student movement, especially in Ontario, where we were, quickly espoused the national union cause. And so they, along with some professors . . . This was at the time of the Waffle—that is, of the democratic socialists within the New Democratic Party—which was more nationalist and more militant. They organized debates on the campuses of different universities. At the University of Toronto, Varsity, in Sudbury, at Carleton, and at others in Toronto, as well as at some colleges. They invited the heads of the big international unions to debate with us, and it was not always a pleasant experience for the heads of the big internationals. Kent proved to be an excellent debater. And after that experience in Toronto, nobody really wanted to debate against Kent, or against me either, but Kent was the more

eloquent one, who went deeper into it. And so sometimes, professors who had accepted to take part in a debate against us, but in partnership with a union leader, showed up alone. But they still had to debate us, which wasn't always much fun for them. I remember that . . . Oh, I forget his name, he had been my prof at McGill, on the Canadian Constitution . . . He had ended up debating us on his own. And Steven Lewis from Sudbury had taken part in a debate with us, and it hadn't gone so well for him, either.

So the students found themselves getting involved in the major issues of the labour movement, which was very beneficial. So now there was a young generation with a vested interest in knowing how things worked, in combating American imperialism and the stranglehold it had on us, by supporting unions that were Canadian and that fought the ideological battle on how important it was to have our own unions here, at home. And in some centres, where the workers were well organized, that became pretty important. Some of the professors were quite well regarded: Watkins from the University of Toronto; two from Carleton in Ottawa, Robin Mathews and a mathematician colleague; and also one of the Laxers from Toronto. And so another of the effects was that during certain strikes, the professors got organized with the students to come and support us. For example, during the 1971 strike at Texpack in Brantford, the company hadn't found any scab workers within Brantford, so they had gone into the underbelly of Hamilton, which is a union town, but where there's always a segment of the population that lives in poverty and doesn't have ties to the rest of Hamilton society. And so they went out and recruited those people, and brought them in via a system we called the driver pool, where the scabs would be picked up from their homes in the morning, taken by special car to a location that wasn't planned or known in advance, and then get on a company bus. And then they were escorted to the city limits by the Hamilton police. At that point, the provincial police took over until they reached the town they had to go through to get to Brantford, and there, the local police took over. And then, at the other end of town, the provincial police once again escorted them to Brantford, where our local force, which had been transformed into a riot squad—they had practiced it in the past, but had never deployed it until our strike; that was the first and last time it was deployed—brought them to a Holiday Inn, where they were met by the manager, the upper management team, and the office staff. And then they were escorted through the picket lines by the police. And the students would get up at 4:00 a.m. to go to Hamilton and find out where the scabs' bus was leaving from. And whether or not they found it, if they had time, they would come all the way to the gate entrance in Brantford. One morning, two . . . One student and one professor found the bus, and the whole group of students climbed onto the bus to try to stop it. The driver took off, but fell and broke a bone, as did the professor who had tried to get him out. So we too had victims in the student and teacher movement, in Brantford, during that strike.

And some other union activists, not necessarily those at the top of the ladder, but workshop representatives, local activists, etc., became quite interested in what was going on. And some Waffle sympathizers, too. So they joined us on the picket lines, and they brought their friends or work colleagues. So the movement became quite big. Another thing that happened was that, while we had regularly been under pressure and subject to raiding when the contracts expired, we found that with the new Confederation of Canadian Unions and the other unions, there was less raiding and we were freer to fight for our conditions directly. And I got the impression that there was a feeling of sympathy on the part of the workers in the international unions, which restricted the activities of the bureaucrats. So it made for a pretty big movement, and the debate continued in other countries. Certain public service unions, which were already Canadian, were

proud to see that someone was engaging in open debate on the principles, and especially on the question of the profits the Americans were making from the payments we made every year, every month, to the international unions, which was one of the things the campaign had uncovered. And I think I already mentioned that, because of it, in just a few years, we went from a situation in which 70% of unionized workers in Canada were in American unions, to one in which 70% were in Canadian unions and a minority were in American unions. And that restricted [the unions'] freedom to do what they wanted or to be dictatorial, because the workers had a choice. So if [the workers] had a bad experience, an attack on their right to strike, when they were the ones who had taken action, kept track of the negotiations, and decided to go on strike, well, they may get through that strike, but in the next round, they would be tempted to organize as a Canadian union.

So that's been an advantage. And for us, the local union movement, which we naturally supported, also involved the CSN, which at the time was still called the CCCL. Because they had evolved a lot, and because the movement was an important one. And when we talked about Canadian unions, we didn't want to leave out the CCCL. We used them as an example of what was possible. And because during those years, a lot was happening at the CCCL, it was the right time to inform the English-speaking workers, especially those who were with the bureaucratic American unions, of what was going on in Quebec, and try to forge some links between the two. So I stayed up to date and I came here. We still had our house. My brother-in-law lived in it at the time, and I maintained my roots here even when I was working elsewhere.