

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.

THE STRIKE AT AYERS WOOLEN MILLS IN LACHUTE (1946-1947)

Union Organization at Ayers (1946-1947)

Judith Murray: Tell me about Lachute, please.

Madeleine Parent: Hmmm. So in Lachute, there were about 600-650 workers at a woolen mill, Ayers Woolen Mills, which made these beautiful wool blankets that were very popular on the market. And during the Valleyfield strike of '46, there had been a group of workers who wanted us to go there, because they wanted to join our union. We had told them, "We're too busy with the strikes in Montréal and Valleyfield right now. We can't go. But if you can wait, once this is over, someone will go see you." So I went in the fall of '46. There were two groups there. One of the groups was very militant, and had wanted to join our union since . . . at least since our strikes, if not before. They were very determined. The other group had been dealing with a group led by Sam Baron, an American who had been sent to Canada on behalf of the CIO Textile Union, which ended up becoming a rival union to ours. Sam Baron was a secret agent of the American government. And his final involvement in the labour movement, at least as far as we know, had been when he was sent by the U.S. Secret Service to work for Hoffa, Jimmy Hoffa of the Teamsters. And apparently, Hoffa found out he was an agent and beat him up in his office, so Baron went off crying somewhere, and we later found out that he had died in Florida.

So there was a group that was dealing with him, and they were honest people, albeit a little less militant, and their president had gone to Cornwall, where the Baron group had its headquarters, to try to arrange something with them because they weren't happy with what was going on at Ayers. But Baron's guys beat him up. So on his way back from Cornwall to Lachute, he stopped in Montréal to ask us if we would go work with them. And because we already knew the other group wanted the same thing, we realized they would be united. So I went, and I met with both groups. And in the end, there was . . . It took three or four days, I think. Some consultations took place, and the leaders of both groups finally came to an agreement. Not without saying, "Finally, you understand!" But in any case, peace was restored between them and the work of unionization happened very quickly. We sent the government an application for certification, with the backing of the majority of the workers. And after checking the company's lists, the government had no choice but to certify us.

And then two things happened. First, the government sent one of its representatives—the same one who had led the vote in Valleyfield—to meet with the president of the old group in Lachute, who insisted on bringing the local's elected secretary with him, at some, I don't know, at some restaurant, something like that, to tell him they would not do well in our union, and that he knew of a better union rep. I guess he knew that Baron was done, I

don't know. That rep was Paul Marquette, who had temporarily been brilliant in the organization of the streetcar drivers, but who had not continued to be brilliant. So he told them they should meet with Paul Marquette, and that he could arrange it. So the two of them, a man and a woman, listened closely to what he had to say, and then they said, "So, do you have . . . How can we get hold of you? Can you leave us a business card or something?" "Sure!" So he gave them his government business card and said something in English, I don't remember what, but in any case, "Take my advice."

And so the next time I was in Lachute, the two of them wanted to meet with me in secret. They showed me his card and told me about their meeting. So I said, "All right, we'll report him." So I reported him to the government on behalf of the workers. And Antonio Barrette decided he needed to be fired. And he certainly deserved it. So on the one hand, the government fired that guy, but on the other, they decertified us. And they gave Baron's group the right to take part in a secret vote with us. But no hearings had taken place with Baron at the Labour Relations Board, because had any taken place, we would have had the right to be there. That's how they set things up, like Duplessis did from time to time. So we were decertified and had to submit to a vote. So we did, and we won. But because of all that, my entire negotiation process had been pushed back [coughs] that whole time. So we got to the negotiations, and it was Gilbert Ayers who decided everything. But his cousins, Thomas, I think, and another one, were the negotiators, along with the company's secretary-treasurer, a French-Canadian who wasn't a member of the family. And they had strict orders: Do not give in. We presented our demands, which had been voted on by the membership, but nothing. Nothing.

At a certain point, the negotiations started to drag on. So he decided to bring in a lawyer from Toronto, who didn't speak a word of French. And other than me, no one on the committee spoke English. And it just so happened that I knew the lawyer, because he sat on the Ontario Labour Relations Board, and I had appeared before the Board a few times. So, he arrived, "How do you do Miss Parent? I'm so glad to see you, etc., etc." I said, "Hello. I want to tell you that from this moment on, you won't hear a word of English from me, because our people don't understand English. We're in Quebec here." So for two days, he tried to make me speak English, but I wouldn't. Finally, he left. But the company had known what it was doing. Their idea had been to bring in an Anglo, so that everything would take place between him and me only, and the workers wouldn't know what was going on.

Sophie Bissonnette: We'll stop here, Madeleine. The tape is running out.

MP: The company just wanted to waste time, without giving us a single thing. Meanwhile, the other union that the company had brought in and that had lost the vote, even though they hadn't done . . . taken part in any hearings at the Labour Relations Board, continued to cause us trouble. And the more militant workers' committee asked to meet with me before one of the union meetings. They said, "For each step we take forward, the government makes us take another step back. At every stage, our work is being sabotaged. They're laughing at us. They're not complying with the labour laws. And if we allow this to continue, people are going to get discouraged. We have to go on strike." And I knew it was true, that they were right. But I knew that a strike here would be much more difficult than the one in Valleyfield, because we didn't have a critical mass of 3,300 workers. Here, there were only 650 workers, and that was it. So I explained that to them, and we discussed it for a long while, and then the meeting took place. They proposed a strike, and it was accepted.

The Ayers Strike and Imprisonment (1947)

Madeleine Parent: The strike broke out in April, and for three weeks it remained completely peaceful. There were picket lines, everything was orderly, and there were no problems, even though Duplessis kept issuing statements against the so-called communists and trying to turn the public against us. Things stayed quiet. For May 1, Gilbert Ayers had hired a . . . a director of . . . as a strikebreaker, a man named Marc Carrière, who later worked for Cardinal Léger, soliciting funds for the Cardinal's works. He appointed him as his personnel director and public spokesperson. The police had arrived in large numbers. The provincial police from Lachute. And on May 1, a parade was organized, along with the police, with Gilbert Ayers and his cousins and the foremen at the head of it, to break the strike. And as they moved along, the police arrested all the picketers. The date was May 1, if I remember correctly.

And I was hidden in a house next to the gate, and people were coming and going. Just a few, so as not to alert the police. But when we heard that all the men were being arrested, I thought we could form a picket line made up of women. But as soon as I went outside—seven or eight of the young women had come out with me—we didn't even have time to join hands and form a line before a police officer ran over, followed by his sergeant, and arrested me. He was the reason I was charged with assaulting a police officer. It's because I saw him from far away, and the look on his face really disgusted me, because I realized that he was not only thinking about arresting me, he was also thinking about sex. So the sergeant ran over to arrest me, but the other officer yelled something like, "She's mine!" And so the sergeant, who didn't really understand what was going on, stepped aside to let him pass. And when [the officer] got to me, I turned my back on him because I was so disgusted by him, and I elbowed him in the stomach.

Obviously, he arrested me, and I was taken to the small local Lachute city jail. Two of our picketers were already there. There were two regular cells and a cage that Lachute kept, a cage you could stand up in. It was called the rabid dog cage, because when they had to catch rabid dogs, they put them in that cage. So they put me in the cage and I stayed . . . I think I spent the night there, that time. Anyway, there was a metal thing you could lie on, if your bones could handle lying on metal. There was cardboard on top of it. But there was no mattress and no blanket. Certainly no blankets from Ayers, which was right nearby. I spent the night there. And I had . . . Throughout the entire strike, I had worn a raincoat. It was pretty big, and had a hood, and it had been useful to me in several different circumstances. That night, I slept on it. Two police officers were on guard duty. They asked each other, "Can she really be sleeping on that? No way, it's impossible, impossible." And they continued to discuss it. But when they left, I got up. There were vermin, mice, rats, and when [the officers] were around, I didn't see any. But when they left, I had to keep moving around to keep them away.

So that's how that went. Finally, I was taken to the courthouse in Saint-Jérôme, and I was released on bail. The charge was "assaulting a police officer," even though the reason the officer had come over in the first place was because he already intended to arrest me. I was arrested about five times during the Lachute strike. The effort of . . . I was taken to the courthouse in Saint-Jérôme, at least once, maybe twice, with a detour via the Montréal courthouse, where they took my fingerprints, my photos, everything that was required by the regulations. And then I was taken to the jail in Saint-Jérôme. Duplessis had ordered that I not be provided with a female prison guard, so I was looked after by men. Even in the Lachute jail, if I needed to leave the cage to go to the washroom, I had to ask the men, obviously. They unlocked the door, they stood watch, and then I went back. One of the times I was arrested, it was nighttime. I had come back. I had been released on bail, and everyone

had . . . The strike committee had called the other strikers to tell them, “Madeleine is back. We’re going to hold a meeting at the union hall.” We had a big meeting room, and right in the middle of the meeting, inside our own union hall, two police officers came to get me. The people were infuriated. And I heard . . . They started yelling, “She’s not leaving, she’s not leaving.” But when I saw the two officers, I saw they weren’t guys who had been appointed by the Union Nationale. So I said, “It’s a trap.” And most of the police officers were downstairs, waiting for us to make a scene, at which time they would storm the room and fire tear gas, and we would no longer have a hall. So I climbed up onto a ladder, and I said to everyone, “I’m leaving. Prepare your pickets for tomorrow, and make sure your committee keeps running.” So I left with the two officers, but not without a couple of hiccups, because with all the arrests, I had started keeping my pockets full of nickels and dimes, I think, to make phone calls, sometimes long-distance phone calls, when I got out of jail in Saint-Jérôme. And when I put my coat on, a whole bunch of nickels and dimes fell out [laughs].

Sound technician: Sorry, I have to change the battery.

MP: Those police officers hadn’t been appointed by Duplessis. They were Godbout-era officers. So I thought, “There’s a chance some people will suffer, so the captain chose these guys. He wouldn’t choose people that Duplessis wouldn’t want to have put in a bad situation. So I told everyone I was leaving, and that they had to prepare for the next day’s picketing, and as I put on my coat, all the nickels and dimes I had on me, to make phone calls as soon as I got out of jail, fell to the ground, and the older of the two policemen rushed to the ground to pick them up, because the workers had become threatening, and they had realized that I didn’t want a fight and that I was cooperating nicely. So I left with them. But when I got downstairs, Captain Labbé was there with police cars and all the cops, ready to storm our hall. I told the lieutenant—one of the officers who had arrested me—“I’m not feeling very well today. I’d like to go to a jail where there’s a female prison guard.” So he put me in the captain’s car, and Labbé got in beside me. So I made my request, and Labbé said, “Who’s in charge here, you or me?” I said, “That’s clear. I’m just making a request, is all.” So I didn’t get a female prison guard, and I spent the night in jail, again.

Judith Murray: Who looked after you in jail?

MP: At the jail in Lachute, it was only the janitor. Unless I had to go to the washroom. Then a police officer came to unlock the door, stand guard, and bring me back to the cage. That’s it. But when I arrived at the jail in Saint-Jérôme, it was the governor of the prison who met me. And normally, I wasn’t held only until the next day. I was held for longer before seeing the judge, because that was part of Duplessis’s strategy to discourage people, to make them feel alone, so they would lose the strike. During that period, Kent Rowley, who was working in Ontario with our union members, had immediately come to Lachute, and he was arrested the first time he went out on the picket lines. So the two of us had been arrested, and it was clear that if a third person arrived, they would be, too.

JM: Question: Who provided you with moral support during all that?

MP: Well, I knew what the workers were thinking. And at the jail in Lachute, the janitor brought me their messages. At the jail in Saint-Jérôme, there were three male guards. They were . . . They weren’t the type of people I could trust. The governor was more humane, and he had brought his wife down. They lived on the third floor of the courthouse, which also contained the jail. He brought her downstairs to tell me, regretfully—and she confirmed it—that they had been ordered by Duplessis not to have her act as female prison guard for me. They felt very bad about it. But I already knew that those two were more humane. So

there were the two of them. The governor came by from time to time, since he was responsible for discipline at the jail.

As for the three male prison guards, they weren't anything great. I had a pewter mug for my coffee—when they gave me any—and in order to protect myself, I kept it near the heater. Because the building was very echoey, and if I had been attacked, I would have been able to make noise that would echo throughout the building. So that made me feel better.

JM: Could your family come see you?

MP: No, they couldn't see me, but my mom came anyway. But our lawyer, Bernard Mergler, said she could maybe try to bring me some fruits, not too many so it wouldn't be obvious, and that she could give them to the governor, who would probably bring them to me. And so that's what happened. So I didn't see her. I wasn't allowed to see her. But I received a few oranges and apples, and the governor would tell me, "Your mother came by. She brought you these." During . . . I was arrested at the union hall another time, after I had gotten out of jail, on a different occasion. That time, we knew they weren't going to try to provoke the people in the hall. So I understood that we could hold a short meeting, then let them leave. And there was another organizer with me, and I asked one of the strikers on the committee, Mr. Trudel, to stay behind to be a witness when the police arrived. So he stayed behind with his two daughters, one of whom was a striker, and the other of whom had come with them. And they didn't get home until 2:00 a.m. But the provincial police force's true executioner was Paul Benoît. And when he came into the room, after we had been arrested, he went to the garbage can in the office, and later on, at my trial, he pulled out a piece of paper. It was the meeting president's notes, along with other notes I had added, and on top of that, he had forged the endings of sentences, using subversive words. And when it came to the trial, which I'll tell you more about later . . . Paul Benoît, when he was being cross-examined by our lawyer, I was able to pinpoint all the words he had added. So he was caught with that, but at the end of the session, at lunchtime, when most people had gone out, Benoît went to our lawyer and said, "So, that wasn't too bad, was it?" No shame whatsoever about what he had done. But that's how things went.

And in jail . . . Overall, I'd say I spent about five weeks in jail. A few days after my arrest, I was released on bail. And if Kent was in jail, it was the same thing. And they wanted \$2,000 for each bail bond. Cash. The only other option was to have someone put up their property as bail, but only if it was fully paid off, no mortgage. So that was difficult. We kept having to pay \$2,000.

JM: Who provided the \$2,000?

MP: Friends, other strikers, and people from Montréal who supported the union movement. But each time, it took a lot of running around. And there were times when both Kent and I had been arrested, and we were in prison cells. And the lieutenant came to the cell door and brought me out onto the sidewalk, just so he could arrest me again. Because I had only been arrested to get me out of Lachute, eh? And it had been done quickly, as far as the warrant was concerned. And probably Duplessis, when looking at the warrant, said, "It's not enough. This is not right." So they would get another warrant and come get me, take me out of my cell and arrest me again. And then they would send me back to my cell. The same thing happened to Kent.

JM: And Madeleine, when you were in jail, there must have been times when you were afraid.

MP: No. It was only the male prison guards that . . . One of them didn't appear to be very mentally stable. He may have previously been a psychiatric patient, I don't know, but at any rate, he wasn't well. But they all made so much noise with the doors every time they came in that . . . because there were two doors, plus my hallway door. And there was nothing to muffle the noise. So to me, that in itself was a form of protection. Because there were other cells, on the other side, not right up against my wall, but a little further down, and I could hear their doors open and close, too. I often knew when someone new had been arrested, by the sound of the door. And if it was the time of day when the morning strikers were being arrested, I was usually right. So no, not really. But I have to say that the sheets were dirty. But I didn't have to ask permission to go to the washroom, because there was one at the end of the corridor. But when I was in jail, I never took a proper bath. I took sponge baths, in case someone came in. If people had been able to hear me running a lot of water, I wouldn't have felt comfortable. So most of the time, I slept in my big raincoat and the rest of my clothes. As far as the food was concerned, it was quite awful. I read Hébert's book, Jacques Hébert's book *Trois jours en prison* [Three Days in Jail], but he had been treated like a gentleman. That wasn't the way we were treated. The book also contained an article by a journalist named Jules Fournier, who had been imprisoned for being a journalist. And the food had been horrible, and what was described in the book, they had "skelley" for breakfast . . . a sort of porridge, but with no sugar or milk. But when you haven't eaten, even if you eat it slowly, you still have to eat something. And the coffee wasn't great either, as you can imagine. And then we were given soup or something, I don't know. It was one dish, plus some slices of bread. There was no real shortage of bread, for me at least. I didn't need very many slices of bread, but I ate them anyway, because there was nothing else.

At one point, to ensure the strike could continue, the strike committee was put in charge of everything: organizing the picketing, distributing whatever funds there were for the picketers, trying to listen to everyone, solving problems. They were very committed and very efficient. They did extraordinary work. I specifically want to mention Édouard Gauthier, who was one of the strikers, one of the elected officials, and Annie Carrière, who was the elected secretary . . . the treasurer, I believe, elected by the union. Two very intelligent people who kept their wits about them despite everything that was happening. I should mention that in Lachute, the police behaved almost as though there were a riot law in effect. The minute they saw more than three people on the street, they harassed them. It was even worse for the women. But that's how it was. They hoped people would get discouraged and give up. Five months in, it became clear that we couldn't win. So I went to Lachute and held a meeting to recommend that they return to work, because we were getting nowhere, the opposition was too strong.

But I should mention that at that time, there weren't only our strikers at Ayers Woolen Mills. There were also about 200 spool workers. They worked in a specific factory belonging to Gilbert Ayers, and they made wooden spools for the textile factories. Their conditions were horrible, and their salaries were even lower than those in the woolen mills. Accidents were very, very frequent there because the company took no reasonable measures to protect the workers. So there were people there with missing fingers, people who had had all sorts of accidents. And those people . . . The day the police stormed into Valleyf . . . into Lachute and started arresting people and breaking down barriers, those people walked off the job in solidarity with the people from the woolen mill. And they continued until the end, despite all the problems it caused them, too. They signed their membership cards and identified themselves as union members to the strikers from the woolen mill. It's pretty rare to see a group of workers unionize when a strike is being attacked in full force and fear is running high. But that's what happened. The strike wasn't successful. We had no collective agreement. But we had exposed the abominable working conditions and the low wages to such an extent that the company ended up having to offer even higher wages than we had

asked for in our last demand before the strike.

The issue that remained was to make sure they could return to work, that the company would take them back. So after thinking about it seriously, I realized there were only two people among the strikers who could get that done. Because me . . . the company didn't want anything to do with me. It had to be one of the workers. Those two people were Annie Carrière and Édouard Gauthier. But with Marc Carrière being the way he was, I was certain that a woman would have a lot more trouble with him. So I asked Édouard if he would sacrifice himself and negotiate the employees' return to work. He immediately said, "So that means I can't go back." I said, "Right." It had to be that way, because the minute he started negotiating for himself, the employer would use him against the other workers, including the most militant strikers. But he accepted the task, and he negotiated the return to work of every single striker, without exception. He went onto unemployment insurance, and we later hired him. Not with a very high salary, but at least he kept working with us. But he was an exemplary man, and I would have liked to be a fly on the wall and watch him negotiate with Marc Carrière, who was so full of himself, who was so arrogant and aggressive. And Édouard, this big worker, succeed in getting all those people back to work, without any discrimination.