

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

WOMEN'S WORK AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN QUEBEC'S UNIONS (1940s and 1950s)

Women After World War II (1940s and 1950s)

Sophie Bissonnette: Yes, please respond, Madeleine.

Madeleine Parent: Yes. There were layoffs in the wartime factories, particularly in the munitions factories, as well as in the aircraft industry, in Léa's factory, at RCA Victor, and elsewhere. And there were jobs . . . Women lost other jobs when the young people came back from the war. But they had the right to keep their jobs. And I should also mention that there was a lot of catching up to be done in domestic production, which had been somewhat neglected during the war. So workers were still needed in the food industries, the tobacco industry, in much of the production of necessary household items, and in the textile mills, for example. Things hadn't slowed down like they had during the crisis of the 1930s.

In addition, because in 1946 we had won the eight-hour workday, there were now three shifts in the textile factories, instead of two. So that required even more workers. So in that sense, there was still quite a lot of work. But mostly, workers were needed in the areas where women had traditionally worked before the war. Meaning the areas that paid less. Also, there were some permanent changes that had resulted from the war. For example, before World War II, a lot of the bank teller jobs had been held by men, but since World War II, they've been held by women, and that has continued to be the case. And so certain jobs . . . office jobs, jobs in certain services, continued to be held by women. So there was still a lot of work, but it tended to be less well paid, and there was a return to "traditional" work, with a bit of an "extension," but it was limited. What I mean is that there would no longer be a large number of women working as electricians, machinists, plumbers, or even carpenters.

SB: Women wanted to work. Was this a desire they had acquired during . . .

MP: They wanted to work and they needed to work, because they needed money, because they needed to earn a living. And when the war ended, it didn't mean that all the men immediately found work and that life went back to how it had been, as though they had never left. Families had to make a lot of adjustments. Some of the men had died. In other households, they had trouble readjusting, and the women needed a certain amount of independence, as well as the right to work.

But along with all that, we entered the era of McCarthyism, which was inspired by the United States, where they were having the witch hunts, and where women's work . . . the idea that there needed to be daycare centres, especially for women who had to make their own livings, all those types of things were being called into question once again. And women's union activism, the union lives of women, also suffered, because when they demanded daycare facilities, or the right to free choice, or other rights, or even equal pay for work of equal value, a number of men had been conditioned to say, "That's not your business." And some men chose to believe that women were their competition. So, during the period of McCarthyism, and the witch hunts of Duplessis' legislation, and Duplessis' anti-union administration, when strikes were being broken, when all our rights were being attacked, when they were trying to take away what we had gained in terms of economic conditions and rights during the war, we had to deal with all of those things, which became very difficult.

Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value (1940s and 1950s)

Madeleine Parent: In 1942-43, I noticed that in the cotton mills, the women were being paid less per hour than the men, for the same work. Which meant that the company was not at all complying with the principle of equal pay for equal work. So that was where we had to start, because there were two pay scales, one for the men and one for the women. That was in addition to the job ghettos, which were already bad enough. And our first collective agreements succeeded in establishing equal pay for equal work, at least. But we hadn't reached the next step yet. In 1945, right after the war, I had the opportunity to meet with two women from the CGT [General Confederation of Labour], who were delegates here in Montréal. During the war, the International Labour Office had been transferred from Geneva to Montréal, and after the war, the first meeting was held here. They were the CGT delegates, and I asked if I could meet with them, so a meeting took place. We discussed pay equity, and I asked them what was going to happen. Was there a way we could achieve what was later called equal pay for work of equal value? And they told me that in '39, before the war, the topic had already been discussed at the International Labour Organization, and that a good number of people from the unions—but not from the employers' side—had agreed that something had to be done. But then the war broke out, and everything came to a halt because of the war. And so, in '45, they had reintroduced the topic, and they were hoping for a decision. Well, it didn't happen until 1951. And the war had ended in '45.

Sophie Bissonnette: What happened in '51? What was it?

MP: It came from the International Labour Organization. It was the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, and it was based on skills, effort, responsibilities, and working conditions. But Canada took even longer. First of all, it had to be passed at the United Nations before any other countries started to feel some pressure. And then it took place country by country. And the principle had been enshrined in the Charter of Rights, but without the necessary mechanisms to enforce it. So that was another battle. But that's just part of the legal battle we have to wage at every stage, which is always followed by another battle to make sure the laws passed by our governments are actually enforced.

A Pioneer in the International Unions (1940s and 1950s)

Sophie Bissonnette: So I'd like you to tell me a bit about . . . being a woman in union organization during those years, and how people perceived you.

Madeleine Parent: Me . . . First of all, before the employers were forced to negotiate with us, they had had three or four years to get to know us [laughs], because of the dealings we had had with all the government agencies. And throughout them all, it was the government officials, the deputy ministers, who dealt with us, and with whom we'd argue and to whom we'd state our cases. And so when the first collective agreements were signed with the big companies—because there had been others before, with smaller companies, particularly in the wool industry and in others—they already understood. And there were always committees, rather large ones, of female and male workers, who participated as well. And that was different too—the fact that our committees had women on them—whereas other committees, not at Léa's place of work, but elsewhere, were made up exclusively of men. So they had learned that about us, and they had had to get used to the idea.

SB: And with your colleagues in the unions, was there ever any friction or tension?

MP: Well, you have to understand the structure. At the Montréal Trades and Labour Council, there was no single authority. It was a group of people who had joined together to plead their cases to city or government authorities, but it had no authority within the unions. It was international. And we belonged to the International United Textile Workers of America, which was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. So we could run things our own way here in Canada. But it's important to remember that the International Union, which had its head office in Washington, was very reactionary, and that it tended to side with the employers. So we had to build a barrier between the American bureaucrats and ourselves. We had to hold our conventions and conferences here in Canada, elect our own representatives, adopt our own policies, and say to them, "We pay you a tax per capita, so mind your own business!" And they had to do so, even though we always had to keep an eye on them, until a certain point when they completely betrayed us and sided with Dominion Textile. So we had to be assertive, that's all.

And I was the first woman to be elected to the executive committee of the Trades and Labour Council. And so . . . And that was because we had a strong delegation of textile mill workers, and also because the tobacco workers, and those from . . . from Léa's factory, and others, supported us. So I was elected. But even certain people with progressive ideas said, "The executive is no place for a woman." So I said, "Well, that's too bad. The textile workers want to be represented." "Oh, but . . ." "Well, tell me, why not?" Well, it turned out that two of the officers went out drinking before each meeting of the executive, and they always showed up drunk. Well, that was their problem, wasn't it? Not mine. So I was elected, and I remained in that position for as long as the people wanted me to, and that was that. But you always had to be willing to keep pushing when the members wanted something done. And not to accept that there was any other reason, that we were discussing the issue and that it had to be settled one way or another, through debate.