

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 *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991) and *Madeleine Parent, tisserande de solidarités* (2002), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

WORKING CONDITIONS AND THE UNIONIZATION OF WOMEN IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY (1942-1946)

Union Organization at the Dominion Textile Merchants Manufacturing Plant and the Question of Women (1943)

Madeleine Parent: In Montréal, there were three large factories and three smaller ones, but they included tooling and major repairs, finishing, shipping, and dyeing. And Kent, as the representative, asked me if I would become an organizer to do the work at his factories in Montréal. It was the first time I had been asked to serve as a union organizer, although it was something I had wanted to do for a long time. I had some doubts about it, because it had never happened despite my wanting it to, so I asked him, "Do you think I can do it?" He replied, "Look at who's doing it for the International Union. Don't you think you can do it better than so-and-so? Or so-and-so, or so-and-so? You know you're able to do just as well, and probably better, than any of them." That gave me confidence, and so I started in Montréal, at the mill called Merchants—the mill we used to call Merchants. It's closed now. It was in Saint-Henri, along the Lachine Canal.

Judith Murray: In what year?

MP: In early '43. I started on February 1. Some contacts had already been made, and I should mention that all the contacts were men, mechanics. When we held the first meeting, or maybe it wasn't the first . . . At the first one I just introduced myself . . . But at the second or third meeting, it was all men. I told them we had to make contact with the women. The first response I received was that they only wanted a mechanics' union. So I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, but we're an industrial union. That goes against our constitution. It's out of the question."

Historically, in the past, there had been trade unions. But at that time, in 1943, that wasn't the case. So it wasn't an option. Some of them were disappointed, but others weren't. So I asked again, "Which women should I meet with, at their homes?" Finally, one of the mechanics said, "Well, there's Mrs. So-and-So, or Mrs. Such-and-Such . . ." "Oh," I said, "What did they do during the strike of '37?" So one of the mechanics said, "They were good. They blocked the scabs, and they did great work." "Who was it?" This was in 1943, so it really hadn't been that long ago. But they only gave me a few names. They were the names of people who had been very committed, who had fought hard. So I started visiting them. And I remember that one of them, who had been militant in '37, asked me, "Who gave you my name?" So I said, "At this stage in the organization, we don't give out names, we don't want anyone to be exposed. But I

can tell you that it was one of the mechanics." So she never found out, unless he told her himself. But the women were very happy to be accepted, to be wanted in the union. And so we went to the Mount Royal factory, further east on the Lachine Canal in Côte-Saint-Paul, and from there, we went to Hochelaga. In the meantime, we also organized a small mechanics' workshop, what the company called the General Machine Shop. It was all men, and some of them had come from the railroad workshops. And for them, it was completely natural to be in a union, but it was a small group of about 50 or 60 people, or maybe more.

JM: Madeleine, I'd like to interrupt you to ask: You were a woman, a unionist and a feminist—even though that word had barely begun to be used. How were you treated during those meetings, where there were only men? You were a unionist. How . . . Were there any remarks made about you?

MP: At first, yes. I remember we had a union hall that was actually a vacant restaurant in old Saint-Henri . . . a place that had gone through all the years of the economic crisis in a state of disrepair. And the men from the night shift had arrived before those from the day shift, who would arrive right after their shift ended. So there I was. And there was a furnace there. And one of the men offered to light the furnace, etc., so I said, "Go ahead." I was glad. And once he got the fire going, he sat down and said, "So, when is the organizer arriving?" And I said, "I'm the organizer." "A little girl?" So we all started talking, and I asked them how things worked in the factory, about their working conditions, about the worst injustices, and they kept mentioning the "royal family." According to them, the royal family consisted of certain relatives of the foremen and the superintendent. They didn't trust them because they would report back to the company. So when they recruited, they always had to avoid the royal family, and all that. In any case, they had left. And the question had never come up again.

JM: At that time, you were married. Was there a kind of . . . Wasn't it difficult, at that time, to be a married woman and a unionist?

MP: Well, my husband was in the army, and there were already a lot of married women working in the industries. There were also others, who had been laid off during the economic crisis and were now coming back, and they had families. That wasn't an issue. It was more the fact of being a woman. But, with my work experience, it didn't come up. That's not to say that no one wished to criticize me, or that they didn't do so behind my back, but it was generally accepted by the workers, because our task was to organize them, so we asked them questions that interested them. And we got to the point where their demands were starting to take shape. That's where their interests lay, in changing the conditions in the factories, etc.

Now, as for being a feminist. First of all, the women were so happy to be accepted, and to not have to keep quiet if they dared enter a union hall, because in the past, elsewhere, not only had they felt unwanted, but they hadn't been supposed to speak up, to criticize, and all that. But here, they could. So they were glad to be there. And then there were the children. It was mainly the women who protected the children in the factory against abuse by the foremen. So when the women told them it was a good union, and to come with them, they were glad to attend with them. And we never had any trouble with the 12–13–14–15–16-year-olds. They did what the women suggested. Especially since, at the factory, they were protected by them. And now that the women were organized, even if they didn't have a collective agreement, they were beginning to find a united voice to defend themselves against injustices. Not to earn higher pay, but to fight injustices in the factory.

JM: Was there any sexual harassment at that time?

MP: Oh, goodness, yes. There was sexual harassment. There were some favourites. And then there were others who really got the brunt of it. Plus, there was no maternity leave, of course, which meant that if a woman left to have a baby, there was no guarantee she'd be taken back afterward. And if she resisted a foreman who abused her sexually, what were the chances he'd take her back after she had her baby? All those considerations had to be taken into account. Also, they would likely be given the worst cotton, the worst machines, etc. Especially since the mechanics were the ones to fix the machines. And if the foreman liked one worker better than another, he would get the mechanic to fix her machine first, so that it worked almost all the time, while the other woman would have to wait, and during that time, she wasn't being paid.

So there were many, many injustices. But by starting to get organized, even without a collective agreement, they were able to exclude the favourites and speak with a united voice, not on everything, but on certain issues. To the point that some of the favourites, who weren't as bad as all that, wanted to be part of the group. They didn't want to be excluded. So except perhaps for the most hardened of them, they joined the majority. Which was very interesting. Nobody was being fooled, but they were happy to have them join.

Working Conditions in the Textile Industry and the Mobilization of Women (1942-1946)

Madeleine Parent: For me, when I accepted to work for the international textile union—because there was no other option . . . when I chose to work in textiles rather than go organize in another industry, what appealed to me most was that there were a lot of women in that industry, and that there were also children. And I knew that a lot of bureaucrats looked down on women and children and didn't want anything to do with them. And even though they had to [deal with them], they weren't necessarily dedicated to the cause. So that was my first choice, and when Kent got to the point where he needed another organizer, I went to work for him, and I started in Montréal. And it was immediately clear that there was a desperate need for organization. The conditions were horrible, and the exploitation of women—and of children, too, but mostly of women—was very, very blatant. For example, after only a few weeks of training, they were almost all on piecework. So, in the sense that it was the pace of the machine . . . the person who was being led by the machine, through the pace of their own work, forced the others, including the new employees, to try to keep up. So they were at the core of the exploitation. Apart from that, they were in job ghettos. They worked as machine operators, whether it be on carding machines, spinning machines, or weaving looms. They were all paid by the piece. And that was a great injustice. Meanwhile, the mechanics were paid by the hour. They also sometimes received bonuses based on the operators' production, but at least they always had the security of their hourly wage. But the women . . . if their machines worked poorly or their cotton was no good, or if there wasn't enough humidity in the air, or if there were other problems, they would lose out, and they would lose a lot because they were paid by the piece. So they always bore the brunt of it when things didn't go well. Things they weren't even responsible for. And that was in addition to being told off frequently, as though nothing else had happened to hinder production.

So, to keep the factory running, the foremen would constantly pressure the women, trying to get them to compete with each other since they were paid on a piecework basis. There were also the favourites, who would get the best machines and the best material to work with. So they suffered all those injustices.

Sophie Bissonnette: Could the women become machinists?

MP: No, it was . . . There was no written rule against it, but it never happened. And I knew a few women who made small repairs on the machines, and who would have liked to become machinists. But they always took guys, whom they would train. And the mechanics had an order. And the practice was to train boys to become apprentices, and then mechanics after that.

SB: So the possibilities for promotion were very limited for the women.

MP: They were machine operators, always paid by the piece. And sometimes, say if the company ordered one of the mechanics to speed up the machines, the women would arrive in the morning and everything would go badly. And that was because the speed had been increased. And they weren't paid for faulty work. And before we arrived, they even had fines for poor work, which we managed to abolish in the first few months, I believe, or definitely within the first year, even without a collective agreement. And there was also the whole question of maternity leave, and since there was no seniority and, what's more, Sunday mass preached that a woman's place was in the home, the company had every excuse not to accept the idea of maternity leave with job protection, in addition to pay during maternity leave. So a woman who planned to have children and who resisted the advances of her foreman always had to consider, "If I get pregnant and I leave, I'll lose everything. He won't take me back." It was another form of bullying, so that they wouldn't defend themselves against the harassment. There was also the issue of their working conditions. Sometimes, it would get extremely humid. Actually, most of the time it was much more humid than was good for their health. That was because the thread was less likely to break in very humid conditions. So they increased the humidity to levels that were good for the thread . . . as it moved. Which was a dangerous level. And there had been cases of tuberculosis—although less so in my time—among many of the employees, and especially among the women and the children, who started young. There was also a disease in the carding department, that the company never admitted responsibility for until much later, called byssinosis. It was a bit like the disease of people who worked with asbestos. For years and years the company wouldn't admit to it, even though they knew what was going on. Well, byssinosis is also a disease of the lungs. When the bales of cotton were shredded and the coarse cotton was put through the first machines—the carding machine and the frame—the cotton flew through the air, along with the dust it contained. I saw people come out of the mill after their shifts and have to lean on the fence just to catch their breath before they got on the streetcar or the bus. I knew one woman, whom I still know today, she was about 15 years old when she started working with cotton, or maybe 14. She worked in two of the company's factories, because one of them closed and she was transferred to the other one. Now she's 65 years old, and her lungs are in terrible shape, and because of the medication she's always had to take, her whole body is in bad shape, and she suffers a great deal.

They never admitted to it. It was the CSN—at that time it was still the CCCL, because we had already left—that finally revealed that byssinosis was a cotton-related disease, and that it was very serious. But it took unionists to reveal those things. With the women, when the machines went faster, they were . . . When the speed increased, we could see that women who were menstruating lost more blood. I had sent one to see my doctor. This was after the 1952 strike, when there had been changes in management and the company had doubled the number of tasks of several people, especially the operators. So she went and got treatment. Finally, the doctor told me—because I went to see him and I asked him what he thought. He said, "If she doesn't leave that job"—and she was only 18—"she'll eventually get to the point where she

won't be able to have children. There's nothing that . . . she has to leave." So she and I talked about it. And she found a new job. And she had kids. She's still alive today, and in good health. And after a year at her new job, she had changed. She was much livelier, her colour was better, and she had regained her youthful vitality.

So we had to tackle all those things. As well as the participation of women in union work and union decisions. Because the men . . . In the past, the men had always taken charge, and we had to make sure that, in certain departments at least, that the shop representatives were women, filing grievances and receiving the support they required from the union, and the employees in the department too, to take the grievances all the way. So that ended up making a big difference, because since the women were more exploited than the men, they tended to be more militant when it came to their grievances. When those who are most exploited are given a chance, they sometimes end up being the most militant. And there were certain departments, for example . . . And part of a union's work is to educate foremen and employers on what it means to have a union in the workplace. They were no longer the absolute masters. The workers now had a say in things. But some bosses, some foremen, were determined to remain the absolute masters. So in some departments, where we were pretty strong, when we complained that a machine was going too fast, for example, the women would slow down, so the boss would lose production volume. And it was always, "What's going on?" "Nothing, we're just tired." And as long as the women banded together, it was very difficult for the foremen, because on the one hand, they were being pressured by the boss, but on the other, the women were playing innocent and controlling production. From a forward-looking point of view, it could be quite frightening for a manager. "What's going to happen? Are they going to end up controlling everything?"

But it was just a way to force the employer to settle the grievances. And in Valleyfield, by using those means, we managed to get the [female] shop representatives to be able to bring delegations of the [female] workers concerned, when the union grievance committee was there to meet with management. So that meant there were sometimes eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, fifteen people at the meetings, and in the meantime, their machines weren't operating, of course. And sometimes this would go on for hours. As a result, the foremen and the manager were often forced to give in. As one of the workers said in Denys Arcand's film *On est au coton*, "We were free!" And Gérald Godin, who was there, said, "What do you mean by 'We were free?'" But he couldn't explain it any more than that. His words were "we were free," but what it really meant was that they had powers they had never had before. They were no longer being pushed around by the bosses, with no power to respond or to take action to make the employer suffer if necessary until he gave in. And it was very difficult for the government . . . The employers would complain to the government, "There's an illegal strike," etc. So they would show up, but they didn't know how things worked. But the women did, they knew the machines. So there was nothing they could do, as long as the women and their reps knew how . . . knew which strategies to employ and were willing to take them all the way.

Hierarchies in the Textile Mills (1942- 1946) (from the film *A Vision in the Darkness*)

Sophie Bissonnette: Was it the same . . . The way Léa described it, the labourers were mostly French Canadians, and above them were the foremen.

Commenté [TG1]: Dans la video, Madeleine dit "ne connaissaient pas . . ." (Verifier la transcription FR).

Madeleine Parent: Yes. First of all, where we were, there were very few immigrants. They were the exception, except for a certain number of mechanics, especially in a workshop right next to the Merchants plant, the General Machine Shop, where they did the major repairs. There, you had mechanics from Scotland and England, and rarely, mechanics from other countries. Most . . . Almost everyone was Francophone, or French Canadian, as they were called back then . . . I've forgotten what you were asking . . .

SB: If the . . . Was the management Anglophone?

MP: Oh, right. Yes. That was an interesting thing. In Valleyfield, for example, and in a number of other factories, the management was almost exclusively Anglophone. A few Francophone mechanics had been promoted to the position of assistant foreman, so they could at least serve as interpreters. But in later years, or at the beginning of the war, I don't know, a certain number of the mechanics who had become assistant foremen—in Montréal, at least, in the Saint-Henri and Hochelaga factories—had become foremen and superintendents. But in the factories in Valleyfield, the managers were Anglophones, and many of the first-line foremen were also Anglophones, so they needed foremen [laughs], assistant foremen simply to interpret to people what was being done.

So an English manager or superintendent would say of his workers that they were "mill hands." They were "hands." They weren't expected to speak. But with the union, because the grievances were discussed in French—and we had insisted that be the case, not only for the workers who filed the grievances, but also for their witnesses [laughs] and work colleagues who went to the office with the union committee. Everything had to take place in French. So the management would bring in interpreters, people who would make sure they understood [coughs]. And sometimes [coughs], they learned a bit of French in order to get by, so as not to appear too foolish. But it was unionism that brought about that change.