# 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.

## SECRETS OF AN ACTIVIST

### The Art of Negotiation

Judith Murray: One more question for this entire interview series, and the last question of the day. You're a very good negotiator. Where did you learn to negotiate?

Madeleine Parent: First of all, you learn from the workers. You have to listen to them, ask them questions, get them to open up about their working conditions, in order to find out what they need. Second, you have to read documents, to read collective agreements from elsewhere and from comparable industries, if possible. But there are generally lots of examples of those. And you have to know the laws, so that you know what the limits are, and what you can demand. But also, I began by shadowing Kent, who was the negotiator in 1943. I shadowed him because we had factories other than Dominion Textile, and in 1944, he said, "All right, we have lots of work in Ontario and elsewhere. You'll take care of the negotiations in Quebec." So I did. And by collaborating with the factory committees, it worked very well. But one thing that often surprised the workers who had never been part of the negotiations before was the ignorance of the employers. They would say, "They aren't as smart or as informed as we thought they were. What are they doing there?" "Well, they've always been protected. But now you're more informed." So that came as a big surprise. And it made them feel more confident in themselves. They realized they weren't as stupid as they had thought, because they could see the flaws in what the employers said. And when the employers lied or did other things, and we exposed them, well, then they came to despise them. Those experiences were very interesting.

We always had a lot of discussions, committees, before . . . First, with the members, to decide on their demands and to have them elect the committees, so that [the committees] would be representative. And then before the meetings with the company, and then again afterwards, so that they could stay completely up-to-date on what was happening. So the company couldn't just pull the wool over their eyes, you know? They were more satisfied.

JM: But to negotiate effectively, you also have to have a fairly logical mind.

MP: Yes, yes. Like young people today would say, you have to be "cool." You can't be a hothead who gets worked up about every little thing. That doesn't mean you can never get angry. Sometimes that's necessary. But it has to be necessary. Not a question of temperament. Even more so if you're a woman. People are even less forgiving if we get angry, and that . . . It's also unknown territory. So you have to be prepared. You have to be logical. You have to keep up, and you have to keep your cool. But it's very interesting work.

JM: Thank You!

**The Eve of Battle**

Françoise David: First of all, Madeleine, I'd like to tell you that when Sophie asked me to interview you today, I was very happy. Not so much because I absolutely want to pick your brain, but because even for me—and I tend to be a person who doesn't believe in what I can't see for myself—it feels somehow symbolic to meet you two days before the World March of Women, for the women of Quebec, at least. And I feel a bit as though I'm spending my "eve of battle" with Madeleine. When I was in Girl Guides, we often used the term "eve of battle" before making our pledges or before big events, and that vocabulary has stayed with me. And I said to myself, "I'm glad to be doing it with Madeleine Parent, the woman I admire most in the world," who for me is a model of generosity, of dedication, and of political intelligence, too.

So I'm here to interview you, but I feel the need to tell you that I am very, very happy to be able to say that two days before the march, I was with Madeleine. I'm sure you've experienced many "eves of battle." So before getting into "how did you become an activist," I'd like to ask you: In the hours before big events—and as activists, we can't always be sure that big events will necessarily be happy events . . . the night before a strike, for example, or before a major battle or an important government decision, how did you usually feel?

Madeleine Parent: First of all, I'd like to say that you're very kind. The night before a strike, I often spent the night elsewhere than at my home or anywhere else the police might find me before the strike began. Usually, I slept at a worker's home or at another location that was close to the strike. And I never slept very well. But like any other situation where you have to be alert all the time and keep your wits about you to help people, I slept when I could. But otherwise, I would imagine what the company's strategy might be, and that of the police, what might happen and how we would handle it.

FD: Were you nervous?

MP: Yes, I was nervous.

FD: It's always stressful.

MP: Yes, yes, very.

FD: Did you feel like you had a huge responsibility on your shoulders?

MP: Up to a point, yes. Strikes were always a big responsibility. Because I would think about the members who had made the decision. They were the ones putting their jobs on the line. And if we lost, they could lose everything, and they could end up on a blocklist and not be able to find work elsewhere in the industry. I'm thinking of the people who went on strikes in the cotton industry before we arrived. And when they lost the strikes, or didn't win them, in any case, even if some concessions were made, they would leave for the U.S., because no one in Canada would hire them anymore. You have to think about those things.

FD: Which means that even though the decision to go on strike was a collective one—you didn't make the decision on your own, obviously—the fact that you were a union organizer, and had helped organize the strike, you probably thought to yourself, "If we lose, they'll lose everything, but I'll still have my job as a union organizer." So you feel terribly responsible.

MP: Exactly. Absolutely. They were the ones who put it all on the line. And the men had their families, and the women, they were sometimes raising families alone, and were quite poor. So they were really putting it all on the line. In other words, it was imperative that the

members understand the main issue, and that they be in agreement. I remember more recent strikes, when I was with immigrant women in Greater Toronto or in other industrial cities, and I didn't ask them to go on strike. We would present them with the report, and we would tell them, "You've got two choices. You can either sign the collective agreement we negotiated, or you can go on strike. If you don't do either, you'll no longer have a collective agreement, because the one you had has expired. But you're the ones who have to decide. And if you decide [to go on strike], you can't expect everything to be settled in a month's time. Once it starts, you have to go all the way. Because if you drop it partway through, it will be a disaster." And so then, if the strikes dragged on and a month went by, then another, and then another, the workers or the women would remind each other, "You knew that . . . We knew this could happen. And we made a commitment not to drop the strike. We have to take it all the way." They would say that to each other.

FD: Mm–hmm. So that meant that you, as the leader—because that's what you were, even if the weight of responsibility wasn't yours alone—it meant that you found it important to be very clear with the women and men about the issues and the risks. For you, it was important to be completely transparent, and to make sure people weren't getting into something they didn't understand.

MP: Exactly. That way is the bureaucrats' way. And it's disastrous. It's humiliating and debasing for the workers. But when you explain to them what you think and what you know, when you open it up to discussion and debate, then . . . So when they take that kind of action, they're committed to it and they understand that it's their . . .

FD: What I'm hearing you say, Madeleine—and it aligns completely with who you are—is that you have faith in people's intelligence and that you trust their judgement. Basically, you appeal to the best in people. Because we know the best is not all there is, right? Unfortunately, we know there's also worse: savagery, genocide, wars, everyday pettiness. But you put your money on the best in people and you appeal to their intelligence. So in fact, in my opinion, you're the least demagogic leader I know of.

MP: Well, there are some that exist. But you don't hear about them much. Because the big media tend to talk about the stars or the great leaders of the union movement. And some of them are good. But unfortunately, some of them are simply bureaucrats who don't tell people the truth. They want to control them and when they do, it's very dangerous, because if they control everything, it's easier for them to deal directly with management, on their own.

**Inner Strength and Awakening of Conscience**

Françoise David: Have you never, ever—I think I know what you're going to say—had any regrets? Have you ever woken up in the morning and thought to yourself, "My God, I could have had a life that was so much simpler"? Have you ever felt even the tiniest bit of doubt?

Madeleine Parent: No, never. Never.

FD: I knew it! Really, never?

MP: No, never. First of all, my family was very resistant to what I wanted to do. And I married a student from Western Canada who had been in the same student movement as me. And even though I still loved my parents, it was an affirmation of my independence. It allowed me to assume responsibility for the problems that would come along with being an activist. But it's not that I thought it was wrong to continue being an activist. And if we take the example of Duplessis, I never would have wanted to be like him, obviously. And so . . . And people needed it, even though they went through some very, very hard times.

For example, the strike in Lachute. The circumstances were extremely difficult. And since Duplessis had taken our victory at Valleyfield personally, he had made up his mind that he would do absolutely everything in his power to make sure the workers wouldn't win in Lachute. And he succeeded! And when he had me arrested—I think I was arrested about five times—he always kept me in jail longer than was necessary, just so the workers would think, "She's gone now." And when Kent came—he didn't come at first because I was the one in charge and he was doing some organizing work in Ontario—but as soon as I was arrested, he came to Lachute, and he was arrested the very first morning he was there.

FD: That didn't take long!

MP: No, it didn't take long. And they held him for quite a while, too. But after that, I needed to help the people . . . First of all, by going all the way, using any means possible. Obtaining support from the union movement, as well as elsewhere. And in the end, trying to make sure that the people, even though they hadn't won the strike, were able to return to work. So there was always something to do.

FD: I understand what you're saying. And my God, I believe you, because you never changed, that's really who you are. But honestly, I don't know, it seems to me there must have been two or three moments in your life, not moments where you regretted the choices you had made, but maybe moments where you would have liked—to use my own expression—to just grow tomatoes somewhere where no one knew who you were? Didn't you ever feel like that?

MP: [Laughs] No, no. No, no. When I managed to take some vacation time—which didn't happen every year, but when there were no strikes, I was able to take some—things were more relaxed, but it didn't change my goals or my plans.

FD: Of course not, but you're allowed to be an activist and still take vacations.

MP: Yes, when I could.

FD: When you could, wow.

MP: Yes. But you know, the members . . . There's a group of members—some people get discouraged—but there's always a group of members who are extremely committed and who persevere regardless of the cost. So I'm not alone in that.

FD: No, of course not. And I know that, as a modest person, you'll say, "But no, there were others." But as someone who's been paying attention to all this, and who's been an activist for quite some time myself, I'm telling you, I haven't met that many people who, over 30 years, as you say, only take a two-week vacation when they can, between two strikes. That's not very common, Madeleine. And so of course, the question is, "How do you do it? Where do you get that inner strength?"

MP: The strength comes from the workers who are committed. Those who . . . who . . . First of all, you never go into battle without consulting everyone and making the decision together. But there's usually one group that is more committed than the others and that grasps the situation in its entirety. And they make excellent comrades! And their sense of initiative in the heat of battle is extraordinary, because they're the ones living it. They've worked for and been exploited by the employer against whom they're striking. They already know him, but then they get to know him in a different light. And they're . . . They'll do anything, within reason—they're not crazy. And they learn things about . . . about their situation, about society. They become conscious, proud citizens. We're never alone.

FD: That's true. What you're saying is true. And as I listen to you, the impression I get is that

one thing you can say is that your life has never been dull!

MP: No.

FD: It's the kind of life in which you learn a lot. I'm sure you learned a lot as well. And it's an intense way of living. Constantly intense, constantly. Going from one strike to another, meeting all those new people, and everything else you described . . . In the end, it's a sort of calling, then, is it not?

MP: It's a calling. But you know, there are sometimes periods where it's more difficult to organize [people], and there have been workers who, even when they've lost, have said, "Well, we went as far as we could, and we were right." So for them, it's the experience of a lifetime, with all the sacrifices they make, and their pride at having understood that . . . It's wonderful to see. For them, it's an awakening, a new awareness. I remember one time, one of the campaigns, but during darker times, when we had to decide not to strike. It was a very sad meeting for all the activists. But at the end, one of the women said, "Okay, it's not rosy, but they can never take away everything we learned from this. Before, we were scared and we lived in fear. But we learned a lot. And they can never take that away from us." It was encouraging.

FD: So, if I've understood correctly, that's it. For you, that's the reward. Your *raison d'être*. All that you've done, the thing that has given you the strength to carry on, was hearing things like that.

MP: Yes, yes.

## Sustaining Hope

Sophie Bissonnette: I'd like to go back to what you were saying about the reason you never became discouraged, because you always looked ahead at what there was to gain. But I'll be honest, when I look ahead, I sometimes get discouraged because I see everything there is to lose!

Madeleine Parent: [Laughs] Well, I didn't see myself as having much to lose, because I had left my class of people behind and I was with the workers, and that's what mattered, especially the women and children who were being exploited. And the men who wanted to work with others toward justice. So I didn't really see what I had to lose. But when I was a student, and I fought in the movement for bursaries for underprivileged students, there were student activists, and there were people from the left, and there were people who said, "Oh, things will change in five years, things will change in ten years." And I didn't say anything, but I had been at the convent, and I had experienced the tremendous influence the clergy had on families, on the population. I said to myself, "They're kidding themselves. It will never happen." And I knew the battle would be a very, very long one. Even today, it's not over. So although there were times when things went wrong, I told myself that it would happen one day, without knowing exactly how. So I didn't get discouraged.

And you know, none of us were ever alone in the fight, even when everything seemed lost. Because the workers had their own sense of justice, so we had to keep hope alive together, and start again later on, when it was possible to do so. And that held the group—those who weren't corrupt or discouraged—together for the next time. Because there was always a next time, important occasions to organize, to go on strike. If we'd let the group of militants fall apart, we'd have lost them for good, and we probably wouldn't have been prepared the next time there was an opportunity to fight, to gain something. So we always had to keep hope alive and encourage hope, even though it could take a long time. And there were workers

who had understood that, long before I did. In Valleyfield, for example, I did a lot of door-to-door visiting, and there were the rumours about me, etc., etc. But [the people] would talk about it as a struggle, because they, their mothers, their fathers, their grandfathers . . . down through the generations, since the factory had first opened in 1874, there had been several strikes, and they would always resume at a later date. And I remember that many times, when I would leave a house after having a discussion with them—and everybody would be there: the grandfather and the grandmother, if they were still alive, the worker's spouse, naturally, the worker and their family, and the kids would be there, too; after all, they had company. And when they walked me to the door—and the kids always followed, of course—the number of times I heard a woman or a man tell me, "Well, we'll keep going. If not for ourselves, then for these little ones, so that they don't have to put up with the things we put up with." So they weren't certain of an imminent victory, either. But they had a long-term vision, for the children.