

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.

WOMEN IN THE UNIONS (1940s to 1970s)

Defending Women's Interests in the Unions (1970s)

Sophie Bissonnette: You were explaining that the women had demands that were specific to the fact that they were women, and that there were . . . that they were more frequently exploited, be it because . . . that because of questions of speed, or of the health problems [the work] entailed, or even salary issues, that their jobs were more tenuous. In a union that represented both men and women, how did you, along with the other women, make sure the women's demands were heard?

Madeleine Parent: There were a number of ways. Personally, I think that even today, it's still important for unions to have "women's committees" for training and discussion, so that women can be better informed and really know the job. And the company and their fellow workers, too. In one city . . . In Brantford, for example, when I moved there, we had three locals. And after a discussion with the women, we agreed that for a certain period of time, we would simply hold weekly meetings after 4:30, and they would only run until 6:00 or 6:15. For the women from all three locals. Personally, I was very encouraged to see the women's response. They hurried to attend after work. And it was understood that afterwards, they would go home to make supper. But they really enjoyed [the meetings], and they asked a lot of questions. They were comfortable being with other women, and they became informed. I think that in that case, they continued until the summer. And after that, we managed to get the women—at their union meetings—to be more confident, to take a stronger stand, and to insist that their demands be met. In other unions, we didn't do that, but we . . . You had to pay attention to the meetings. Traditionally, for the day shift, for example, union meetings would be held at 7:00 or 7:30 or 8:00 in the evening. But that meant that in the winter, when it got dark early, once most of the women got home and became busy with their families, they didn't attend. It was mostly the men who attended. So, in several unions, we scheduled the meetings right after work, so they could leave the factory together and walk a block or two . . . They were always as close as possible to the factory. We also made sure they ended by 6:00 or 6:15, so they could go home for supper. The meetings were therefore shorter, but they came to the meetings in infinitely greater numbers. And that brought us together. And when we helped them, we obviously gave them more attention than we did to many men. We didn't refuse any men, but if they didn't feel the need, we didn't push. But we did it for the women, and the women's response was very positive. And there were always a few who understood, and they encouraged the others. And I was often at the factory gates when there was a meeting right after work, and the more active women would wait at the gates to make sure their colleagues attended the meeting. But in Ontario, the

number of times I heard, "But my husband . . ." "Never mind your husband. I have a husband and children, too. We'll go to the meeting, and then we'll go home." So, in order to make sure they had the support of the more active women in the factory when they had problems with the foremen, they would go to the meetings and gather information, and they would become stronger and more active, and the level of solidarity would grow.

We encouraged the women to become president of their locals, or to hold other positions, because traditionally, women might be secretary-archivists of a local, or hold secondary positions, or positions where they used their education, but they weren't serving themselves as a group of women. So we always insisted that they participate as much as possible. What was interesting was that when there was a strike, the women regularly participated. Not all of them, but a large group of women, and they always held out until the end of the strike. Because in fact, they had to deal with a ghetto, and not just in the factory. But the conditions were starting to change, and they knew that starting all over again somewhere else, somewhere that wasn't unionized, would be even worse. So they held on tightly to those jobs, whereas the mechanics could normally find work elsewhere. And some of them, not all, would disappear during the strikes. They would go work elsewhere. Some of them wouldn't come back, but others did, and we were inclined to chide them, "Where were you while we were fighting at the gates?" So they developed a certain pride, and a lot of the men learned to appreciate the women during the strikes. And they would proudly tell stories about the women's courage and persistence. Many of them had been very surprised by it. So all of that helped. And once they had that toehold, they needed to be encouraged to stay and take on even more responsibilities.

Fostering Union Involvement Among Immigrant and Racialized Women (1970s)

Madeleine Parent: In places like Toronto, where there were a lot of immigrant women, we encouraged immigrant women to elect one of their own. And when there was a large group, for example Italian women at Puretex Knitting, an Italian woman was elected, and a lot of . . . she would preside in Italian, and either a colleague of mine or myself or someone else would deliver the report, in English if we were in Ontario, and she would translate it. Also, we encouraged women from different ethnic groups to each have their own spokespeople. And so when the main report had been delivered in English and in the dominant language, such as Portuguese or Italian, for example, you would hear a certain buzzing in the room as the Chinese had it translated, or the Greek, or whichever other language. Subsequently, during the discussion and question period, if someone spoke only Chinese, she was less embarrassed to ask the Chinese interpreter to ask a question or give her opinion because she didn't have to say it herself, a friend was speaking for her. So the meetings were a bit more complicated, but as soon as they understood the system, it worked pretty well, and the women were proud of their ethnic origins. They didn't try to hide them. Because I'd found that in other factories where there were fewer immigrant women, after the meetings, they'd say things like, "What he said wasn't right" or "I don't agree." And I would ask them why they hadn't spoken up. "Oh, my English isn't good enough." They were embarrassed. Whereas in Toronto, where there were a lot of immigrants, they had that service and it went well.

In other areas that were mostly English-speaking, I encouraged them to speak up anyway. I told them, "Someone will translate for you." But they didn't want to draw attention to the fact that they were immigrants, so you had to be careful. Sometimes there were conflicts, especially at the beginning, between one immigrant group, usually the one that had been there the longest, and a newly arrived group of immigrants, who were less inclined to be timid in their dealings

with the employer. And in some industries, it was also due to the physical strength of the immigrant women. For example, in a factory where they made canvas tents and sleeping bags that were rather complex, there were Greek and Macedonian women, and there had been Italians . . . who were quite strong. They had lived in rural areas in their former countries. But if Chinese women arrived, they couldn't handle it at all. So they would be given windows or doors or cords to make. Small pieces. And the boss would come over and say, "Go faster, go faster!" And the Greeks weren't happy, because although they worked very, very hard, they had learned to maintain a certain flow and not to go any faster. But they . . . So listen, if you protect them because you're more capable—and one of them was always a workshop rep—and if you make sure the boss doesn't harass them, you'll see that they'll become more independent, and you'll be able to count [on them]. So there was this one woman from Macedonia, and when one of the superintendents would get on one of the Chinese women's cases and tell her to go faster, she would go to him. "What are you doing here? Leave her alone. Tell me what the problem is. That's no problem. Get out of here!" And they would need to keep that woman, because it wasn't easy to find women who could attach the walls of a big canvas tent to its floor. And on a machine. People who could do that were hard to find.

One time, I asked the Chinese woman who was on the negotiating committee—she didn't speak a lot of English, but someone always explained everything to her, before and after. And she always knew how to behave during the negotiations, and the superintendent looked at her often because she seemed so gentle and kind, and she wasn't physically strong, either. But she always agreed with us. So I asked her once, as we were preparing for a strike, which didn't take place that year, but later. I asked her, "What will you do if the Greek women . . . ?" I specifically named the Greeks because they were known not only as being the most competent and physically the strongest, but also as the most hard-core unionists. She told me, "You know, what the company has proposed, we, the Chinese, would accept. But if the Greeks remain outside, we'll remain outside with them, because the workshop would be unbearable without them." And a few years later, after I had retired, the company decided to close the factory and move it to another town in Ontario, further north, where there were no unions. So the women occupied the factory, and anywhere there were Greek women, there were Chinese women right beside them, supporting them and standing shoulder to shoulder with them. At one point, the police arrived, and they cleared out the factory. Well, the Chinese women were there, right alongside the Greek women, and actually, it ended in our favour, which actually surprised the employers, who hadn't expected the Chinese women to take it so far.

In another workshop, a sock workshop, we had a situation where most of the workers were women and most of them were Portuguese, many of whom had come from the Azores. The president was also a Portuguese woman. Some Vietnamese women arrived. They were still scrawny and they weren't strong, but they had good intentions. And during the strike, they stayed with the Portuguese women and the others. A few times, the police—because there's no anti-scab law in Ontario—the police wanted to arrest one of the Vietnamese women, who was quite frail and not very strong, but all the Vietnamese and Portuguese women on the line intervened, and they weren't able to put her into the paddy wagon. So they simply gave up. But there was an understanding between them, the activists, which came as a surprise to the company and guaranteed them that . . . But you had to keep encouraging them. And one issue we had with immigrant women—not so much the ones who had been here for ten years or more, but the newer ones, or those in a new union—was that a large number of them didn't speak English, as we know. So they didn't really understand how things worked. Some of them

got lifts to work from some of the other workers, who would drive three or four women to work and charge a dollar a week or some such amount. But to get to a meeting room, and I don't mean the short meetings after work, but the more serious meetings, for example if they had to vote on our recommendations or our negotiation demands, or if we had to decide whether to accept the company's latest offer or go on strike . . . naturally, we wanted everyone to be there. We had to take . . . It took much longer. We had to hold those meetings on Sundays, or another day that was convenient. Very often, their husbands or sons brought them. We would rent a big room, in a church basement, for example, and there would be a row of chairs along the wall. And in the centre of the room, we would have the women, the members, and the few men who worked there. Because if . . . One time, we had let the men sit with their wives, and one of the men had stood up and said, "My wife doesn't speak English," but he didn't speak much better than she did. But we said, "No, no, no, you're not the one who is going to speak. Your wife is." But when they were all seated along the wall, they knew they had to keep quiet. And the women would speak. But for some men, in the American unions, for example, it was very eye-opening for them to see how the union took the time to explain to the women how things worked, to encourage debate and to honour secret ballots or other [methods], depending on the seriousness of the . . .

There was another phenomenon that occurred. In one factory in particular, there was a minority group of Black women. And these Black women didn't need their husbands to drive them to the meetings. But after a while, they started bringing their husbands also, and the Black men went and sat along the wall, because it became a way for them to support their friends or their spouses. And at the same time, they learned a bit about unions, which interested them. And it gave the women a certain prestige among their men. For example, there was one strike that involved mostly Italians, with two Greek women, I think, and a small group of Black women. We had prepared the women—it was a strike in winter, which was hard—but we had told them ahead of time—because I could see that a strike was looming—to negotiate with their husbands at home. Many of them had husbands who worked in the construction industry. So to remind them that "When you're on strike, I work and take care of the house so that you can be out on the picket line. Now it's my turn, and I expect you to support me, too." And we discovered that out of all the women, about half had supportive husbands, and the women put in long hours on the picket lines, and the others were at home because their husbands made them work at home, or had insisted that they go work in another factory. So two years later, when we presented our report on the negotiations that had followed—we had won the strike—the husbands were all sitting there, and once the women had voted to accept the collective agreement, one of the men said to another, "It's not enough. They should have gone on strike." And the other man said, "Oh! Where were you when my wife was freezing on the picket lines two years ago, eh? You kept her at home, didn't you? You made her work, didn't you? Well, it may not be the best settlement in the world, but it's reasonable. And they can't go on strike every two years, but next time, you'd better make sure your wife is out there picketing with mine! Understood?" So that's how it played out.

And among the men, you could tell which ones were proud to have supported their wives and which ones were feeling a bit ashamed. And whenever there was an emergency on the picket lines, or if something bad happened, the women would call their husbands, their sons, sometimes their daughters, and those who supported them came, of course. But the others, their wives weren't on the picket lines. And it was very eye-opening, because there was a whole group of women who, once the strike ended—because we held weekly meetings with each

picket line to keep them informed throughout—decided amongst themselves to tell us, “Once we have a settlement, we want to vote on it, but we don’t think the women who stayed at home should have the right to vote.” So we talked about that, and we decided that they would be the first to know what the settlement conditions were. And if they deemed them acceptable, only then would we hold a general meeting and everyone would vote by secret ballot. So that’s what we did. And they were very proud to have been the first to know. But then we had to tell them, “Listen, in four years, six years, we may have to go on strike again. If so, don’t try to get back at them. Help them understand that we can win, because we did win, and that next time, you expect them to be with you.” That was a little tougher, but it worked, in part. Especially because at the factory, the strikers were better informed of their rights. And over time, that helped.

Demanding Maternity Leave (1940s to 1970s)

Madeleine Parent: Regarding maternity leave, once I got started in organization, I realized that women had no security, and that they considered themselves lucky if they were hired back on. But then it was almost as though they were new hires. One consolation was that when they returned to piecework, they were up to standard on any piece, because it was based on performance. But they had no job security. We fought for it everywhere, and in some factories where we hadn’t won—and it took a long time to win, I’m talking about the 1940s and 1950s—if the girls were well organized, they’d throw a little party for the one who was pregnant. And at the end of the party, say it was held at lunchtime, they’d call over the foreman and tell him, “So-and-so is leaving to have a baby. Now you have to promise that you’ll hire her back on when she’s ready.” And in the locations where they had enough power, they would succeed. Now, it didn’t mean the women got credit for the years they had worked before, but at least they got their jobs back. And I have to say that when there were grievances that went to arbitration, and women were called to testify, and they were asked where they worked and for how many years, every woman, without exception, regardless of what the issue was, would reply, “Since my last pregnancy, it’s been such-and-such number of years, but I’ve actually been there for such-and-such number of years.” So all on their own, without us preparing them or telling them to do so in advance, they had already done the calculations and they had their answers ready.

We had a very interesting experience in a factory where there had been a strike two years earlier. And the workers there had decided that, given that Kent had been the spokesman during that strike and that it had been very, very hard—but the people had won, and it had been a good test for Canadian unions—that it would be a good idea to try to get me to negotiate, along with them. So everybody agreed, especially Kent, and we went. Our committee was comprised of about six people, including one other woman and me. And I had explained to the committee that “now we’re going to demand paid maternity leave, with seniority upon return to work.” Now this was a company that had always, always resisted . . . as did most companies, actually. And so we were in negotiations, and the guys said, “Yes, we’re going to back you on this. We understand.” Well, there was this one general manager from the American South, a true born-and-bred Southerner, the son of General So-and-So—because in the days of slavery, many of the rich Southerners who owned large tracts of land had small armies to protect them from their slaves, and so they were colonels and generals, etc. And this man, who was about 35 years old, was about as arrogant as they come. The company had pulled this guy out of the South, thinking he’d be helpful to them, but in actual fact he had pretty much caused the strike two years earlier. So we presented our demand for maternity leave. “No chance!” But we pushed and we pushed. And finally he said, “In any case, when women partake in the pleasures of sex,

they have to pay.” “Oh! Well, how many times has partaking in the pleasures of sex cost you your job?” Now the table was too narrow, and I almost got punched in the nose. So I said to myself, “All right, I may get punched in the nose, but you are going to pay dearly.” So he stared right at me for a long moment, in silence. Then he left the room, and he went and punched a hole through the window in the next room. So I looked at the personnel manager, who was a much more sensible man, but who wasn’t in authority when the general manager was present. And the next day, the width of the tables had been doubled, and the general manager wasn’t there. So we negotiated the rest of our demands, and we got maternity leave, and it was settled.

Now it just so happened that this general manager hired the factory nurse to look after his kids from time to time, when he and his wife went out. One night, when they got home and the general manager went into the garage with the nurse to drive her home, they were in the garage for too long, and the wife discovered that the two of them were involved, sexually. So then, as per usual, it was the nurse who got fired, not him. Now, I didn’t know that at the time, but if I had, I still would have said what I said. It wouldn’t have been any different. In any case, we won that one. Now in other cases, it wasn’t always so crudely done, but we had to be absolutely firm. And sometimes, it wouldn’t be included in the collective agreement, but rather, as an appendix that was signed by both parties, and it was binding. But it was very, very difficult. But as it became more widespread, things got better. And legislation follows practice, right?

The Strike at Puretex Knitting and Surveillance Cameras (1978-1979)

Sophie Bissonnette: I’m thinking of a strike that took place at another factory, where the women worked in very unique conditions, and there was electronic surveillance.

Madeleine Parent: Oh yes, the cameras! He was a strange employer. His father had built the manufacturing business, Puretex Knitting, in Toronto. They made men’s shirts. They knit the fabric, then it was cut, and there was a big room where the women assembled the pieces using sewing machines.

Now this employer, who had a lawyer who was absolutely horrible—all the unions hated him, and we had fought him on numerous occasions, but he didn’t always win, he had learned that much. Well, this employer decided to install cameras in the big room where the women worked. So some of the women ended up with cameras filming them from both sides. And another camera was set up to monitor who went into the women’s washroom. There weren’t very many men working there, but those who did were employees also, and there was no camera outside their door. And there were two monitors, one in the owner’s office and one in the manager’s office. So we had asked that the cameras be removed, because that was against human rights . . . They weren’t allowed. And we filed a grievance, but they wouldn’t settle. I didn’t go to arbitration at that time, because given the government of Ontario and the options available for arbitration, I discussed it with the committee and said, “We won’t go right away. We’ll take it to the Human Rights Commission.” So we went to the Human Rights Commission, which was still under the Conservative regime. We were very poorly received and treated with great disdain. And we were told that the employer had the right to install surveillance cameras over his employees, as he’d done. And the fact that it was just the women, and that it also included their washroom, made no difference. He had the right. So, each collective agreement was valid for two years. A few months later, we filed a new grievance and went back to the Human Rights Commission. This time it was even worse. It was really disgusting to see that there was absolutely no consideration. The lawyer who was with us asked me, “Why go back a second

time?” So I said, “One of these days we’re going to have to go on strike against this company. And I don’t mind being humiliated twice instead of once. But when the time comes, it will become a public issue, and that will be a different story.”

So when it came time to negotiate, in addition to the salary increases and other improvements, we asked that the cameras be removed. Nothing about the cameras! He was so sure of himself. So when the negotiations came to an end, we weren’t in agreement, but at the mediation session, I asked him to sign his final offer and told him we would present it to the employees, without making any promises. So at the general meeting, we told them, “This is all he’s offering, it’s not enough, and he’s not removing the cameras.” So the women were angry. “What do we do? Do we go on strike? Do we not?” So I said, “You know, strikes are long. They’re hard. And you have to take them all the way. Two or three weeks in, you can’t say, ‘I’m tired. I’m going back.’ Because you’ll have no collective agreement. You’ll have no protection. So if you decide to strike, which you have the right to do, think about it seriously.” So the women were still undecided, and someone asked the president—what was her name again? I can’t remember. In any case, she was Italian—“What would you do?” And she said, “I vote to strike!” So everyone applauded. Their decision had been made. We held the vote by secret ballot, and they were close to 100% in favour of striking. And so then, in the public eye, we exposed the camera issue. It was . . . If we were to allow it to continue, he’d do it under any pretext, and it was a form of harassment, one that wasn’t justified whatsoever. So we fought about the issue of a woman’s right to bodily integrity, and respect for her bodily integrity in the workplace. It caused quite a stir. And of course the Conservatives, who were in power, didn’t want to put any pressure on the company. But there was a woman in the opposition party, Margaret Campbell, I think, the Liberal opposition, who really fought hard and got her party on our side. The New Democratic Party didn’t have that many MPPs, but the battle was being fought constantly, both in public and inside Queen’s Park, because whenever Margaret Campbell encountered the minister of labour in the hallways, in his office, anywhere, she asked, “What are you going to do about those cameras?” [laughs].

Judith Murray: Did you win?

MP: We won! That is to say, we went to arbitration, but the government was helpful and we got an arbitrator who had a conscience. He was the Dean of Osgoode Hall, the law school at the University of Toronto. He was a very honest man. He ordered that all the cameras be removed, except the ones in the shipping area. And those men had no objections. It’s where the goods came in and went out. But everywhere else, there were no cameras. So that was a victory. Even more so because it had received a lot of coverage. The principle of it had been respected and acknowledged. And one of the lawyers said to one of our lawyers, “Our faces were red!” So I said, “They deserved it. We gave them every opportunity.” And the women were proud, but . . .

JM: How long did the strike last?

MP: Three months, in the middle of winter. But . . . And the employer was so scared of the Italian women that he didn’t even try to break the strike. What he did was, he had the forewomen call the women at home to tell them, “You have to come back to work. The union is pushing you, but it’s not good, you look like thieves because it’s all about the cameras.” So the women would report that to us at the picket line meetings, and we’d talk about it. There was tension every week. There was tension. But when the strike committee met and when we held meetings for the daytime and nighttime teams—it was a 24-hour thing—they were satisfied, and

they continued. But then the following week, at the committee meeting, it would start all over again. But they held fast and strong until the very end, and they were proud. I have to say that our president was excellent. And that we had two generations of Italians. The president, Maria, was a young woman, and her mother was a seamstress in the factory. And her mother was strong, too, despite not being able to speak English. So the mother had the support of all the older women, who knew that her daughter was honest and had her mother on her side. And Maria had the support of all the other women. So it went well. It was difficult, but it went well.