

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.

STRIKES IN THE ONTARIO MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY (1971-1973)

The Texpack Strike in Brantford (1971)

Madeleine Parent: Texpack was a factory, a manufacturer of bandages and various other products that were used to care for the sick and which were . . . whose main customers were hospitals and nursing homes, although their products were also sold on the retail market. They had been organized, with us, at the end of the 1950s, I think. They were mostly women. We had had some disputes with the company, but never any strikes. At one point, the owners, who were from the city—this was in Brantford—decided to sell the factory, and a big multinational American company called the American Hospital Supply Corporation bought it. After a couple of years . . . There hadn't been too many changes, because they had agreed to keep the same management team in place for a certain amount of time. But at one point, the American company took full control. And then everything changed. Production was high. It wasn't piecework. It was done by machine, and the women supervised the machines. There were some men there too, working as mechanics and in the shipping department. The women were very particular about hygiene and cleanliness. The products were hygiene products, so they had been trained that way, of course. But the new company kept pushing them to produce more and more. They tried to argue with the foremen, "But it makes for poor products. That's not how it should be done, it's not good . . ." "More, make more." So what started happening was that the orders would be delivered to the hospitals, but the merchandise was unsatisfactory, and the hospitals were cancelling their orders.

So the Americans would send their salespeople to the hospitals. "What happened? Why did you cancel your order?" "Look at this. You can't expect us to keep products like this." "Oh, you're right, the quality isn't very good. But I have an American product that you'll like better." So they were causing the quality of the merchandise to deteriorate on purpose, so that the orders would be cancelled, and then they would replace them with American imports, or with imports from other countries where the company had production units or factories, to exploit even cheaper labour.

Throughout that whole battle, the company . . . was making decisions. The negotiations were very hard that year because we wanted to get back to a more responsible system, in which people weren't always being pressured to produce more. We talked about quality, because our people had been trained to produce a quality product, and they didn't want to have to continue producing what they were currently producing. We argued about another product from the U.S., which had been bandages in the previous wars, that the Americans . . . in the places where they

were engaged—in Vietnam, and this was almost in 1970, and in Korea. And they were sending the unused bandages to Texpack. I thought they were being re-sterilized. But no! They just took out what was mouldy or unravelled. Then they repackaged them with a Canadian label and sent them—as we found out later—to workers in factories and mines. So that was a major topic of protest, but the company didn't want to hear about it. And not only that, but they gave us an ultimatum in the negotiations. It was to be a new clause exclusively about managerial rights, giving them all the rights. So the seniority clause would be rendered meaningless. Whether it be about an employee being fired or a machine running too fast, we would have no rights, because the company was to be the judge of everything. And we decided we couldn't do that. And on top of that, there were all those cancelled orders that had been replaced with American products. The factory was large, because those who had sold it had invested in expanding it, and the American products were coming in.

So with all that, plus the company's refusal to negotiate seriously—the personnel director arrived from Los Angeles at 10 a.m., looked at his watch, and said, "I have to leave at 4:00 to catch my flight," as though what we were going to say was a foregone conclusion, and nothing would change—we . . . The day before the strike, and it was a legal strike, the manager called a meeting of all the employees. He told them that if they went on strike, they would be defeated. What could a little Canadian union do, when they had fought and won against the Teamsters in the U.S., when they had so much money, etc., etc.? The people didn't say anything, but they were deeply offended. And so, that evening, there was a meeting, and they said, "We're going on strike. It's legal, and we're doing it tomorrow morning." So the strike took place. The company recruited scab workers from the underbelly of Hamilton. Hamilton is an industrial city. There were big locals, electricians, at Westinghouse, steelworkers. It's also a major trucking centre for the Niagara region. And by chance, the leader was a good leader for the truckers, with the Teamsters. And the company recruited . . . It turned out that when the company had bought the Texpack plant, it wasn't to continue production. It was to use it as an entry point into the Canadian market, for its products that were made in the U.S. and in other countries around the world. And they planned to use the factory as a warehouse, not as a manufacturing plant.

Sophie Bissonnette: With job cuts, etc.?

MP: Yes, and as a misuse of the wealth-producing assets we have in Canada. So when . . . It was the strike that allowed us to address that whole topic, especially since the police were very, very forceful and aggressive, and there were over 100 arrests in a plant that was down to about 135 employees, given that the company had . . . had arranged for orders to be cancelled. So with the support of the public, we were able . . . And you know, companies never seem to understand that the more arrests there are, the more we'll be in the news [laughs]. So the journalists had started calling every morning, after the scabs had gone in: "Have there been any arrests?" And we were able to keep them happy, because yes, there had been! And it generated so much publicity that we were able to expose this big American company's role in wiping out our jobs and destroying our production tools, and we received a lot of sympathy and a lot of support. And workers from other manufacturing plants in Hamilton, Brantford, Oakville, and Toronto became interested in our cause, and they joined our picket lines. As well as students and activists from what was called the Waffle, which was a wing of the New Democratic Party that was more militant than the leaders of the NDP, and which generally supported the correct causes, especially strikes.

SB: So it became a cause for Canadian nationalism?

MP: Exactly. And we knew that some of the representatives from the big companies in Hamilton—because every morning, in Hamilton, there were volunteers who hunted down the scabs who were picked up in Hamilton, supposedly in secret, to be escorted by the police to Brantford and enter as scab workers. So we found out that some of the other companies had told the Conservative government in Ontario, “If you’re not careful, we’re going to end up with a general strike in Hamilton. And those 135 girls over in Brantford aren’t worth it.”

So then we found out that the government told the company that if the strike wasn’t settled in a reasonable time period, they would lose their police presence. Simple. And so what happened was that the minister of labour assumed his responsibilities . . . He met with the union and with the company, and he said, “Each of you have someone.” For the company it was the deputy minister of labour, for us it was the chief mediator, who was much more adept at difficult negotiations than the deputy minister, and we kept referring back to him, and the minister followed along with everything, despite the fact that it wasn’t his own genius that resulted in . . . the results. And in the end, they signed and we won. And we obtained the return to work of everyone, and a certain . . . a certain commitment on the part of the company to maintain a certain level of personnel. And it became a big topic of conversation, because there were other plants closing in other sectors, and some people said, “You, with your little union, you shook up the entire industrial sector, and you succeeded! How come we can’t do the same?” Well, they could have if they had wanted to, eh? It made big waves, and our people were satisfied. And I should mention that more than three quarters of the strikers were women. The president, a young woman, was excellent. And Kent never left the picket lines. The company had filed for an injunction against us, even though the strike was legal, and the Court had granted them the injunction *ex parte*. So we appealed it, and the Court of Appeal spent almost three months deciding on the injunction appeal. And once the strike was over, they ruled in our favour. But still, the injunction had served against us for almost three months.

The Strike at Artistic Woodwork in Toronto (1973)

Madeleine Parent: Artistic Woodwork is in the city of Toronto. There are approximately 150 workers there, mostly men. That was the strike that exposed the fact that immigrants in small- and medium-sized industries in Ontario were terribly exploited and underpaid, and that many of them worked in conditions that were very dangerous to their health. It was a factory that produced wooden frames, and it had a sawmill where many people had lost fingers, maimed themselves. And there was another large section where the varnishing, stripping, re-polishing, etc., took place. Those workers breathed in dangerous fumes, and the factory conditions were not adequate. It was a legal strike. The employer in negotiations was a “Dutch Afrikaner,” a terrible person, who had hired workers of different ethnic origins who had trouble communicating with each other. He had offered a modest salary increase, which would have been accepted, except that, in that first collective agreement, he absolutely insisted on including a managerial rights clause, which took away everything the workers could gain through a union. He figured that the legal language in the managerial rights clause would prevent the workers from understanding that they were being trapped, and that they would accept it and sign the agreement. But we always explain everything to the people, to make sure they understand and don’t make any mistakes. And they asked us, “Is it good? Is it bad?” “It’s bad!” “Why? In what way?” “Because although you may get a raise of 25 cents an hour, he can fire you whenever he likes, and he can increase the pace of your work whenever he wants. Those are managerial rights, and you have no recourse.” So they understood easily. On the one hand, he was giving

them a bit of money, while on the other, he was acquiring the power to do anything he wanted against them.

So during that strike, we exposed all the unsafe working conditions at that company. But that wasn't enough for the company. On the very first day, they brought in scab workers, with the help of the police. In Toronto, there was a riot police division called the tactical squad, which itself created riots. Those officers were among the worst of the entire Greater Toronto Area police force. And when they made moves against the strikers, most of them took off their hats or swapped hats with each other, or they took off their numbers, their identification badges. So we weren't able to say which of them was doing what, even though we knew they were doing those things. And there were more than 125 arrests. By talking about the exploitation of immigrants in the Greater Toronto Area—and everyone knew there were a lot of them—and with all those arrests constantly being reported in the newspapers, we were able to expose the cruelty of the company and the poor conduct of the police team, which had no respect for anyone. Several city councillors joined our picket lines, including one who was arrested. And not only was he a councillor, but he was also a minister at a Protestant church. Students joined us, as did workers from other factories. Union people. And an interesting thing took place. When a group of unionized workers joined us, for example from an aircraft manufacturing plant, they would all wear vests with their union crest on them, and the police wouldn't touch them. But one morning, two people from an aircraft plant didn't wear their vests, and they were arrested! That caused a lot of outrage in the aircraft manufacturing plant. So the people fought back, the company fought back even harder, and it became a big battle. And it became clear that they were going after the people who supported [the strike], but that up to a certain point, they respected the bigger unions.

There was also the fact that the workers from the factory, except three that I knew of, were all immigrants, and they were afraid . . . many of them were afraid of being deported. And the police would say to them, "I'm going to arrest you, and if you're convicted of a criminal offence and you don't yet have your citizenship"—and most of them didn't—"you're going to be deported." And in fact, one of our young strikers, a Greek—and this was during the Regime of the Colonels in Greece—was arrested and called up to the army in Greece. So our best lawyer did everything he could, and he wasn't deported. But the immigrant workers were terribly afraid.

Sophie Bissonnette: When was it settled?

MP: Well, it was settled . . . We signed a first collective agreement. But the employer, before he signed it, had brought all the scab workers before the Toronto municipal council, which was in charge of the police, and the Department of Labour, to protest. And at the Department of Labour, they were told, "I'm sorry, but you're not a certified union. We only negotiate with the union." But once again, I found out that the government . . . First of all, the mayor of the city met with the premier of the province to say, "Our police officers are behaving so badly that we're losing credibility as a police force. You have to do something." And so, from what I heard, the premier said to the company, "If you don't settle soon, you'll have no more police officers." And that's why the Dutch Afrikaner, the manager-general, had brought the scab workers—paid by him—to protest before the city council and the Department of Labour. But we won anyway. Unfortunately, in the two years that followed, that same fascist employer—let's call a spade a spade—managed to discourage so many people, and to create so much division, that we lost. But in the meantime, there was a group of scab workers from . . . They were from South Asia, but had been in South Africa during apartheid, and they were now in Montréal, with no jobs. So

the employer said to them, "I'll take you on." So they were essentially scab workers, which they understood once they were driven through the lines in the foremen's vehicles. And once the strike was over, one of the immigrants from apartheid Africa became the president, and another one became very active, and we . . . and a third was fired. So we brought the case before the Ontario Labour Relations Board. It took almost a year. The president ended up quitting, because as an immigrant, he said, "I have to earn a living elsewhere." The other one held fast, as did the Canadian who had been fired, and they won their cases and were reinstated. So even though we lost two years later, we managed to get a few things done.

SB: As for the police, it launched a debate on how the police should act.

MP: Yes. Each month we went before the Toronto city council, then before the council executive, which met on a different week, then before the council of the GTA, and then before their executive, so four times altogether. And we spoke about the police's brutality against the people. It became a big scandal, there was a lot of criticism, and finally, not long after our strike ended, there was an inquiry into the police force, and we exposed what had taken place. And other unions did the same. And I think that it had been the worst . . . the worst example of police brutality. After that, things didn't change all that much, but the excessive abuse, where people were beaten, that was mitigated somewhat. We also exposed the fact that all the officers, especially in that squad, were white, and that they were prejudiced against people of colour and against immigrants. And that it was not appropriate to have a police force in which the minorities were not represented. And it took some time, but afterwards, there were some changes. Not quite satisfactory, but it was progress.