

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

AN ACTIVE, ENGAGED RETIREMENT (1983-1999)

Developing Solidarity in the Age of Globalization (1999)

Sophie Bissonnette: And then you came back to Quebec . . .

Madeleine Parent: Yes, I came back.

SB: To . . . I wouldn't say it was to retire, because we've seen you all over the place since you came back to Quebec. Tell us about your return to Quebec, and what you've been doing since you got back.

MP: When Kent died, I was 59 years old, so I thought about what I was going to do next. There was a new, younger generation in place that was doing great work. I said to them, "I'm going to leave when I'm 65, so I have five and a half years left. And if the members are still in agreement [at that time], you'll take over." So that's what happened. I had been greatly looking forward to coming back to Quebec. So that's what I did. And I started working with the women's movement quite soon after 1983. I was elected the Quebec representative of the National Action Committee, on the board of directors, and we ran a number of campaigns. We did a lot of recruiting during that period. My main priority was to develop links between the women's movement in Quebec, which was represented mainly by the FFQ, the Fédération des Femmes du Québec [Quebec Women's Federation], and the Women's Coalition in the rest of Canada. And to develop solidarity so that we could take action together against the federal government. It wasn't always easy. There were some major misunderstandings, some big problems, but it was the task I had set for myself, and it's still very important to me to this day. I have to say that until we can have major demonstrations on Parliament Hill in Ottawa by women from both Quebec and the rest of Canada, we still have a lot of work to do before we'll be respected by the federal government.

Also, soon after I came back, Solidarité Populaire Québec [People's Solidarity Quebec] was formed. It still exists and does good work, but it needs reinforcements. It's a coalition of grassroots groups and unions. And for a while, the unions were the big labour confederations. But since Solidarité Populaire Québec also includes community groups, there was no good reason why the independent unions shouldn't also join. So now, a decent number of them, not all of them, but a significant number of them have joined Solidarité Populaire Québec. And I was a member of the Solidarité Populaire Québec committee for a long time. And there are frequently tensions between the labour confederations and the grassroots groups. Because despite having their own problems, the labour confederations have stable membership and

considerable revenues, compared to all the other groups. So when they don't want to share their decisions with the less powerful, less wealthy groups, it creates tension. And due to the public credibility of the Fédération des Femmes du Québec, which is associated with the coalition, and which stands with the grassroots groups, it helps the movement take on a little more importance and it better reflects the needs and demands of the grassroots groups. It's also good for the independent unions. You'll recall that the FIQ is an independent union. So is the union of the Quebec public servants. As is the Syndicat des Professionnels du Gouvernement du Québec [Union of Quebec Government Professionals]. There are others, but those ones are the biggest. And they too had been somewhat pushed aside by the labour confederations. And I hold the FTQ responsible for that. But once Solidarité Populaire was formed, the independents were just as welcome as all the others, and with the FFQ and its extensive credibility, they finally had a say in the coalition. And I find that promising.

And I'm convinced that we'll have a real impact on government policies when the coalition and the unions and people from grassroots groups, anti-poverty groups, women's groups, groups fighting for decent, low-income housing, groups fighting for health care, etc., etc. . . . it will take a vibrant coalition like that to succeed in having a real impact on government. And we're not there yet, but I think a coalition movement exists, a solid one. And as for the second summit conference, which was organized by the current government, the Fédération des Femmes du Québec and certain other grassroots groups left the summit in protest because they hadn't gotten what they wanted at the first summit. And because the government paid lip service to a partnership, but without actually taking grassroots groups and unions on as partners, only big business. The time had come to tell the truth and expose what was going wrong. And I think it was a step in the right direction. I'm thinking about the Women's March Against Poverty in '95, when women marched through the different regions of Quebec to gather in Quebec City, in front of the legislature buildings. They went through the different regions, they made contact with people, they appealed to them, they helped the women there understand, everywhere, that they were wanted, that they were an important part of organized work to achieve greater justice in Canada. It was an important step. And now, with the project of the World March of Women against poverty and violence against women, it's a huge challenge. But if we succeed in, as planned with the first part of the women's march in 2000, in getting to work in our regions here in Quebec, alerting people, getting many, many women to participate, they will feel like they're part of this movement until the end of the year and beyond. So that's what we have to do. And the other challenge we have is to ensure the participation of and solidarity with the women of English Canada, to reach the same goals.

SB: It's a challenge. I imagine you're referring to the nationalist issue, which is suddenly creating tensions within the coalition movements. Can you tell me a bit about that, about how, what role you play and how you view that?

MP: I have to say that the federal government does all it can to divide people, to make sure people from Quebec and people from the rest of Canada remain distrustful of each other. Because the government understands that if we were united in our demands, they would have to give in. It's really too bad that large segments of the population let themselves be taken in by the attacks on the people of Quebec, and ditto for the people of Quebec against Anglophones from elsewhere, and against minorities. People's right to self-determination is part of the United Nations Declaration, which our country accepted. It's a right that has to be respected. Whether one exercises it or not is their business. But the right has to be respected. And we'll only win

respect for that right, whether we declare sovereignty or not, if we succeed in working with minorities and with people from the rest of Canada, and if they work with us, on our shared demands. It's complicated, but it has to be done. And now, in the age of globalized trade, that part of the work—of the effort—of developing alliances and solidarity, is important, and there has to be another aspect to all this, which is that with international companies setting up here and exploiting our people, and closing our factories, and setting up factories in Mexico and in other places, to exploit people even more, it's in all of our interests—workers, people living in poverty, women from different countries—to join together to fight the multinationals and force our governments to fulfill their responsibilities, their commitments to the population.

We need to have access to all the necessary health care services, for free. But now we're . . . First of all, there have been more and more cuts in services, based on the false argument of the debt. Now that our governments, both in Ottawa and in Quebec City, accumulate surpluses every year, they have no excuse not to provide us with the health care services, education services, and social services we need. But they'll only do so if we're united in the fight to demand all those services. Whether it be in a coalition here at home, or in solidarity with the rest of Canada and the world, it's all the same thing. It's more complicated now that we have to act on a global scale. It will take longer. But we have common interests. It's a matter of helping people become aware of our common interests, so that we can unite around those objectives, which are really everyone's objectives. It's also important to realize that getting organized on a global scale is not an impossible challenge. But most of all, we have to get organized here, ensure our grassroots and union coalitions are stronger, more dynamic, and more active, and from there, develop solidarity with other people who are facing the same problems. Most of them are even poorer, but they have the same problems. So we have to identify our common interests and fight for them.

And we also need to pay attention to the slaughtering of people around the world today. Most recently it was in Kosovo, and it's not settled yet, but it's getting there. But I don't think it will ever be settled until the Serbs have brought the head of their government, who initiated the massacre, to justice. In East Timor, there's an abominable massacre that . . . The Indonesian government said it would do what the population wanted and that it would respect the referendum. But when the people voted for independence, the government hid behind the paramilitaries, who are killing everyone they can get their hands on. So no, it's not true, they haven't respect their commitment. And we have to support them, and insist that the massacres be stopped. But who was talking about East Timor a year ago, two years ago? Very few people. Only a few of the most well-informed people, and those who had the most power made sure not to talk about it, so as not to alert anyone to the situation. But we have to help. If our trade unions don't become too bureaucratic, if they take an interest in the major problems, not just of the people from here, but also from elsewhere in the world, and our grassroots groups do too, we'll be able to do something. And change things.

A Combative Union that Listens to its Members and to Young People (1999)

Sophie Bissonnette: You experienced the years when unionism spearheaded progressive forces to bring about change. But when you talk to young people today, they don't have the same perception of trade unions. In that context, how do you see the role of unions today?

Madeleine Parent: Well, it's very important that unions back the demands of young people. First of all for access to education. It's very, very unfair that young people have to go into debt to get

an education, especially nowadays. And the, the unions have to do everything they can to support demands for access to education, without the students having to go into debt like they do nowadays. There is also labour legislation that should be revised. Young people are demanding that orphan clauses be outlawed in the legislation, that they be made illegal. But there are certain unions—not all of them, thankfully—who are opposed to making orphan clauses illegal. What is at issue here is . . . the fact that more and more, when new collective agreements are signed, the scale is not based on equal pay for equal work—something we fought for in the '40s and pretty much won in the late '40s. [Under orphan clauses], employers have the right to pay lower wages to young people and to those they hire after the collective agreement has been signed. This is separate from things like training, probation, etc., where there may already be differences. So what this means is that a young person hired today under an agreement where there is no anti-orphan clause, will be hired and could, for the rest of their career in that plant or in that job, be paid less than someone in the plant who is more senior than them. And this form of discrimination doesn't just affect young people. It also affects newly arrived immigrants. They end up on the same scale as the young people. So they'll be stuck with the orphan salaries for as long as they work for that company. Also consider mothers who take . . . who have, let's say, two or three children and decide to stay at home for a few years longer than their maternity leave clauses allow. When they go back to work, they too are "orphans." So the clauses are very unfair to all those people. So orphan clauses have to be fixed, so that everyone gets equal pay, at least for equal work. In addition to the fight for equal pay for work of equal value, which has not yet been won, but which is well underway.

And then there's the question of minimum wage. Minimum wage must be raised, because women and young people are the ones most affected by it. And there needs to be stricter supervision of small factories, little hole-in-the-wall operations, where the laws aren't followed but need to be. So those are all conditions that we have to . . . demands we have to support. And it's the young people who are making them. And we can't . . . refuse them our solidarity.

SB: So the unions have to be more . . . What you're saying is that they're still as necessary as ever, but that they need to be more attentive . . .

MP: To listen to and respect those people. They're our future citizens. And if they grow up with an image of unionism that doesn't respect them, that doesn't take care of them, they'll think, "All they do is collect our dues, but they don't actually care about us."

SB: You seem to be talking about trade unionism more in line with the history you not only know about, but experienced yourself and were an important part of. But nowadays, there's a lot of talk about unionism that says it needs to . . . move toward transformed partnerships and greater consultation with employers. With your long history in unionism, how do you see that?

MP: Well, you know, employers and owners and shareholders are only in business to make a profit. If they don't make enough of a profit, and they can make greater profits elsewhere, they'll close the company and put their money where it pays better. Those people are not our partners. Workers are there to make a living, to provide a decent life for their families, to benefit from certain social services they're entitled to. Not to create greater profits for the company. And when a government, whether it be the federal government—although in labour relations matters, it's the provincial governments, except for in certain public sectors, where the federal government behaves like any other employer, i.e. privatizing certain jobs, getting rid of railway lines, there's talk of getting rid of certain airlines as well, so that private corporations can make

more profit off of them. That's not a partnership. They exist and invest their money to make the greatest possible profits. So when the government talks about partnerships, it's lying. And unfortunately, governments like that act as partners to employers who want to make their profits off the labour of others. They don't give us more power, but that's how it should be in all partnership formulas. So nowadays there's all this talk of partnerships, but it's the same thing I heard fifty years ago, with different names now, but at its core, it's the same old story. And workers have no more power in the companies or in the economy than they did back then.

So it's untrue. We have to take care of the workers' interests. Let them express their grievances, their problems, their demands, and organize to fight for them. And when you hear about solidarity funds, for example, they worry me a lot. Because when workers invest their money in them, everybody says, "It will create jobs" or "It will prevent certain companies from closing." But the workers end up in a state of contradiction with themselves. Because once they become the investors, they're there for the profits. But on the other hand, there are workers who are hurt by those same profits, and end up having to fight for fairer salaries and benefits. So for that reason, I don't like solidarity funds. I think they're a mistake. But in the end, it's up to the workers to decide, and once you're in, it's not always easy. But when companies appeal to the solidarity funds to modernize—or "rationalize," as they say—their plants, and the result of the rationalization is to lay off large numbers of workers, that's not in people's interests. At that point, they're entering the competition for greater profits. And there's no profit in that. We have to use our funds to defend our basic interests, not to improve the conditions or interests of the employers.

The Declaration of Human Rights: A Powerful Tool (1975-1999)

Madeleine Parent: Contrary to what we had in the 40s and 50s, we now have a powerful tool that we should apply much more frequently. But before we do that, it's important to become familiar with it. It's the Declaration of Human Rights, falsely called [in French] the "rights of men." The original English text that Eleanor Roosevelt worked on, along with Professor John Humphrey of McGill here in Montréal, was called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but a French man from France chose to call it the "*Droits de l'homme*" [Rights of Man]. But they . . . It says that all humans are born equal in dignity and in rights. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, work status, etc. It then goes on to describe those rights. It says we have the right to work without slavery and with a certain degree of freedom. We have the right to freedom of expression and the right to association. That's for unions and other groups that organize themselves. And that's very, very important. Quebec was the first to adopt a declaration of human rights, in 1975. I think the Quiet Revolution had already had several important effects on the population. In '76, it was adopted by Ottawa, using slightly different language. And it's part of the new constitution that Trudeau debated and then enacted.

But it's not serving the purpose that it should and that it could because, first of all, people aren't very well informed. Also, you can't expect that once you've won a right under the law, that the right will be respected everywhere, without a fight, without people being informed and demanding that it be respected in all circumstances where it's necessary. And that's taking place a bit now, but it should be happening a lot more. And I think that educating the public, young people, workers, and immigrants about the Charter of Rights, its meaning, and the importance of applying it, should be taking place in a much more widespread manner. We have . . . As a result of Supreme Court of Canada decisions, where now, when someone

complains about a violation of their rights, the Supreme Court . . . Even if the lower courts rule against the complainant, the Supreme Court usually defends them in the name of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the other international agreements that have resulted from it. And that has to be part of our struggle, on an international scale, as well. There are some governments that adopted the same declarations, but ignore them and hope their populations never understand them. So we should share information and solidarity, in everyone's interests.

Sophie Bissonnette: Can you provide an example of a group that has exercised those rights and ensured they were applied?

Madeleine Parent: Yes. Dr. Morgentaler, who, by pushing for the right to therapeutic abortions when women asked for them, obtained a decision from the Supreme Court of Canada that said he was right, despite all the persecution and court rulings he'd endured at the trial court, and even at the Court of Appeal. Chantal Daigle, who had become pregnant at the hands of a violent man who had beaten her, and who wanted an abortion at any cost, lost in both the trial and appellate courts. But the Supreme Court of Canada defended her right. But our declaration of rights is not as perfect as the international declaration. For example, the international declaration says that all humans are born equal in dignity and rights. So as it pertains to abortion, it's clear that you have to be born before you're considered an independent human being. But that's not stated in our declarations. But the more we study them and the better we understand them, the harder we'll fight to perfect them. And also to ensure that the laws based on the declarations have teeth, and that they can be used in the interests of people's rights and freedoms. Even today, conditions of semi-slavery exist in a number of countries. But according to the Declaration, all forms of slavery are forbidden. But it's a mistake to think it doesn't exist. But to defend our rights, we need to apply the declarations, and the laws that reflect the declarations. And the right to associate and the right to unionize. Serious violations still take place here at home, and even more in other countries.