

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 *A Vision in the Darkness* (1991), directed by Sophie Bissonnette.

Women in a Men's World (1940s) – Léa Roback with Madeleine Parent

Sophie Bissonnette: When you talk about your relationships with the employers and the politicians, they were pretty exceptional. You were female unionists at a time when there were very few others.

Léa Roback: There was Huguette Plamondon. No? But she was a different kind.

Madeleine Parent: She was a different kind.

SB: How did the employers and politicians view you?

LR: Well, I know that at RCA Victor, they were negotiating with a woman. Because RCA Victor was a U.S.-based multinational, Radio Corporation, and over there, it was men. But we had both men and women on the committee. And at first, they'd look at me, "It's a woman!" So they thought, "This will be a cinch!" But they found . . . You see, I had no fear of words. For example, there was the case of a young woman who had had an operation, a hysterectomy, and the company doctor . . . I never knew a single company doctor who actually spoke out in defence of the workers. Because at RCA Victor, the doctors were shareholders. So . . . heh heh! So the doctor had examined this woman, and he had said, "She'll never be able to work on the line. She can't continue." She worked quickly and everything! But they didn't want to settle. Instead, they decided to just get rid of her! So we went to arbitration, and we had a very good arbitrator, Professor Woods from McGill. He was very good. So I told him what had happened, and he said, "We're going to win this." So we all sat there, discussing it. I spoke, and so did the men on the committee. They didn't want to hear any of it. They just sat there with their pens, scribbling away on their pages. So I asked . . . After all, the woman worked on the guts, the inner components of the radios. And you had to solder those. It's a big thing, there are a whole lot. So I asked the corporate gentlemen what their reason was, given that she had had her uterus and ovaries removed—because that's what they're called, are they not? So I asked, "So when she does her soldering, does she use her ovaries and uterus, or does she use her hands?" "Oh, so vulgar!" Me, vulgar! Personally, I couldn't have cared less about that. And then Dr. Woods, uh, Professor Woods wrote to me to tell me, "We won the case." And in fact, we did win. The doctor looked like a complete fool. But that's how it goes. I've always said you have to be wary of company doctors because they're always looking out for their own interests. But in the end, we made them understand. There were men, and there were also women on the committee, so . . . And they knew I wasn't afraid to speak up!