

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.

The Life of a Union Activist: Rose Pesotta and Léa Roback (1930s)

Sophie Bissonnette: Léa, I'd like to talk a little more about Rose Pesotta, because she really was an important union organizer.

Léa Roback: Indeed!

SB: One of the things that strikes me about Rose's life is that it must not have been easy—nor for you, either—to be a female union organizer.

LR: At that time, in the United States, there had been a start, an important start, because . . . You know what woke the women up? It was when there was that big fire, right near Times Square [the Triangle Shirtwaist fire], and all those young women lost their lives. That's what opened their eyes. They took to the streets. They demonstrated. And there were people, who weren't being paid by the unions, but who came out and said, "We're going to get organized." And Rose Pesotta . . . Some people thought she was Spanish, but she was a Ukrainian Jew. So, what was with the name Pesotta? It could have been anything else.

Rose was a very educated woman, you know. She went to that university where women went for training. It's a fantastic story! She worked in the store, on the machines, for many years. But not only did she work on the machines, she also woke the female workers up. "Look what they're giving you! Look what they're doing to your lives! Open your eyes!" She did wonderful work. She also went to the Philippines, because they did all this beautiful embroidery on these beautiful nightgowns and all that. But most of it was done in the homes, and in little back-alley factories that weren't very clean. So she also tried to get them to organize over there.

SB: She was the only one. She was the only female vice-president on an all-male executive. She really was a great organizer.

Sound technician: Sorry... [Clicks the electronic box]

LR: The sexism . . . The dress industry was mostly made up of women. But Rose was a person . . . she was a woman in the fullest sense of the word, and I think Dubinsky thought that one day he'd get her . . . I don't know, that's none of my darn business. So they had done her the great honour of bringing a woman onto the executive, who represented most of the workers in the stores, who were women. That was their way. The men [points to one side], and the women [points to the other side] tomorrow, or maybe another day. And when Rose arrived here, Shane couldn't stand her. He was jealous of her because she had an extraordinary personality.

So the women liked her. And even though she couldn't speak French, they didn't care. She understood the issues. So one day Shane called Dubinsky and told him, "Take her to your place! I can't stand her. Either she goes or I go!" So naturally, Dubinsky . . . Rose! So she returned to New York, and he still wanted her in the office there. She said, "No, I'm going back, and I'm going to work in the stores." So she went back to the machines. But she always remained interested in women's rights. And she went to Denmark when they had those big meetings about women's needs. She was a great lady. But she died much too young, exhausted.

SB: When we were talking about Rose Pesotta, Léa, I found . . . At the public library in New York, I found Rose's correspondence and diary. It's very interesting, but there's something very moving and a little sad in her diary. I'll read you an excerpt.

LR: Yes, yes.

SB: It's something that comes up often. There's a lot about the loneliness of this woman who was a union organizer. For example, she wrote in her journal:

Lying in bed this morning, I am trying to decide my fate. Why is it that I am always a loser in everything? My friends tax me with more strength than I possess in reality. Everyone will imagine that a person like myself is always happy, always cheerful, has scores of friends and admirers. What more does a person need? Nobody knows how many cheerless, sleepless nights I have been crying in my loneliness.

And all of a sudden, it struck me that behind all those union activists—especially during those years, it must have been difficult to be a woman, to be a woman activist.

LR: Because, when she came to Montréal, she stayed at a hotel. And there were tailors, members, who would have liked to take her out. But you have to be careful. You have the responsibility of being a person who knows how to make a living. Without that, your ability to organize [flicks her fingers open to denote dissipation]. So you don't have the chance when you travel like she did, an organizer on the move, like she was. It's a very hard life. And especially here in Montréal. When she was here, she didn't speak French. Yvette and I often went to the little cinema that showed films from France. So we were able to relax. But not poor Rose. And then there were all those endless meetings with Shane. And he really laid down the law.

SB: And you, how . . . You never married? How did you . . . Basically, as an activist, it was very difficult in those years to have a life.

LR: But you know, I was lucky. If you had a family . . . Pesotta didn't have any family. I was surrounded . . . spoiled, to be honest. My family felt they had to help me . . . After all, I didn't have the type of life where you go play bridge and all that. So I wasn't familiar with that type of life, and my family always, always . . . When I got home in the evenings, after a meeting, on the table there would be a note from my mom, "I hope you're not too tired." And there would be a plate covering another plate, and it was always something good to eat. And "Have a good night." So I never felt lonely.

And I received letters when I was in Europe and Toronto. I worked in Toronto. We tried to organize Northern Electric. That was quite an adventure. In Trent, a small city outside of Toronto. I received letters every week, I had . . . My mother called me long-distance to chat. "Do

you need anything? Is there anything I should send you?" So not only was I accepted by strangers, but I had my own family.

SB: Would you have been able to accomplish everything you did as an activist if you had been married with children?

LR: I don't know. I can't answer that, because I didn't experience it. If I had worked in a factory, yes, I would have been an activist in my workplace. But could I have done all of that, like Rose and the others, like Madeleine? She was married, but she didn't have children. She and her husband worked together. That's not the same thing at all. As for Rose, I don't know what her life was like, as a woman . . . But life is hard for women like that. And back then, those women accepted that.