

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's Grievances in the Dressmaking Industry (1936)

Léa Roback: It was very interesting, and what interested me the most was the fact that at our workshop meetings, we wanted the grievances. Boy, I could tell you some stories about those. And the recurring theme was the question of whether we could be allowed to work without there being favouritism, without people trying to lift our skirts, without being “groped,” as Sally [St- Aubin] used to call it. That was a fundamental issue, and I don't know if Yvette remembers little Juliette. Oh, that young worker . . . She was a pinker. I tried to get a hold of her. Impossible! So Juliette wasn't buying any of it. She looked at me, and at Pesotta, and at the others. She wanted answers before she agreed to it. So she asked, “What's going to happen regarding our rights as women?” And she wasn't talking to me. She had turned around and was speaking to the other workers. Oh she was a little . . . she was fantastic. So she said, “Yes, salaries are important, and working hours, and favouritism, and the groping. We don't want any more of it! We work, we earn our pay. And we won't accept being groped all over just because we're a favourite, to let . . . 'Here, he'll do you a big favour, he'll give you a whole ton of work to do, lots of dress pieces, and you'll be able to' . . .” Because it was piecework. Which was just shameful. And to think it still exists today! Everything is counted, timed . . . That's what causes burnout among workers. And it still goes on. So they were aware of the issue, but in their minds, those were the rules! And there were a lot of other injustices. The salaries, for example. Say a woman brought her daughter along. They'd both be on the same card. And “Shut up!” Just like that. “Shut up!”

But no one dared complain, because there was no union. If you complained, or even just talked about it . . . And people would make belts during their lunch break. And if they didn't finish them, they brought them home and the whole family would gather around the table, because you had to try to get ahead. The conditions were truly hair-raising. So the employers didn't want . . . And meanwhile, the Catholic unions were meddling. They too . . . And at that time, the chaplains wore the habit, the cassock . . . So they went there. There was one thing . . . There were one or two Jewish employers who said they wouldn't be signing any contracts. There was one who had signed a contract, but not with the communists. Seriously, give me a break! Mister Shane was as horrified by the communists as was Duplessis! I always said that before those guys got into their beds at night, they must have checked underneath to make sure there were no communists hiding there! So that's how it was. And Dubinsky was exactly the same!