

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.

Anti-Communist Purges in the Unions (1940s and 1950s) – Léa Roback with Madeleine Parent

Sophie Bissonnette: Both of you must have experienced the ravages of the Duplessis era and the impacts of the witch hunts. For you Léa, that post-war period, with the Gouzenko Affair and . . .

Léa Roback: Oh yes, that was . . .

SB: As a communist, it must have been difficult to be an activist. What were those years like for you?

LR: Well, that was the issue. People in the USA suffered. And here, too. So, as Madeleine said earlier, the unions also suffered a lot. With us, they started by . . . I think we were the first UE [International Union of Electrical Radio and Machine Workers].

SB: Could you tell us what happened to the UE?

Léa Roback: Well, the first UE in the USA . . . They were very active, and no doubt some of them were part of the communist movement. After all, the USA was a democratic country, right? And here, too? So they . . . It was the era of McCarthyism, so it was an issue for everyone. Even the activists, the more militant unions, they were seen as communist unions. So in the USA, it was a huge battle. A loss. Then the union came in, then another union, and they took advantage of that, and went in there. The same thing happened in Ontario, and in Montréal, where there were Canadian unions. There were RCA Victor executives here. So what happened is, those people were Duplessis' friends, and they took matters into their own hands. "We'll get rid of the union, otherwise RCA Victor will move and all these people will be out of work." They had suddenly become so generous and so concerned about the workers, and that's all they were asking for. And then Duplessis, and the communists, and all that! So we lost our union. It lost its certification. That's how it played out. And so the other UE unions here in Montréal folded, and other activist unions.

SB: They folded because they were accused . . .

LR: Accused of communism. They accused your union too, didn't they?

Madeleine Parent: No, not the government. It was the bandits from the international union.

SB: Léa, why did the workers accept that?

LR: Well, you know, when you're accused and you're told, especially the clergy . . . To think that they always had the right . . . The Irish church rented out rooms for their big meetings, in the Saint-Zotique parish . . . Then Duplessis said, "You will no longer rent out rooms to that union, because they're communists." Of course, the members of their own flock who worked there, they weren't communists . . . but that's how things played out. So they got scared. "Communism, communism," it was really something. So they just put up with it. It was very . . . Some people tried to fight. Like Mr. Cormier, who came to testify. I'll never forget him. He was an older man. He said, "I've known Léa for many years. We worked together. I don't know if she's a communist or not, but she helped us." But that didn't count! And Victor Walker lost his job because he was the local president. Albert Gauthier, remember him? He had devoted himself . . . He cared; he was an activist! He lost his job, too. And he suffered a lot. He couldn't find another position. As for Vic Walker, he went . . . Had he spoken out against us, he would have had everything handed to him on a silver platter. But he said, "I have nothing to report." So do you know where he found work? He was a cleaner. He cleaned houses, offices. That's what he did. Albert worked in a café. He couldn't find any other position. He didn't want to speak out against us. And there were others who were asked, "Tell us, are they really communists?" They said, "Whatever they are, they never bothered us."