

# 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.

## Tensions in the ILGWU/UIOVD Union (1937-1939)

Sophie Bissonnette: Coming back to the subject of the end of the dressmakers' strike, Léa, it was a major victory, was it not?

Léa Roback: Yes, oh yes! But the victory didn't last. The issue that hurt us was that of the ongoing injustices. A lack of experience, and also, the union was like that. And unfortunately, it still is. Favouritism, union leaders accepting gifts . . . If you accept gifts from the employers and then you sit down to negotiate that sewing twelve buttons on is not worth only two and a half cents, but five or seven . . . How can you try to bargain with them? They'll tell you, "My God, you paid almost nothing for your suit, so don't come here asking for the impossible." So that's that. Uh . . . This has to be said. So I'll say it to whomever is willing to listen, that Shane, and Dubinsky in the USA, the leaders . . . the policy of those leaders was to be friends with the employers! Friends with the employers! But you can't . . . Now, I'm not saying you have to go around punching them in the face, but how can you be friends with the employers, when we need rights, when we need better working conditions for the labourers who pay the union dues? When I pay someone to do something for me, I expect it to be done. And when we heard that the business agents were saying to people who told them . . . A member of the negotiating committee—not the major negotiations, but the price negotiations, because for price negotiations, you had to talk to the employer—said, in front of the employer, "Why are you always complaining?" You don't say that to a worker! She was right to complain!

Interviewer: So why did you quit?

Léa Roback: I quit because I was "Calamity Jane." Because I couldn't achieve what I wanted to achieve. They blocked me. They didn't like me. And I didn't need them to like me, but I wanted to . . . And the workers started to be afraid. There was Jodoin, who said, "Oh, her, I don't know about her, but I'll see to it. Leave it to me. I'll take care of it." But of course he never took care of it! And the younger ones . . . There were still a few activists—some always remain, you know, always—but they weren't in the majority, and the others said, "I need to work, so we'll just have to accept this." But I couldn't work in those conditions. And the movement, the Communist Party, wasn't happy that I left. I said, "I'm not a heroine!" I just wanted to live my life, and I didn't want to have done to me what Shane and his cronies had done to others when the employers said, "She's a troublemaker" or "He's a troublemaker." So they weren't just a person taking care of the workers that they represented. And there were grievances that the union management didn't like, and that of course the employers didn't like, because they had done them favours.