

# 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.

## A Union Organizer in the Dressmaking Industry (1936)

Sophie Bissonnette: So Léa, tell us how you came to be involved in union organization in the clothing industry.

Léa Roback: That's an interesting story. I was at the bookstore. And there was this young reporter by the name of Ted Allan. He was young, but he enjoyed doing that type of work. He wanted to do interviews. And at that time, there was a major campaign taking place, lots of publicity around Ms. Pesotta, a well-known organizer in New York, who was a member of the ILGWU [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union]. And she was looking for someone who spoke Yiddish, English, and French. And their method of organizing was through education. Their first priority was a library. So they opened a library. But not books that would teach the workers about knowledge, you know, profit, how to make a profit, workers' rights, all that. Those things are "prima," but not them . . . For them it was the library, education. And so Pesotta . . . She really was a fantastic woman. I really liked Pesotta. She had [points to her head], she was beautiful . . . a woman who got it! Because she herself had worked in the factories. She herself had. So she knew what she was talking about. So Ted went to see her. She gave him an interview. And regarding the communist newspaper, I don't know. He didn't mention it, and she didn't ask. She was a practicing anarchist. She wrote in the Jewish Yiddish newspaper *Die Stimme*. And she had good political skills. So she asked him, "Find me someone." And he said, "I've got the woman for you."

So he comes back to the office, I mean to the bookstore, and says, "I've got a new job for you!" "But I've got a job!" "A bigger job." At that time, we had meetings with the communist committee for the unions also. So they said, "We'll find someone else." And I said, "But I don't know how this is going to work out for me." "You'll learn!" And that, that's always been the motto. So she asked to me go and meet to her. So I did. And we spoke. And then she asked me . . . She didn't speak French, so she asked Yvette [Charpentier] to come speak to me and see what kind of person I was. And supposedly Yvette said, "Things will go very well." And I was hired! And I was the "educational" resource. But with Pesotta, "educational" meant being involved in everything. Like Yvette. She was the secretary, and she had a lot to do, but she was also involved in the organizing.