

# Book Review: The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925, by Craig Heron (ed)

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# BOOK REVIEW

## The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925

EDITED BY CRAIG HERON

(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998)<sup>1</sup> vi + 382 pages, 20 illus.

Craig Heron states in his introduction to this book that, in 1919, “the clenched fist of working-class solidarity was raised defiantly throughout the industrialized world.”<sup>2</sup> In the chapters that follow, though, working-class solidarity is less apparent than divisions of race, ethnicity, language, gender, political ideology, type of employment, differing opportunities for material success, and divergent visions of the good life. But working-class solidarity is not a mere chimera. For a few shining moments, as men and women fought for security and democracy in their workplaces, on the hustings and in trenches in Europe, workers claimed their share of whatever good might be salvaged from the sacrifice of war.

This book documents those moments of working-class solidarity region by region, with five chapters by eight different authors, and with a chapter in which Heron implicitly acknowledges the limited usefulness of region as an analytical device. None of the regions had a single industrial pattern; yet, he argues, because workers participated with regional politicians and business people in seeking regional solutions to the problems of post-war adjustment, the “rise and fall of the workers’ revolt followed a distinctive rhythm in each region ... .”<sup>3</sup> Region is clearly a slippery concept: it is sometimes used to delineate a particular geographic area, or sometimes a particular consciousness. Even the choice of regional boundaries seems arbitrary—a way to divide the material into manageable, but not necessarily coherent, units.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [hereinafter *Workers’ Revolt*].

<sup>2</sup> C. Heron, “Introduction” in *Workers’ Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 3 at 3 [hereinafter “Introduction”].

<sup>3</sup> C. Heron, “National Contours: Solidarity and Fragmentation” in *Workers’ Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 268 at 269 [hereinafter “National Contours”].

<sup>4</sup> See D. Gorham, “From Bonavista to Vancouver Island: Canadian Women’s History as Regional History in the 1990s” (1999) 28:2 *Acadiensis* 119 for a thoughtful discussion of several of the problems of using region as an organizing concept for Canadian history, while recognizing the inadequacy of the “one-nation narrative.”

Allen Seager and David Roth,<sup>5</sup> writing about British Columbia and the Mining West, pay the most attention to delineating the distinctive characteristics of their region, describing the demographics of the workforce, the corporate and capital structure of the leading employers, and work processes in the region's resource-based industries. But the geographic areas of British Columbia and the Mining West, the Maritimes, Quebec, southern Ontario (Northern Ontario is not dealt with in this book), or the Prairies, lack sufficient difference from each other and sufficient internal uniformity in economic activity or labour organization to justify their designation as regions. Indeed, the creation of a regional consciousness to dilute and diffuse working-class solidarity is a central theme of the chapter by Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton.<sup>6</sup> They explore the rejection by many workers of "bourgeois 'common sense,'" <sup>7</sup> followed by the re-imposition of "old habits of deference and patronage" <sup>8</sup> with the crushing of labour militancy and the channelling of labour's anger into support for the Maritime Rights Movement. In place of labour's radical critique of capitalism, the Maritime Rights Movement offered a conservative neonationalism that identified the central struggle as one of local people of all classes against "big shots" from away.<sup>9</sup>

Authors understandably resent book reviewers who review, not the book the authors have written, but the book the reviewer wishes they had written. Nonetheless, this book would have better met its goal of "clarify[ing] what happened in working-class Canada at the end of the war and [situating] the workers' revolt within the larger structure of Canadian social, economic, and political history" <sup>10</sup> if the authors had written their regional essays, circulated them, identified common themes, and then written book chapters that developed these themes with evidence from across the country. Even without this process, these chapters emphasize similarities, not differences: the extent of radicalism and militancy among workers across the country, and the connections between the Winnipeg General Strike and labour's struggles for democracy and security elsewhere. The existence of similarities is not

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<sup>5</sup> A. Seager & D. Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West: A Ghost of a Chance" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 231.

<sup>6</sup> I. McKay & S. Morton, "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* at 47.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* at 76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* at 77.

<sup>10</sup> "Introduction," *supra* note 2 at 7.

surprising, but the focus on region obscures two significant sources of these similarities.

First, although region is treated, by and large, as a fixed concept, both the population and the cultural understanding of regions are mutable. Workers move about in search of jobs and, in the process, revise their particular understanding of their region, of nation, and of class relations. On visits home, their new views may change the limits of the possible for others.

Second, the attempt to integrate and synthesize material from numerous local studies tends to obscure the importance of the federal state in setting the context for labour relations in Canada for the first quarter of the twentieth century. Heron and Myer Siemiatycki note that bringing war-related industries under the *Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (IDIA)*<sup>11</sup> in 1916 made conciliation a precondition for a legal strike or lockout.<sup>12</sup> They note, too, that the state increasingly relied on coercion and overt oppression in the management of labour relations, as shown by the orders-in-council creating criminal sanctions for those of the working classes who were unemployed, outlawing various radical organizations, and banning strikes,<sup>13</sup> as well as the hastily-enacted legislation of 1919 to make it easier to deport labour radicals and to obtain convictions for seditious conspiracy.<sup>14</sup> But there are no references to permit the reader to identify more precisely how and when these very illiberal measures were added to the state's arsenal, or how they were used. Nor does Heron and Siemiatycki's chapter provide any information on what percentage of the workers in each region were subject to the *IDIA*, any discussion of labour relations regimes in each jurisdiction, or an explanation of the constitutional division of authority between the federal and provincial governments over employment matters.

This lack of attention to the powers and functions of the state may explain why the book offers little description or analysis of the state's use of force to suppress political radicalism and labour militancy. Perhaps, given the well-known history of Bloody Saturday, when the state attempted to crush the Winnipeg General Strike by a show of force, the authors of the various chapters took for granted readers'

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<sup>11</sup> S.C. 1907, c. 20 [hereinafter *IDIA*].

<sup>12</sup> See C. Heron & M. Siemiatycki, "The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 11 at 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* at 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* at 35.

understanding of the limits of workers' democratic rights and civil liberties. McKay and Morton mention the presence of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police spy at labour meetings in Halifax and the use of injunctions to prevent picketing during the Halifax shipyard strike (both in 1920),<sup>15</sup> the dispatching of troops to the Cape Breton coal mining communities in 1922,<sup>16</sup> the assault on a group of workers by mounted provincial police on Bloody Sunday in 1923,<sup>17</sup> and the arrest and conviction of labour leader J.B. McLachlan for seditious libel.<sup>18</sup> Seager and Roth report that A.S. Wells, editor of the *BC Federationist*, was charged with sedition after the paper serialized Lenin's *Left Wing Communism* in 1921.<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Ewen refers to three picketers who were charged with disturbing the peace in Montreal in 1917 during a two-month strike in the men's garment industry, and adds that the use of injunctions to curb picketing became more common after 1920.<sup>20</sup>

These instances, and others not included in the book, could have been collected into a chapter dealing with the state's use of force against workers, and with the attempts to manage dissent through carefully-controlled opportunities for worker participation in the policy process. Heron notes two such opportunities: the Mathers Commission on Industrial Relations, appointed by the federal government in 1919, prior to the Winnipeg General Strike, and the National Industrial Conference, a meeting of representatives of employers, workers, and the public, convened by the federal government in September 1919.<sup>21</sup> Tom Mitchell and James Naylor,<sup>22</sup> and Seager and Roth report and analyze some of the testimony given at the Mathers Commission hearings across the country, which Seager and Roth call "participatory theatre."<sup>23</sup>

A chapter on labour and state should also deal with workers' attempts to turn the state to their purposes, through their campaigns for elected office. As the various chapters confirm, workers in this period

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<sup>15</sup> See McKay & Morton, *supra* note 6 at 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* at 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* at 73.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* at 74.

<sup>19</sup> See Seager & Roth, *supra* note 5 at 258.

<sup>20</sup> See G. Ewen, "Quebec: Class and Ethnicity" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 87 at 99, 117.

<sup>21</sup> See "National Contours," *supra* note 3 at 289.

<sup>22</sup> T. Mitchell & J. Naylor, "The Prairies: In the Eye of the Storm" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 176 at 192-99.

<sup>23</sup> Seager & Roth, *supra* note 5 at 253.

voted for their own in federal, provincial and, particularly, municipal elections, which were not as likely to be contested on party lines. McKay and Morton note the transformation of the Glace Bay municipal council in 1919, with the election of seven coal miners and two machinists,<sup>24</sup> and Mitchell and Naylor include in labour's revolt on the Prairies the election of Joe Clarke, labour mayor of Edmonton in 1918,<sup>25</sup> and particularly, the success of labour candidates in Winnipeg's municipal election in 1919.<sup>26</sup> Naylor, relying on his own published research, credits workers elected to municipal councils and school boards in southwestern Ontario with fighting for better wages for municipal employees, better education for working-class children, and the removal of property qualifications for voting in municipal elections.<sup>27</sup> But none of these chapters provides an overall assessment of whether municipal councils dominated by workers were able to govern differently. For that, the reader must consult the community-level studies cited in the book's forty-page bibliography, which is arranged alphabetically, by author, and exists primarily to provide the full bibliographic information for items cited in the chapter notes.

Perhaps only a legal historian would expect a work of labour history to recognize the central role of the state in all its manifestations, and to emphasize the legal regimes that constrained labour activity, both ideologically, through continued promotion of the idea that labour unions interfered with freedom of contract, and coercively, through injunctions and the use of military and police power against workers' organizations. But paying more attention to state power may have made it easier for Heron, in his concluding chapter,<sup>28</sup> to explain the defeat of the workers' revolt while invoking its history to inspire those engaged in similar struggles today. Rather than workers coerced into submission, Heron presents workers led by cautious trade unionists into acceptance of the dubious benefits of industrial legality. In an analysis that presages labour's post-war compromise with the institutionalization of collective

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<sup>24</sup> See McKay & Morton, *supra* note 6 at 54.

<sup>25</sup> See Mitchell & Naylor, *supra* note 22 at 201.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* at 215.

<sup>27</sup> See J. Naylor, "Southern Ontario: Striking at the Ballot Box" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 144 at 157.

<sup>28</sup> See "National Contours," *supra* note 3.

bargaining after World War I,<sup>29</sup> Heron describes workers as giving up the right to strike during the term of a contract, and eschewing political or sympathy strikes, in return for weak state support for collective bargaining.<sup>30</sup>

Legal historians, of course, were not the book's intended audience. Nor, it seems, was the general reader with an interest in Canadian history, or even the Canadian historian who wants to learn more about labour history. Too many terms and entities are introduced without explanation, or with explanations that come far too late in the text, making the book easily readable only to those already familiar with many of the historical and historiographical debates in labour history. For example, Heron and Siemiatycki, in their chapter, identify labourism and socialism as the two main ideological tendencies within independent working-class politics,<sup>31</sup> and several of the other chapters also use these terms in discussing labour politics, particularly McKay and Morton on the Maritimes, and Ewen on Quebec. Ewen identifies particular labour leaders as "labourists who insisted on a separation of economic and political action—a position that precluded any political use of the strike weapon."<sup>32</sup> But it is only in Naylor's chapter on southern Ontario that we get a definition of what he refers to as "the ideological morass of labourism"<sup>33</sup>: labourists sought the election of working-class candidates to the legislature in the expectation that they would propose and support legislation to benefit workers rather than capitalists; they attacked not the capitalist system, but the corrupt political parties that perverted democratic processes.<sup>34</sup>

Syndicalism is another undefined term, perhaps because the authors are not entirely decided whether syndicalism is to be celebrated or deplored. Heron in his introduction, and Naylor and Mitchell in their chapter on the Prairies are critical of historians who use the term syndicalist as a pejorative to suggest that western labour radicals might

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the post-war compromise, see C. Heron & R. Storey, "On the Job in Canada" in C. Heron & R. Storey, eds., *On the Job* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992) 1 at 21-24; and W. Roberts & J. Bullen, "A Heritage of Hope and Struggle: Workers, Unions, and Politics in Canada, 1930-1982" in M.S. Cross & G.S. Kealey, eds., *Modern Canada: 1930-1980's* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984) 105 at 117-20.

<sup>30</sup> See "National Contours," *supra* note 3.

<sup>31</sup> See Heron & Siemiatycki, *supra* note 12 at 28-29.

<sup>32</sup> Ewen, *supra* note 20 at 91.

<sup>33</sup> Naylor, *supra* note 27 at 168.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.* at 156.

have accomplished more through parliamentary politics.<sup>35</sup> In his concluding chapter, Heron offers a definition of syndicalism—“that European brand of radicalism that rejected radical social change through electoral politics in favour of the revolutionary potential of direct action on the picket line”<sup>36</sup>—and says that the term has been inappropriately applied to the more flamboyant expressions of support for industrial unionism.<sup>37</sup>

The divisions between craft and industrial unions is another subject covered in all of the chapters, again without enough explanation to make the significance of the distinction clear to the newcomer to North American labour history. Heron and Siemiatycki describe craft unions as bureaucratically structured unions, affiliated with the major North American trade union centrals—the American Federation of Labor in the United States and, in Canada, the Trades and Labor Congress—and focused on “a regularized contractual relationship that would protect their craft status and workplace power, in return for labour peace and wage stability.”<sup>38</sup> Divided jurisdictionally by occupation, there might be several different craft unions representing different categories of skilled workers in a single workplace. In contrast, industrial unions organized all workers in a workplace, and some of their leaders regarded collective bargaining as one strategy in a more general assault on the power of capital.<sup>39</sup> Structure and politics are thus considered in categorizing a particular union as craft or industrial, with the term “craft unionism” often used as a synonym or code word for conservative unionism. Conflating these two different criteria for categorization makes it difficult to label the United Mine Workers of America, whose locals in coal mines in eastern and western Canada were organized by workplace rather than by craft, but which accepted the political and organizational principles of the American Federation of Labor. As McKay and Morton relate, the union’s international president, John L. Lewis, was quite willing in this period to discipline individual locals that did not honour existing contracts, and to depose elected leaders such as J.B. McLachlan who espoused revolutionary socialism.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See “Introduction,” *supra* note 2 at 6; and Mitchell & Naylor, *supra* note 22 at 180.

<sup>36</sup> “National Contours,” *supra* note 3 at 274.

<sup>37</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Heron & Siemiatycki, *supra* note 12 at 28.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.* at 27-28.

<sup>40</sup> See McKay & Morton, *supra* note 6 at 49, 71-72.

Federal labour unions, referred to briefly in various chapters, further illustrate the impermeability of the dividing line between craft unions and industrial unions. Directly chartered by the American Federation of Labor or the Trades and Labor Congress, rather than by one of their member unions, federal labour unions were set up as temporary organizations open to workers at individual workplaces or in several workplaces in a single community, pending resolution of jurisdictional disputes among existing unions and reorganization of the federal labour unions along more traditional lines. Thus, although firmly integrated into the craft union bureaucracy, and, as McKay and Morton report,<sup>41</sup> sometimes organized by American Federation of Labor staff, the politics of the federal labour unions was often at odds with that of the parent trade union centrals. Local federations of labour, too, were often more militant than the craft unions they represented, and sometimes, as in Amherst in 1919, adopted strategies associated with syndicalism or industrial unionism, such as attempting to bargain collectively with all of the community's major employers.<sup>42</sup>

Some of these issues of definition, distinction, and categorization might have been addressed in 'a thematic chapter focusing on the demographics of the Canadian labour force, the institutional structure of organized labour, and the intricacies of labour politics. Such a chapter would provide the background for further thematic chapters exploring the relationship between the male workers who are central to most of these chapters, working either in skilled trades in major urban centres or in resource-extraction industries, particularly coal mines, and the others who make cameo appearances—women whose work is hidden because it is unwaged, factory girls, municipal workers, teachers and other white collar workers, and the unemployed. All of the authors are conscious of what is omitted from existing secondary literature, and attempt to redress some of the omissions. Only Seager and Roth address the question of Aboriginal peoples' participation in wage labour and labour organizations,<sup>43</sup> but women as wage workers and as supporters of their striking husbands appear in every chapter. Ewen explores as well the ambivalence of male union leaders in Quebec toward the wage-earning woman, documenting male workers' resistance to women's entry into traditionally male jobs, along with efforts to organize women workers.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See *ibid.* at 51.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* at 53-54.

<sup>43</sup> See Seager & Roth, *supra* note 5 at 239-40.

<sup>44</sup> See Ewen, *supra* note 20 at 104-09.

Seager and Roth use census data to describe women's wage force participation, and note that this source leaves unrecorded women's work in the home or on the farm, and various forms of "penny capitalism," including prostitution.<sup>45</sup> Seager and Roth picture male unionists in western Canada as being just as suspicious of women workers as their counterparts in Quebec,<sup>46</sup> suggesting that Heron's criticism of "male francophone indifference to the rights of working-class women"<sup>47</sup> has more general application.

This book is weak in identifying and exploring thematic questions across the country as a whole, or even across what Heron calls the "archipelago of isolated industrial centres,"<sup>48</sup> which are the book's main subject. The best of its chapters, nonetheless, provide a convincing synthesis of the extensive published and unpublished research on working-class Canada in the years immediately after World War I, making this book an essential starting point for those who want to understand the continuing hegemony of "bourgeois common sense."

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<sup>45</sup> See Seager & Roth, *supra* note 5 at 242.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* at 241.

<sup>47</sup> C. Heron, "Conclusion" in *Workers' Revolt*, *supra* note 1, 305 at 309.

<sup>48</sup> "National Contours," *supra* note 3 at 283.

