

# Conference Report

## Rapport de colloque

### Meeting of the Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1 June 1991, Kingston, Ontario

SHARON REILLY

At the June 1991 meetings of the Canadian Historical Association in Kingston, Ontario, the Committee on Canadian Labour History (CCLH) met to discuss the topic *Working Class History and the Working Class*. The meeting was organized and opened by Canadian labour historian Bryan Palmer, who introduced the sessions as an opportunity to consider the ways in which labour history can be made more accessible to the labour movement and to working people.

Approximately 70 individuals participated in the day-long meeting, including university historians, other academics and graduate students, archivists, several historians working in museums and at other public history sites, and a number of labour activists. Like the topic of the day's meeting, the diversity of this group reflected the interest of the CCLH in expanding its scope and impact beyond traditional academic boundaries.

The first session focussed on the problems faced by university historians trying to reach beyond a limited academic audience to address working people. Palmer observed that, although many academics see their work as supportive of the groups they study, the fact that they function within the university means that they work in relative isolation from society. He introduced historian and labour activist Wayne Roberts, who reflected on his experiences writing working class history and working with organized labour over more than 20 years. Roberts emphasized that by making labour history relevant and accessible to working people, and by "applying the pressure of the work they do to labour activity and self-awareness," historians can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of contemporary issues. The way to do this, he pointed out, is to answer the ques-

tions that labour considers important – like explaining why union members are apathetic.

Larry Wagg, a retired activist from the Canadian Labour Congress, spoke next and described himself as someone who has worked all his life to promote an awareness of labour history among trade unionists. He expressed his concern over the fact that the priorities of unions are wages and confronting management, and not that of understanding their own history. Regarding the role of academics and the writing of history, Wagg observed that while he enjoyed reading labour history, academics are really "talking to one another" in these texts and not writing for ordinary people. He commented further that while "most of us in the trade union movement are democratic enough to put up with all your viewpoints," academics could not expect unions to support them when they criticize its leadership. Labour needs its leaders to survive, Wagg warned, and academics who attack labour's leaders risk being seen as "the enemy within." What "we in the labour movement need," he concluded, "is a Pierre Berton of labour history."

Both presentations were commented on by Trent University Professor Joan Sangster. Sangster acknowledged the reality of the gulf between historians and labour which Larry Wagg described, and she reiterated the call to make history accessible to working people. She pointed out that "historians don't want to be irrelevant" but have difficulty in finding ways to make their findings accessible to a broad public. "CBC and the mass media," Sangster noted wryly, "only know that three historians exist in Canada." And publishing, the usual means of getting history out to people, has become increasingly difficult in the current economic climate. Responding to the suggestion

that academics can be seen as unfairly critical of the labour movement, Sangster pointed out that while today's labour historians are anxious to make their findings available to working people, they also strive to be objective, and not "fall into the old trap of creating [false] heroes."

This key session set the tone for the remainder of the day's discussion, which explored some recent work in the field of Canadian labour history, considered the role of museums and historic sites in interpreting labour history, and concluded with a discussion of the task of synthesizing working-class history.

The session *Alcan Workers in the Twentieth Century* included two presentations on current research. David Akers, of Queen's University, described his study of company unionism and its role in the beginnings of independent unions in Alcan's operations in Kingston, Ontario. Akers described how the company attempted, but ultimately failed, to use the notion of family and family building to win and maintain workers' loyalty. José Igartua, of the University of Quebec at Montreal, discussed the organization of work, working life and union organization in the company town of Arvida in northern Quebec. His description of community development in the remote northern town, including the role of fraternal associations like the Moose Lodge, suggested the potential for a colourful public history project.

The afternoon session, *Museums and the Working Class*, included reports on activities in four provinces. Joanne Burgess, an historian at the University of Quebec, introduced the discussion by explaining that museums in Montreal have done little in working class history because: a) the collections needed to enable curators to do this do not exist; and b) because there are few social historians working in museums to take on such programs.

On a more positive note, however, Burgess pointed to recent efforts of the McCord Museum to give greater emphasis to work history in some of their exhibits. She also described the impact of the "eco-museum" movement in Quebec, with its commitment to involving local communities, personal memories and private collections in the creation of a new style of museum. Such projects, reported Burgess, do not focus on labour history as such, but they are starting to explore and interpret working people's lives. Burgess concluded with the observation that while social histori-

ans have had an important impact on museums, there is less evidence of reciprocal influence, and not enough attention is paid by historians to the evidence offered by photographs and artifacts.

Michael Earle from Cape Breton described the ongoing Sydney Steel Project, in which oral history research with steel workers and photographic evidence of the workplace are being used together to create a vivid history of life in the steel mill. Like the Quebec eco-museums, this project clearly is succeeding because it has captured the interest and enthusiasm of the local community.

Another community-based project was described in the presentation by Sharon Reilly, Associate Curator of History and Technology at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg. Entitled "Concerning Work," this project was organized by the MMMN in 1982-83 and included a variety of exhibits and public programs developed with community groups that focussed on the history of working life in Canada. Reilly also showed an array of slides from an ongoing research and collecting project intended to document the history of fraternal and early union organizations in Manitoba.

In the final presentation in the session, York University Professor Craig Heron described efforts underway in Ontario to create a museum of labour and working people's history. Heron distributed copies of the October 1990 issue of *Our Times Independent Canadian Labour Magazine*, which featured an article concerning the recently incorporated Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre and described its mandate to help to preserve and interpret Ontario's labour heritage.

The final session of the day, *Synthesizing Working Class History*, returned to the opening discussion about the need to write history that is not only professional but also interesting and accessible to a wide readership. While of particular concern to educators in both the university and the labour movement, this issue also is important to historians working in museums and other public history institutions, because interpretive programs and exhibits also must be professional, relevant and accessible to a wide public audience. Indeed, the very survival of these institutions depends upon the level of public support which they receive, and that support will most certainly reflect the extent to which the museum is perceived as

being meaningful to and therefore valued by a broad public.

In conclusion, the meeting of the Committee on Canadian Labour History brought together a variety of individuals who share an interest in and commitment to Canada's labour history, and provided an opportunity for these

people to share information and ideas about different projects going on across the country. It also encouraged the participants to think about how, together and individually, they might work to make the findings of their research more accessible to ordinary people.