

“Workers of the World, Give Me a Call!”

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Being an “active” historian can take many forms. Some of us send off letters to the editor. Some carry placards in demonstrations about issues that upset us. Some write affidavits for important court cases or carry our knowledge before government commissions. Some write speeches for prime ministers. Over the past quarter century, many of us have tried to rethink what it means to be a historian from the inside out, and have tried to develop ways of thinking, writing, and acting that connect us with issues of social justice and the movements behind them.

I was an activist before I was a historian. As an undergraduate History student at the University of Toronto in the late 1960s, I defied my upbringing in conservative working-class Scarborough by being drawn into radical student politics and identifying with the emerging New Left in Toronto. I embraced a set of principles and values that, broadly speaking, have shaped my political thinking ever since. It was a form of politics that was ultra-democratic, anti-authoritarian, egalitarian, and communitarian. At some point in the 1970s it became heavily influenced by feminism.

I was a “radical” - the word we all used in those heady days to label our diffuse, multifaceted politics. In practice that meant that I identified with groups that I believed were exploited and oppressed and looked forward to fundamental structural changes in their situations. Besides agitating for a more democratically run university, working on radical education projects, and marching in countless demonstrations, I thought I should be supporting the struggles of working people, and I started to walk picket lines in some of the most high-profile strikes. Indeed, I recall starting my first classes in the MA program at the University of Toronto in 1971 in a somewhat bleary-eyed state, having been up before the sun to get to a picket line at the Texpac plant out in Brantford.

My understanding of the importance of the working class to political struggle was fairly abstract, and had not come from discussions at my family’s dinner table. But I did become more sharply aware of class distinctions as I spent my summers working in factories while my middle-class university friends headed off to Europe. That means that I can remember the political exhilaration of working in the infamous Canadian Johns-Mansville asbestos plant in Scarborough and reading the leading American radical magazine, *Ramparts*, on my coffee breaks.

When I finally decided that I might like to become a historian in 1975 (after some time outside the university), I brought along all this political baggage and had plenty of skepticism about academia. I was critical of the elitism of professional life that insisted on unnecessarily rigid hierarchies between graduate stu-

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dents and faculty, between support staff and academics, and between administrators and everybody else. I was critical of overly authoritarian pedagogy, and preferred a more student-centered approach. I was concerned about the under-representation of women and minorities in the university and in the historical profession itself. And, of course, as a graduate student staking out a research project, I was critical of how the writing of Canadian history had ignored or dismissed the experiences of women, minority groups, and, above all from my perspective, workers. I was going to uncover the as-yet undiscovered story of the Canadian working class in the early twentieth century. I was not content to stay within the narrow frameworks of conventional historical writing, and was much more open to perspectives from other disciplines than I thought my senior colleagues were.

My youthful political formation also encouraged me to try to break down the isolation of academia, to build bridges to the outside world and make my workplace more relevant to the mass of the Canadian population. So I tried to design assignments for my students that would encourage them to apply some of the insights they were gleaning in my classes to the real world, in particular through oral history projects. I also thought it was important to find a variety of voices for communicating the insights of my research to different audiences. So even while working on my dissertation, I wrote articles for union newspapers and a script for an NFB sound-filmstrip on child labour, I spoke to non-academic conferences and workshops, and I helped to produce a full-length pictorial history of the Hamilton working class. In my first years of teaching, I also worked with the Ontario Museum Association and the Toronto Board of Education's Labour Education Committee to find ways to bring the emerging scholarship in Canadian labour history to children and the general public.

I need to emphasize, however, that my criticisms of academia and elitist professionalism did not lead me to reject or abandon some basic professional standards. I was committed to careful, exhaustive research that could meet the highest standards of scholarly excellence. I wanted to see rigorous discussion and debate about empirical detail, methodology, and theory, and believed it was important to engage in critical interventions within the profession to begin to shift paradigms of historical thinking (which of course meant participating fully in contributing to and organizing conferences, writing provocative review articles, and so on - a major commitment of time and energy that soon drew me away from some of the older venues of activism).

I expected a lot from myself, my students, and my colleagues. I thought (and still do think) that it was possible to be rigorous and demanding without being arrogant and pretentious. Being informal, friendly, and supportive does not have to mean being intellectually lazy. And I believed that, as a serious professional, I was developing an expertise that gave me a right to be heard. Since I was also looking outward from the university, I was expecting to be able to apply my expertise in democratic ways, in settings beyond academic conferences and seminars, but

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also to be respected for what I knew about history.

Fortunately, I was not alone in these proclivities. As a graduate student, I had been lucky to be doing a doctorate at Dalhousie where a good number of faculty and graduate students shared my views about how to do history and be a historian. By that point there were larger beachheads within the Canadian historical profession where these ideas and practices were also taking hold - the Canadian Committee on Women's History, the Canadian Committee on Labour History, and so on, as well as an interdisciplinary grouping known as the Political Economy Network, all of whom held sessions at the Learned Societies meetings each year. I also discovered when I began teaching at York in 1982 that I had arrived at an institution with more radicals per square inch than anywhere else in the country. That was not so true in the History Department as I found it in the 1980s, however. My willingness back then to honour the picket lines of secretaries and part-time instructors and then to go out on strike myself along with the rest of the York University Faculty Association set me apart from most of my colleagues - a sharp contrast, I should add, with what happened in 1997 and 2000 during even bigger labour disruptions at York, when most History Department faculty did not try to teach and often walked the picket lines.

So, in the 1980s, I soon found that my most important intellectual growth was taking place not in the History Department, but in discussion groups set up informally outside the structures of the university, with young equally radicalized academics - in my case, an industrial relations group, a Marxist history group, much later a masculinities history group, and, by far the most important, a group of sociologists, historians, and scattering of economists and legal scholars, which is still meeting today after more than a quarter of a century as the Toronto Labour Studies Group (through which more than fifty people have passed over the years).

So it was with this peculiar political and professional formation that I began to devote more energy to working outside the university with the labour movement. In 1988 I coordinated what turned out to be the last in a series of biennial conferences started in the 1970s to bring together academics from many disciplines and labour activists in the hopes of sharing insights. It was originally called the Blue-Collar Work Conference (informally dubbed the Blue Denim Conference as a result of the attire that academics typically sported), and then, under the weight of feminist criticism, it was renamed the Workers and Their Communities Conference. It was intended to give academics working on topics in labour studies in various disciplines an opportunity to talk to each other and, more importantly, to bring into the discussions labour activists and people from other closely allied social movements - feminists, environmentalists, housing activists, cultural workers, and so on. Sometimes it worked, but more often it was an embarrassingly lopsided event with relatively few working-class voices participating. A few years later, I convinced the Canadian Committee on Labour History to begin

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holding a workshop each year just before the regular meetings of the Canadian Historical Association to bring together labour historians with union and community activists in day-long discussions and cultural events - a generally much more successful experience that continues to the present.

A month after the end of the last Workers and Their Communities Conference, in the early summer of 1988, I attended what was ultimately a much more important meeting, the first in what was to become, for me, fifteen years of meetings to launch a new institution devoted to the history and culture of working people. This new project brought together a remarkable mixture of people from the labour movement, public and popular education, archives work, arts production, and academia. We called it the Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre (the Ontario part of the title was dropped about 2002 - hence the acronym WAHC). In the early 1990s we managed to get some grudging support from the new NDP government at Queen's Park to buy and renovate a handsome old building in Hamilton, which opened to the public late in 1996. From the beginning the Ontario Federation of Labour appointed three members of the board, and had a rarely acknowledged senior status among us (much as the labour movement did in the many other coalitions of social groups it was joining in the 1980s and 1990s).

This project ran on a shoe-string, with a ridiculously small budget and no staff until late in 1995, and even then nowhere near enough for the scope of our ambitions. So the board members not only debated broad policy and lobbied politicians for funding, but also did much of the hands-on work in running the centre. I wrote many grant applications, spoke to countless audiences, tacked pictures to walls, stacked chairs, served drinks, and much more. I also curated five exhibits and worked as a historical consultant on several more, as did other academics (notably Franca Iacovetta, Ken Cruikshank, Nancy Bouchier, Richard Harris, Wayne Lewchuk, and Robert Storey). I have written a long article about much of this experience (in *Labour/Le Travail*, Spring 2000), so I won't go into much detail about the process - just a few highlights.

First, what was I trying to do in this project? I saw this work as part of popular history, as a way to convey the insights of the academic scholarship of labour historians to larger audiences, particularly the people whose experience was presented in that scholarship, in the hope that they could use this knowledge for their own collective purposes. That of course meant having to think about different modes of communication than academic writing or classroom lectures, and made me much more conscious of the use of artifacts, visual material, and three-dimensional space, for which my professional training as a historian had not equipped me at all. This kind of work did not do much to deepen my historical understanding of particular topics or issues, but it did change the way I think about history, especially the visual and spatial dimensions.

For academics accustomed to being authoritative voices, this kind of political engagement was largely unfamiliar. Our challenge was two-fold - to learn

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to listen and cooperate with other activists with similar goals, not simply to impose our academic knowledge; and yet, at the same time, to find ways to have our expertise taken seriously at the table of discussion and planning. I saw my work at WAHC as helping to preserve and promote the historical experience of working people and the organizations they had created to advance and protect their interests and concerns, particularly their unions. In Hamilton at several points it was certainly clear that our efforts gave local unionists a stronger sense that their current struggles had a long history. That required putting more of the accent on their pride, determination, and success - an upbeat, hopeful story to counterbalance the neglect and disparagement that had been heaped on workers. It was harder to turn the spotlight on the failures or on such less attractive behaviour as racism, sexism, bureaucratization, or red-baiting. To be fair, it was possible to insert some of these critical dimensions into the mix of exhibitions, mainly because there are voices inside the labour movement raising these concerns. But, repeatedly I had to get used to adapting my training in history to the uses of heritage, which involves much more celebration, veneration, and myth-making than many hard-boiled historians are normally willing to accept. In this case, carrying my expertise into such settings was to contribute to a larger culture of resistance that had to be negotiated with people from very different backgrounds.

So how did those people think about historians like me and the work we do? There is a small, but encouraging core of unionists who love labour-history. But many activists in the labour movement and other social movements have little interest in or patience with history. Many unionists are also cavalier about preserving their historical records (a year ago the Canadian Labour Congress turfed out many boxes of files when they moved to new offices without bothering to ask any of us what should be saved and archived). Most often labour activists want history to provide straightforward lessons from the past, and to reaffirm the stories that circulate among them. I have had, for example, a devil of a time trying to get labour people to accept that the creation of Labour Day in 1894 was not a capitalist plot in response to the more radical May Day. It was also hard to get unions to put their money where their mouths were. For many years, WAHC's experience was that the labour movement ritually would proclaim its support for labour history, but when it came to funding projects, the money often was not there (fortunately there has recently been a significant increase in financial support).

How they have viewed us, as opposed to our scholarship, is more complicated. I think we are respected, but not entirely trusted. They like to hear us as public intellectuals talking to the media with labour-positive messages, and they have seemed willing to tag along somewhat passively on the arts and heritage projects we set in motion. But, among many workers, there is a perfectly understandable discomfort with people coming out of the university environment. Unionists can sense a sharp class difference. Back in the 1980s I was introduced to the chair of the Education Committee of the steelworkers' union local at Stelco in

Hamilton, who bluntly said: “I know you professors - you either want to study us or change us,” and walked away without shaking my hand. There is also a residual problem from the Cold War, when Canadian unions pulled all their educational work inside their own organizations and wanted to keep tight control over it. They are cautious about working with free-floating intellectuals outside their offices. So in 1999-2000 the CLC put together their own Millennium project with no significant input from those of us who had been working in the area for a long time. And more recently a traveling exhibit on the history of working women was put together with no help from the many scholars in that field who could have contributed. Perhaps most important, beyond the leadership level, workers have not flocked in large numbers to labour heritage events and programs (in 2007, for example, WAHC launched a new permanent exhibit on Hamilton labour history and got only a handful of people turning up). We are probably too earnest and too didactic for most working-class tastes. Whatever the explanation, it is certainly frustrating to have to put up with so many digs about irrelevant academics from a broad range of progressive people.

So I can report that my efforts to do “active” history have in some small ways contributed to changing the content and practices of the historical profession in Canada, and that the ongoing work being done out of the old Custom House in Hamilton by WAHC’s staff, board, and volunteers has made some considerable difference. Yet on reflection the interaction of the two spheres of activity has been far more difficult than I imagined. In particular, I think that many of us who, with missionary zeal, carried our agenda of public education outside the university discovered that there is quite limited interest in it. We often framed our projects in ways that did not always resonate with the groups we hoped to work with, and our professionalism, however radicalized, could prove to be an obstacle to easy working relationships with those groups. As a historian of alcohol consumption, I find that sobering.