

The Workers' Revolt in Canada: Then and Now

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It is a privilege to participate on this panel and discuss the scholarship of Dr. Craig Heron—a pioneer of Canadian labour history and among the most respected historians in Canada. Since he received his PhD in 1981, Heron has pursued his career with dynamism and energy. Among his many accomplishments, he has written numerous books and articles for both academic and public audiences, provided meaningful contributions to critical historical debates, and developed insightful analyses in Canadian social history. To highlight these accomplishments, this paper will focus on Heron's work related to “the workers' revolt.”¹ The historiography of the workers' revolt can be recognized as one of the most lengthy and controversial debates in Canadian labour history. It began as an emphasis on the exceptional radicalism of workers in Western Canada during the post-World War I period. However, Heron and other historians argued that worker radicalism in the West was not exceptional, but rather part of a broader national and international trend of working-class resistance. This essay will review some of the relevant scholarship in this debate, and will further consider the different ways in which historians have built upon and challenged the concept of the workers' revolt. It concludes with reflections on how the workers' revolt can continue to provide a framework for further research.

The origins of the workers' revolt controversy can be traced back to Donald Masters's book published in 1950, *The Winnipeg General Strike*.² In his study, Masters argued that before and during World War I, western workers were more radical than workers elsewhere in Canada. To substantiate his argument, he pointed to the unique conditions faced by western workers, as well as the close ties between western workers and radical working-class organizations, such as the One Big Union and the Industrial Workers of the World. He further claimed that the Winnipeg General Strike (which he considered to be the first major challenge to western workers) exemplified their unparalleled radicalism in Canada. The majority of his study details the strike itself, but as he emphasized in his *Forward*, the post-World War I period was part of a broader “western revolt.”³ Masters's overall emphasis on the western revolt became the focal point of the controversy that followed. By emphasizing a western revolt and western radicalism, he was overshadowing radicalism and working-class agency in central and eastern Canada. The debate which followed would last decades.

During the 1970s, historians—particularly those with non-Marxist leanings—re-affirmed the emphasis on the western revolt with similar determination. David Bercuson and Ross McCormack were among them—both published full-length studies in the 1970s. As with Masters's work, these studies continued to em-

phasize western social and economic conditions giving rise to workers' radicalism.⁴ By the 1980s, the narrative of the western revolt was finding its way into popular history. In 1980, Desmond Morton and Terry Copp wrote *Working People: an Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement*.⁵ Of particular note was their chapter titled "The Western Revolt," which provided an overview of post-World War I unrest in western provinces. Controversially, they described nothing pertaining to central and eastern Canada, despite the book's national scope. Even three decades after Masters's study, central and eastern Canadian workers still remained overshadowed by the West.

The absence of post-World War I central and eastern working-class history prompted a pushback from some—particularly Marxist historians—beginning in the 1980s. Professor Heron was among them. Given their Marxist leanings, these historians were fine with western workers being portrayed as radical, but they argued that there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate that workers revolted *across* Canada. One of the first major milestones in challenging the western revolt narrative was a 1983 symposium on the Winnipeg General Strike.⁶ While the Strike was the central focus, special attention was also given to the national, and even international, character of class struggle. Heron, having received his doctoral degree from Dalhousie University just two years prior, presented a paper on this subject titled "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class."⁷ In it, he demonstrated that labourism was a distinct ideological form in Canadian politics, and that it existed, loosely, on a *national* scale. During this symposium, other historians also provided substantiated evidence for the national character of the Canadian working class. Gregory Kealey's "1919: A National Labour Revolt" spoke directly to the western bias of post-World War I history.⁸ Kealey argued that World War I was a catalyst that ignited class conflicts which had been brewing long before the war. He further argued that while the labour revolt was not homogenous, it was *nation-wide*, part of an international trend, and driven by class consciousness. By expanding their analysis beyond the West, Heron, Kealey, and many other historians were establishing a foundation upon which they could effectively challenge the western revolt narrative.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, historians continued to debate the regional and national character of post-World War I unrest. Heron, understanding the importance of history as a way to shape collective memory, endeavored to bring his new perspective to a broader audience. In 1989 he published *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History*, providing a direct alternative to the western bias of Morton and Copp's *Working People*.⁹ In particular, the second chapter, "The Workers' Revolt," was a sharp contrast to Morton and Copp's chapter, "The Western Revolt." Heron integrated his own arguments and evidence with those of other historians to make a case for the workers' revolt as a national phenomenon. He argued that the revolt was the outcome of long-term trends, such as the intensification of industrial conflict into the twentieth century, the increasing desperation of the craft

unions, the growing appeal of industrial unionism, and the desire to realize broader working-class interests through political action. As a book written for a broad audience, it was a great success—it was republished twice, and continues to be widely used among unions and working-class organizations. However, popular histories do not tend to end academic debates. When Bercuson republished *Confrontation at Winnipeg* in 1990, he included a full chapter of rebuttals to historians who had attempted to undermine his arguments. What was needed to address the western revolt was a more rigorous and comprehensive study.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, the number of studies examining how workers revolted throughout Canada proliferated. This expanded body of empirical research provided Heron and other historians with what they needed to firmly demonstrate that working-class radicalism and resistance existed in central and eastern Canada. By 1998, Heron had met with other leading historians and published *The Workers Revolt in Canada 1917–1925*.¹⁰ The study is a series of essays, each focusing on a particular province or region. As editor, Heron wove these essays together by providing an overall framework, which emphasized how these seemingly separate conflicts were part of a nation-wide revolt. He also contributed two chapters, “The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada,” co-authored with Myer Siemiatycki, and “National Contours: Solidarity and Fragmentation.” Other contributors were Suzanne Morton, Geoffrey Ewen, Tom Mitchell, Allen Seagar, David Roth, James Naylor and Ian McKay. Each author had previously written on topics related to the workers’ revolt, making the book the culmination of decades of research.

Through the sheer volume of its evidence, *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada* seemed to signal an end to the debate around the existence of working-class radicalism in post-World War I Canada, at least to the extent that the debate had once existed. Since its publication, there have been a number of labour studies that expand on our knowledge of the workers’ revolt, but few that directly challenge its central thesis that workers across Canada revolted, not just in the West. Outside of labour history, *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada* has had a more mixed reception. A comprehensive overview would be too large of an undertaking for this paper, so instead it will draw on two studies which demonstrate how *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada* has had varying influence on World War I historiography.

The first study is Ian McKay’s *Reasoning Otherwise*, published ten years after *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada*. McKay draws upon the workers’ revolt and integrates it into the liberal order framework.¹¹ Here, the workers’ revolt is seen as part of a major crisis in liberal hegemony, wherein the common sense of liberalism was challenged on a mass scale during the war, leading people in Canada to “think otherwise” about how they might re-construct society and empower themselves during the post-war period. While still inclusive of organized labour, McKay expanded the study’s scope beyond working-class resistance to also encompass the resistance of “the left.”¹² There is little doubt that McKay, having participated in writing *The*

Workers' Revolt in Canada, built upon the workers' revolt in a positive and constructive way.

In sharp contrast to McKay is Brock Millman's book published in 2016, *Polarity, Patriotism, and Dissent in Great War Canada, 1914–1919*.¹³ Millman seeks to show how the Borden government balanced polarizing interests within Canada's diverse social and political landscape. Controversially, Millman argues that "wartime dissent in Canada did not derive from class divisions," and that "In Great War Canada, there were effectively no classes."¹⁴ French and British Canadians tended to organize according to ethnicity; labour radicalism was often local, short lived, and led by marginalized ethnic groups; and finally, the labour movement largely supported the war effort. By disassociating class from his analysis of wartime dissent, Millman undermines the arguments in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, which recognize class as a significant cause of conflict during and after the war.

Both studies demonstrate how historians have responded to *The Workers' Revolt in Canada* in different ways. On one hand, McKay's work highlights how *The Workers' Revolt in Canada* continues to be useful for research on social and political conflict, while for Millman, it can be considered irrelevant, given that class conflict cannot be seen as a central catalyst for wartime dissent. The divergence of attitudes towards *The Workers' Revolt in Canada* outside labour history may leave some wondering about its future in Canadian historiography.

The debate on the workers' revolt may still take another provocative turn. One plausible alternative is to further expand the narrative of the workers' revolt itself. Workers were not alone in their desire to reconstruct a fairer and more just society after the war. Farmers, veterans, reformers, ministers, women's groups, and ethnic groups were mobilizing across the country to ensure post-war reconstruction would be worthy of their wartime sacrifices. Nowhere is this clearer than in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*. As Heron and Siemiatycki write, "Numerous social movements presented their own agendas and competing visions, most of them projecting little confidence in the existing political and economic institutions."¹⁵ Throughout the study there are numerous examples showing how non-working-class groups similarly advocated for change, such as when Naylor and McKay discuss organized labour's strategic alliance with veterans and farmers. However, since the empirical framework, argument, and narrative in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada* is centered on substantiating working-class conflict, non-working-class organizations are marginalized in the analyses. This limitation—understandable given the aims of the study—should be compensated for, by recognizing that there was a plurality of revolts. Indeed, as early as 1948, Paul Frederick Sharp referred to an "agrarian revolt" during the war and post-war period.¹⁶ In most cases, identifying non-working-class conflict during the war and post-war period as a "revolt" is a categorization yet to be considered. For example, if the literature on veterans in Canada was re-assessed, could Glenn Wright and Desmond Morton's "second battle" be considered as a "revolt" instead?¹⁷ It is to be expected that not every social or political group can be consid-

ered to have “revolted” to the extent of the working class, yet the fact that these social and political conflicts coincided should not be ignored. At the very least, re-examining these conflicts would be a thought-provoking and useful comparative analysis, as it would provide an understanding of how social and political conflicts during this period potentially correlated, overlapped, and competed.

Producing a singular study (or series of studies) on a topic of such breadth would be a challenging task, given the number of groups requiring consideration. However, by changing “the workers’ revolt” into “the people’s revolt,” the framework of *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada* can be emulated and used to overcome problems of feasibility. Before continuing to discuss the advantages of this framework, it is important to clarify what is meant by “the people’s revolt.” Simply put, “the people’s revolt” is a reference to the multitude of grassroots challenges to the status quo that were pursued during and after the war. This idea of a “people’s revolt” is actually evident in a primary source used in *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada*. At the end of the chapter, “Southern Ontario: Striking at the Ballot Box,” Naylor quotes Arthur Mould, a labour candidate who ran for London during the 1921 federal election. Mould stated,

The remarkable fact is, the workers and farmers did overturn the Government, and did elect people of their own choice. No matter what one may think of the Farmer Labour Government, its failures and shortcomings, its very election was a demonstration of a people in revolt.¹⁸

Hence, the view of a people’s revolt is not an anachronism; rather, it was a legitimate idea used during the period in question. It is important to point out that “the people’s revolt” is not the same as “the populist revolt.” The people’s revolt recognizes the centrality of distinct class interests during this period.¹⁹ Even as Mould referenced, farmers and workers were united, but they existed with distinct class interests. It is a recognition of this underlying unity among the revolts—among different class interests—that the “people’s revolt” centres on. At the same time, given the inherent differences and tension due to class, gender, racial and ethnic interests, it would be important to also focus on how these coalitions were fragile and contradictory. Hence, uncovering how revolts competed is equally important as understanding how they overlapped.

The narrative of “the people’s revolt” provides the common thread uniting a series of individual studies, and follows a similar framework as that used in *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada*. Such a framework is pragmatic because it offers a broad narrative and a set of common questions suited for guiding empirical research. What were the post-war visions of prominent social and political groups? Which groups succeeded in forming coalitions and pursued coordinated initiatives? Which groups were in stark opposition to each other and how did they attempt to thwart

each other's visions of a post-war society? Which groups failed or succeeded in achieving their goals? Finally, was the war directly responsible for bringing these groups together or was the formation of these coalitions part of a long-term trend?

Notably absent in this framework is overt theoretical baggage or an imposition of rigid methodology, thereby allowing each contributor to use an approach and writing style that is tailored to their specific research topic. The strength of this framework is clearly shown in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, as each chapter reads with considerable ease, while still retaining depth and sophistication. Given that the framework itself provides considerable flexibility, it only requires minor adjustment for pursuing research on the people's revolt. Ideally, a published study on the people's revolt would be a collection of essays similar to *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*. The organization of the chapters, however, could be approached differently. Rather than organize chapters according to individual provinces and regions, chapters could be organized according to individual topics: how groups sought to implement democratic reforms, economic reforms, immigration policies, labour policies, and measures to prevent profiteering. An alternative is to organize chapters according to specific relations between groups, such as labour and veterans, farmers and veterans, or labour and Methodists. Admittedly, the people's revolt is an expansive topic, and no organizational approach could produce a total history. Instead, historians will have to use their own judgment to determine which areas will prove most interesting and informative. A preliminary stage before deciding how to organize and focus research will be a coordinated overview by those wishing to contribute. In this way, the people's revolt would follow in the footsteps of the workers' revolt, as it would similarly draw upon a pre-existing and fragmented literature, and synthesize this research into a more coherent argument.

There is another similarity shared by the people's revolt and the workers' revolt—how such a history can contribute to our collective memory and become an asset in contemporary politics. In reference to the 1996 Toronto protest against the right-wing agenda of Ontario's Conservative government, Heron noted that "Collective memory of such struggles is usually weak enough that few would have realized that their determined action and their slogan 'Organize, Educate, Resist' placed them in a long tradition of similar working-class resistance."²⁰ This statement, which appeared in the first paragraph of *The Workers' Revolt*, clearly demonstrates the political agenda of the study. The people's revolt would pursue a similar goal of strengthening our collective memory of struggles for a better future—not just as a class, but as people with divergent yet common interests.

NOTES

¹ “The workers’ revolt” refers to the general subject, while *The Workers’ Revolt* refers to Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

² Donald C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950). This study was part of a series on the origins of the social credit movement in Alberta.

³ Masters, ix.

⁴ Andrew R. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899–1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations and the General Strike* (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1974).

⁵ Desmond Morton and Terry Coop, *Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement* (Ottawa: Deneau & Greenberg, 1980).

⁶ See *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring, 1984) for papers presented at the symposium.

⁷ Craig Heron, “Labourism and the Canadian Working Class,” *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring, 1984): 45–76.

⁸ Gregory Kealey, “1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt,” *Labour/Le Travail* 13, (Spring, 1984): 11–44.

⁹ Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1989).

¹⁰ Craig Heron, ed. *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

¹¹ Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008). The Liberal Order Framework is a Gramscian inspired approach which seeks to understand the history of “Canada” as a project constructed and governed in accordance to liberal hegemony.

¹² *Ibid.*, 5–6. “The left” is seen as a broad political and social category, united by a mutual advocacy for leftist ideals, specifically the promotion of equality, democracy and freedom. McKay outlines how there are different “left formations” throughout history, whereby the particular ideas, practices, institutions, intellectuals and overall objectives give the left formation its particular historical character.

¹³ Brock Millman, *Polarity Patriotism and Dissent in Great War Canada, 1914–1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ Heron and Siemiatycki, “The Great War, the State, and Working-class Canada,”

in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 17.

¹⁶ Paul Frederick Sharp, *The Agrarian Revolt in Western Canada: A Survey showing American Parallels* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1948).

¹⁷ Glenn Write and Desmond Morton, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Quoted in Naylor, “Southern Ontario: Striking at the Ballot Box,” in *The Workers Revolt in Canada*, 170.

¹⁹ Heron’s article “Labourism and the Canadian Working Class” is a useful starting point for understanding the post-war period as a distinct moment for labour politics, rather than populist politics. For a similar debate on labourism versus populism see James Naylor, “The British Columbia CCF’s Working-Class Moment: Socialism Not Populism,” in *Labour/Le Travail* 71 (Spring 2013): 101–121; Robert McDonald “‘Telford Time’ and the Populist Origins of the CCF in British Columbia,” *Labour/Le Travail* (Spring 2013): 87–100.

²⁰ Heron, “Introduction,” in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 3