

Parading the Past

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“As We Go Marching, Marching. Canadian Workers on Parade: An Exhibition of Labour Banners, Memorabilia and the History of Workers’ Festivals”

Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre
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Curated by Steve Penfold and Craig Heron. Exhibit Design: Jim Miller.
Curatorial Assistant: Jill Armstrong.

The “Days of Action” – the series of city-wide general strikes and protests launched by the labour movement and community groups to protest the right-wing agenda of the Ontario government – has popularized the spectacle of mass political action on Ontario’s streets. From small urban locales such as Sudbury and Peterborough, to the large cities of Toronto and Hamilton, tens of thousands struck their workplaces and marched in mass demonstrations against the Tory assault on jobs and social services. For some participants, it rekindled the marvelous feelings of confidence and solidarity gained from past experience in strikes and mass demonstrations. For many more, it was their first inspiring encounter with the politics of the street.

Unlike their counterparts in the corporate board rooms, workers cannot rely on the ‘politics of influence’ to advance their interests. Governments and employers rarely concede to the lobbying of individual workers’ representatives unless they are backed up with the threat of mass action on the part of those they represent. Memories of working-class struggle do not conjure up scenes of suit-clad bureaucrats comfortably ensconced in the back rooms of the legislature with their governmental opponents; they call to mind placards and picket lines.

The ‘politics of mobilization’ has been the most effective form of working-class resistance because it (potentially) utilizes the main strengths of working people as a class: numbers, solidarity and organization. It is also an eminently democratic form of political action, contrasting the passive and isolated environment of the voting booth with the active and public exercise of voting with your feet, united with fellow workers.

As this exhibition brilliantly demonstrates, mass protests and parades have always taken pride of place in the working-class movement. Organized around seven key themes – Labour Day, May Day, International Women’s Day, Street

Theatre, Community, Editors and Entrepreneurs, and Banners – the exhibition assembles a varied array of banners, props, newspaper advertisements, buttons and photographs to show how workers used parades “to proclaim their rights and promote their struggles for dignity and justice.”¹

On entry to the exhibition, the visitor is excited by the distant glimpses of colourful union banners hanging in the main exhibition hall. Banners were a striking visual element of workers’ parades and served to identify union affiliation and express important slogans and demands. Images of solidarity and resistance were presented in rich colours and bold illustrations. Recent quilted banners from the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79, which organizes municipal workers in Toronto, depict the importance of human rights and fighting oppression. The banner of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers’ Union Local 534 (reproduced in an attractive postcard available from the giftshop) reads “Women, Work, Family, Equal Job Opportunity, Breaking Barriers, Respect.” Folksy illustrations highlight the work process, the home and a lively picket line. The intricate detail and forceful messages of these artistic creations remind the visitor of the broad agenda of modern unions.

The sections of the exhibition on the celebrations of the calendar of working-class protest – Labour Day, May Day and International Women’s Day – include numerous photographs and enlarged newspaper advertisements and cartoons. The exhibition’s organizers did a fine job of differentiating between Labour Day and May Day. Granted by the state as a national holiday in 1894, Labour Day began as a demonstration of working-class respectability among white male workers. Women were confined to sitting in carriages or watching the parade from the sidewalk. There was much in this holiday that spoke to working-class dignity and collectivity, but it was also usurped by business who used the occasion to play on labour themes to sell their products. Labour Day marches were characterized by mainstream pomp and pageantry with workers wearing their best clothes for the occasion. People soon began to think that Labour Day only marked the end of the summer, holding no special significance for workers. The mainstream press even used the day to urge harmony between the classes. But in the midst of the industrial union drive in the 1930s and more recently in the fight against the Tory government in Ontario, Labour Day has witnessed more explicitly political demonstrations.

May Day was a uniquely socialist holiday, celebrated in Canada by immigrant radicals and various leftists and more likely to be condemned by business and the state. Unlike Labour Day, women played a much more prominent role in May Day demonstrations. May Day parades were often subject to state repression because of their overtly oppositional political nature. In Winnipeg, only

banners and placards identifying the group were allowed; the police eagerly confiscated red flags and Communist Party of Canada placards with slogans such as “Down With Imperialist War” and “Hands Off the Soviet Union.” A photograph of the Edmonton May Day demonstration in 1937 portrays a group of children holding placards in a pleasing type face, demanding “Long Live May Day” and “Free Text Books.” These photographs inform visitors of the long history of state repression against radicalism, internationalism and the left’s concern with the concrete issues of working-class life.

Working-class parades involved more than just placards and banners. Floats, costumes, and other symbols were used to stage “street theatre.” Such productions asserted the rights of workers and condemned injustice and oppression. A photograph of the 1966 Labour Day parade in Toronto featured a United Steel Workers of America float in which workers were jailed in a mock prison. One of the placards on the side of the prison bars reads “Tilco 1966” – a reference to a strike by women workers in Peterborough which was busted by the employers’ use of anti-union injunctions. The float symbolized labour’s feeling that such labour legislation in Ontario was imprisoning.

Fashioning a broad appeal to the working class was also a central concern of parade organizers. A Knights of Labor medal on display was actually forged on the Iron Moulders’ Float during the parade and passed out to spectators. Parades were routed through prominent public thoroughfares as well as working-class residential areas. These artifacts and photographs drive home the point that organized labour was interested in appealing to the larger community for support.

The use of props in the exhibition sheds light on the process of parade organization. Fictitious first-person accounts and notebooks detail the meticulous planning of parade organizers. A sewing machine and the tools needed to build floats are exhibited to explain that these celebrations encompassed their own complicated work process. While some of the banners were purchased from companies, much of the work in putting together the floats was a volunteer labour of dedication and commitment.

The spacious physical layout and organization of the displays are user friendly and attractive. The selection of photographs aptly covers the various regions of the country and the experience of large urban centres and smaller towns. Enlargement of certain photographs allows visitors to see the fascinating details of the parades. In an engaging interactive exhibit, visitors are invited to make their own buttons and write down their own experiences of the modern events commemorated in the buttons. The text labels and exhibition guide are clear, concise and informative in setting the historical context and providing

little-known facts about workers' parades.

The curators and designers of this exhibition deserve much credit for bringing the inspiring history of workers' parades to life. The only thing better is to go marching, marching yourself. This reviewer can't wait until the next Day of Action.

The Ontario Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC) opened in 1996 in the historic Customs House in the industrial city of Hamilton, Ontario. In its first two years, it has amply demonstrated the crucial role a workers' museum can play in stimulating critical interest in working-class history. The centre has mounted several first-class exhibitions and traveling displays, produced a video introducing the history of working people in Ontario, organized walking tours of Hamilton, built a Resource Center, and launched a series of educational programs for people of all ages. It has coordinated a number of research projects including oral histories of local workers. OWAHC publishes an informative bulletin, *Work Lines*, which covers the Centre's various activities as well as discussing current strikes and working-class protests. The Center is funded by individuals, labour and community organizations, and government grants.

For more information on OWAHC write to P.O. Box 83034, Jamesville Station, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8L 8E8; email owahc@web.net or call 905-522-3003.

¹Citation from the first page of the brochure which accompanies the exhibition.