

“What We Fought For” Ontario Workers Struggles, 1935-1955

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On May 28-29, the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre (OWAHC) hosted a conference about workers' past and current challenges in conjunction with the Canadian Committee on Labour History, the McMaster Labour Studies Program and the Hamilton and District Labour Council. It was a terrific success. About 100 women and men gathered at the Steelworkers' Hall in Hamilton to hear and talk about critical moments in the history of Ontario workers. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the “hot” year of 1946, when a massive wave of postwar militancy led to important advances for Ontario's working people. The conference also gave us a chance to rethink strategies as we press on in Premier Mike Harris' anti-labour Ontario.

To the delight of the conference organizers, “What We Fought For” attracted a real mix of participants: labour historians, trade unionists, educators, students, artists and community activists. Seated at one of the tables for the session on the relevance of the 1940s were a firefighter, retired unionist, teacher, steelworker and historian. While most of the participants came from Ontario, the labour historians came from all over, including Atlantic Canada, Manitoba and British Columbia. Most people seemed to enjoy the “table talk” sessions that followed some of the formal presentations. It gave us an opportunity to respond immediately to what we had heard and engage the issues presented. It's a strategy worth repeating at future conferences.

One of the highlights from the conference was “Hamilton's Hot Summer of 1946.” Three veterans of the 1946 strikes, Bill Walsh, Bill Scandlon and Jerry Shea, offered their reminiscences of those dramatic events. Stanley Grizzle's recollections of organizing the sleeping car porters in Canada had the audience riveted, as did

Rosemary Donegan's visual presentation, "Meaning, Memory and the Industrial Landscape: Ford City/Windsor." A large gang of folk also took advantage of a beautiful sunny day to take one of the OWAHC-sponsored walking tours.

The sessions "What We Thought We Won" and "Gendering Labour" became forums for important debate about the relevance of past strategies and victories for today's challenges and about the feminist challenge that women, then and now, pose to the labour movement. Participants observed, today's battles cannot be fought by organized labour alone. They require the combined power of many groups fighting for social justice: trade unionists, feminists, anti-poverty activists, youth and others in the community.

Other sessions combined historical and contemporary concerns. "The Legacy of Italian Internment" dealt with the current controversies within the Italian-Canadian community over the strategies used to secure an apology (from Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in 1990) for Canada's internment of approximately 600 Italians during World War II. That redress campaign, the historians suggest, "sanitized" the past by hiding the fascist background of some of the internees.

Participants were especially enthusiastic about the concluding plenary of the conference, "Images of Workers," where they were treated to three stimulating visual presentations, including Al Seager's lively critique of the National Film Board's depiction of miners in the 1940s and 1950s. David Frank's slide presentation of postage stamps underscored the point, all too familiar to labour activists, of the paucity of public and popular images of Canadian workers. (At the annual meeting of the Canadian Committee on Labour History held a few days later in St. Catharines, members voted unanimously in favour of David's suggestion to lobby the Canadian government to recognize working people in the stamp program.) Steven Penfold nicely wrapped things up with an engaging presentation of slides and other images of Canadian Labour Day parades that he and Craig Heron have compiled. Their's will be a picture book worth buying!

The members of the OWAHC board would like to thank all the presenters who made the conference a great success. Our thanks also to the United Steelworkers of America (Hamilton) for free use of the union hall and to Wayne Marston and the Hamilton District Labour Council for their support. Harrison Kennedy and his jazz trio treated an appreciative Tuesday night crowd to some wonderfully mellow music from the 1940s. The members of the organizing committee included Craig Heron, Wayne Lewchuk, Kathryn McPherson, Oisín Rafferty and Eric Tucker. The conference was coordinated by OWAHC staff Mary Breen and Renee Johnston. Most of all, thanks to the brothers and sisters, comrades and friends who came out for the event. Now, we push ahead to the opening of the Workers Custom House.



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