

1981 in Canadian Working-Class and Labour History (and things to look for in 1982)

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The last year was quite significant for Canadian work in this field. Three conferences of considerable importance highlighted the year and each was quite different. In addition the year brought significant developments for the two organizations of labour historians in the country and for their publications. Finally the year brought recognition to the field for previous publications, saw a number of important new titles appear, and held out the promise of major works to appear in 1982.

To begin with the conferences. The Third Blue Collar Workers Conference was held at McMaster University in Hamilton in May. This four-day conference brought together academics from numerous disciplines which was refreshing, but even more important it was also attended by numerous political activists and trade unionists. This mix had not worked well at the second conference held in Windsor in 1979, where there was much uncreative tension about the relevance of even politically committed scholarship. These tensions were not apparent in Hamilton. Instead both academics and labour activists seemed to realize in the dreary and threatening economic and political climate that they had much to offer each other. Memorable sessions were held on contemporary shop floor struggles, on the labour history of Hamilton (Canada's Pittsburgh), and on memories of the great steel strike of 1946. A social/political evening at The Steelworkers Hall also reinforced the tangible reality of the contemporary scene as Hamilton's USWA members were well on their way toward a bitter conflict with Stelco which culminated in a four-month strike.

A very different conference was held in Halifax the following month during the annual Canadian Learned Societies meetings. The Canadian Historical Association meetings are not usually exciting but in 1981, with an imaginative programme committee chaired by Dalhousie University's Judith Fingard, things were different. Two excellent sessions on coal mining were held featuring special guests Roland Treppe and Keith Dix. Another special guest Raphael Samuel of

History Workshop delivered two interesting “works-in-progress”—one on the portrayals of the lower classes in East London from 1700 to the present and the other on the issue of professionalism in historical writing. This latter paper was a response to Royden Harrison’s sardonic critique of History Workshop delivered at the previous year’s CHA in Montreal (published in *Historical Papers*, 1980). Another important session was held on industrial unionism in Canada with excellent papers on auto and steel by John Manley and Laurel Sefton MacDowell.

The third conference was the first Commonwealth Labour History conference held at Coventry in early September. Jointly sponsored by the Canadian, Australian, and British Labour History Societies, this meeting brought together for the first time Canadian and Australian historians of the working class. Both groups had had previous contacts with the British Society but not with each other. For this participant at least, this was undoubtedly the most valuable aspect of the conference and there are plans to hold an Australian-Canadian conference at some future date. (For Australian in all the above uses add New Zealand as well!) Sessions were held at Lanchester Polytechnic and at the University of Warwick stretching over three days. An opening plenary session heard papers by Royden Harrison, Eric Fry and Susan Magarey, and Bryan Palmer on the British, Australian, and Canadian Labour and working-class historiography. Working sessions followed on Miners, Social Democracy, Workers’ Control of the Labour Process, Labour and Racism, and Trade Unionism. The most successful sessions were the ones where the most focussed comparisons occurred, such as when in the coal-mining session specific comparisons became possible concerning levels of mechanizations and the very different timing of work-place transformations which in turn had a significant impact on the differential development of the labour movement in each country. Not surprisingly the Canadian experience here seemed far closer to the American than to the Australian.

After the Commonwealth Conference a number of the Canadians and Australians also participated in a special one-day History Workshop in London on Labour History and the Lands of White Settlement. The following day the Workshop also arranged a special tour of the National Museum of Labour History at Limehouse Town Hall—another high point of the trip. All-in-all the three conferences of 1981 each had somewhat unexpected results but each was successful in its own way.

The Committee on Canadian Labour History met during the CHA meetings in Halifax and elected its new executive Ross McCormack, University of Winnipeg; Robert Babcock, University of Maine at Orono; Greg Kealey, Memorial University; and Andrée Levesque, Université d’Ottawa. In addition, the CCLH’s journal *Labour/Le Travailleur* moved (with its editor) to Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The *Régroupement des chercheurs en histoire des travailleurs québécois* also met in 1981 and reinvigorated itself with a new executive chaired by Jacques Rouillard of l’Université de Montréal. As part of this new life they again began to publish their useful *Bulletin RCHTO*.

The year was also a good one in terms of publications in the field. The

Macdonald Prize for best book in Canadian history finally came to labour history with Greg Kealey's *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) winning the prize. In addition two of the runners-up notation also went to works in the field—to Joy Parr's *Labouring Children* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's) and to Fernand Harvey's *La Revolution Industrielle*. (It should be noted that in 1979 Bryan Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's) also received a notation.) Among other notable 1981 publications were: Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal: Vanguard), a revisionist study of the CPC in the 1920s; Bryan Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson* (Toronto: New Hogtown), an excellent account of the political roots of Thompson's historical writing; Jacques Rouillard's, *Histoire de la CSN (1921-1981)* (Montreal: Boréal Express CSN), a vivid and well-illustrated history; and David Lewis' posthumous autobiography, *The Good Fight* (Toronto: Macmillan), which is filled with interesting material on CCF-CPC relations up to 1958 when the volume ends. A one-volume survey of working-class culture in Canada by Bryan Palmer is due in the fall of 1982.

1982 already looks promising. Two conferences of note will be *Histoire Social/Social History's* conference on Canadian Social History in the last 25 years to be held in Ottawa in early June and the North American Urbanization conference to be held at the University of Guelph in August. Forthcoming titles of interest this year are: Eugene Forsey's *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press); Sally Zerker, *The Rise and Fall of the Toronto Typographical Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press); Peter Weinrich's *Social Protest from the Left in Canada, 1870-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press); and Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan Palmer, "*Dreaming of What Might Be*": *The Knights of Labor in Ontario* (New York: Cambridge University Press). In addition the committee on Canadian Labour History is celebrating its tenth anniversary with a special, double number of *Labour/Le Travailleur*. This 450-page issue, due to appear in the spring, will include an index of the last ten years of CCLH publications.

Noteworthy among events planned for the future is an international conference in the spring of 1983 on the "Winnipeg General Strike—Its Prelude and Aftermath."