

# Who is Listening? Teaching Labour History to People Who Don't Want to Learn It (or, Cry me a River, WhiteBoy)

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# TEACHING LABOUR HISTORY / L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'HISTOIRE DES TRAVAILLEURS ET DES TRAVAILLEUSES

Who is Listening? Teaching Labour History  
to People Who Don't Want to Learn It  
(or, Cry me a River, White Boy)<sup>1</sup>

Karen Dubinsky

THIS PAPER STARTED LIFE as a presentation to the "Teaching Labour History" session at the Labour History workshop of the Canadian Historical Association meetings in Charlottetown. As the precious days before that conference were speeding past at an alarming rate, I was talking to a friend (who will remain nameless), and complaining about how much I still had to do to prepare to leave town for a week. Specifically, I was complaining that my presentation for the labour history gathering had not yet written itself in my head. She gave me some good ideas about how to frame my talk, and then she said, "You probably will feel like you haven't said anything, but, you'll probably never feel like you've said anything, because you are not a man." That, I realized, was exactly what I wanted to talk about.

<sup>1</sup>This is a slogan I saw on a button in a Vancouver bookstore recently. I don't endorse the identity politics on which it is based, but I think it's funny and I wish I had the nerve to wear it in class.

Karen Dubinsky, "Who is Listening? Teaching Labour History to People Who Don't Want to Learn It (or, Cry me a River, White Boy)," *Labour/Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 287-92.

There are, I am aware, many of us, male and female, who spend much of our lives feeling as though we have very little to say. This affliction strikes every graduate student I know mid-dissertation, and surely people who talk to large groups of people for a living, as professors do, some days feel as though they are spinning their wheels, marking time between their students' other responsibilities: part-time jobs, families, flirtations and sleep. So, while feeling as though one has said nothing is perhaps as common to the academic as it is to the secretary, for example, who has spent all day moving paper around, and feels as though she has accomplished nothing — it's just a job hazard — I want to suggest that this phenomenon isn't neutral: it has important political and especially gender dimensions. Sometimes, we feel as though we have said nothing because people are not listening to us. And sometimes, people don't listen to us because of our politics and our gender.

To illustrate this, I am going to reflect on my brief, and ultimately unhappy career as a rookie labour historian in McMaster Universities' Labour Studies programme a few years ago. I have 'dined out' on these stories before, and each time I do, I hasten to add that there were bright spots in my miserable teaching experience. I liked my department very much. As a sessional lecturer, I was welcomed by my colleagues and never made to feel peripheral by either the other teaching staff, or the clerical staff. When I started speaking up about the wretched experiences I was having, my fellow teachers believed me, supported me, and the chair of the department in particular went beyond the call of duty to help me identify and 'prosecute' one particularly malicious student, whose story I will tell shortly.

Neither is this simply a story of a heroic young teacher, bravely facing down the hordes of students, whose response to my teaching ranged from apathetic to hostile. I did have some very good, and very pleasant students. I was young, new and scared (I hoped not visibly, but who knows), and of course I made lots of mistakes. As I looked through my lecture notes when I taught one course a second term, I was astonished and horrified at how much material I had crammed into three-hour lecture slots the first time I taught the course, and instantly I felt as though I should raise all of the marks of my first class, if only for being able to keep up with me.

My teaching career before this experience had ill-prepared me for what I faced, for I had learned to teach in the safe, comfortable, and extremely supportive world of Women's Studies. Women's studies teaching is of course not without its own set of problems. It can be politically raucous and emotionally draining in another way entirely, but the 'girls,' as I took to calling them, were a completely different ball game from the 'boys.' The girls were, as girls are wont to be, better behaved; they never had to be told (six or seven times per class, on bad days) to please be quiet while the lady is teaching. The girls did not whine about their marks, and they never called me "hey lady," "missus" or worse. They never commented on my body parts in the course evaluations. The girls got my jokes. I knew, because battle-weary older women professors kept telling me, that teaching women's studies was

different from teaching other university classes. I knew this, but I was completely unprepared for how true this was. When I walked in to my first labour history classes, all I saw were shoulders: great big male shoulders. It took several classes for me to realize that the shoulders actually came in different shapes, colours and ages: some were older, some were female, and a few were in fact quite friendly.

One other important preface before I tell this story: this is not only about something that happened to me. Talk to any young, female, feminist professor who has taught large first year survey courses and I would almost guarantee you will hear a version of this story. Read Patricia Williams's breathtaking book, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, which is about her experiences as a black feminist, teaching contract and property law at American universities, or, in Canada, read the collection, edited by a group of OISE professors and students, titled *Unsettling Relations*, and you will hear versions of this story. This story is about many things. I think it's about the changing class and career aspirations of a new generation of scared, frustrated, and extremely impatient young undergraduates; it's about centuries-old mistrust of women who enter privileged male employment territory; it's about a changing political climate as well, which is relevant to all labour historians, male and female.

The first problem I faced, which tends to be a more gender neutral one, is the cynicism and distance many people, especially, but not only, young people, have towards trade unions. Imagine my surprise when I found students in Hamilton (which I had romanticized as a labour town, and therefore probably full of students eager to hear about labour's past), who believed that unions were either a) the cause of the recession we are now in, b) an annoyance which take too much money from their parents paycheques each month, or c) screwed them out of a summer job. As I got to know my students — as much as one can with a class of one or two hundred — I found out that some of them were, as one older, wiser student reminded me, "Dofasco kids," her metaphor for people who have benefitted from trade unionism without ever participating in it. Many others were, thanks to the peculiarities of the labour studies programme at this institution, business students who had to dabble in a course or two 'from the labour side' during their educational career, but they damn well weren't going to enjoy it. These, not surprisingly, were the students who were the most hostile and rude, as blissfully unaware of their own ideological premises as they were hostile towards mine.

I wasn't, I didn't think, a particularly 'ideological' teacher. Certainly my teaching was based on some simple premises about workers in the past: that the working class existed and exists, that unions were created to help people out of a miserable economic and political situation, and that they did, and continue to do, some very good things. I expected that some of my other premises would have been deemed controversial: that workers come in different races, ethnic groups and genders; that unions, on the whole, do not have a great historical record where organizing women and non-white people are concerned; that the work women do in the domestic sphere 'counts' as labour; and that conflict within the working class

is an important feature of labour history. I'm not sure that most students picked up on the finer points of my argument. In one course evaluation, after a course which tried to integrate female and male labour history as much as the material would allow, one student wrote that he and he alone had spotted the hidden "feminist bias" in the way the course was taught, and he wasn't sure, but he thought that "Greg Kealey was one, too."

If we can separate the political hostility I faced, from the gender/sexual hostility, I suspect that my experiences reflect, at least in part, the distance which young people feel from the world of paid labour and trade unionism. I had a women's studies teacher once who used to say that women didn't become 'seasoned feminists' until they were well past the confidence of their early twenties and had experienced some of life's disappointments: an unequal or failed marriage, or a dead-end job. Perhaps, the same argument applies to labour studies. There was a marked difference in both the behaviour and the receptivity of my classes, between the day course, full of young students, and the evening course, which contained a mix of young and mature students. After one lecture, during which I gave what I thought was a rather well done rendering of Ester Reiter's marvellous analysis of the working conditions at Burger King, one astonished student put up his hand and told me that I (and Ester, presumably) had missed the point entirely, because where he came from "all the popular kids got jobs at McDonalds."

This raises some questions to me about how we convey labour history at a time in which the labour movement is beleaguered, besieged, and not very popular to many people. Furthermore, if we are to take seriously the critique which Panitch and Swartz, among others, have made of the increasing bureaucratization and cultural distance of unions from the lives of some of their members, what do we say when their sons and daughters turn up in our classrooms? How do we present our critique of the 'degradation' and increasingly meaningless content of work to a room full of nineteen year olds who may never find permanent, full-time employment? How do we say this, in particular, from our lofty and relatively highly paid and meaningful perches within the university system?

These are some of the questions which I think all labour historians must be facing, varying in kind and intensity in different regions in the country, in the cold 1990s. Yet when I reflect on the social dynamics, as opposed to the reception of the material, in my classroom, there was clearly much more going on than this political analysis lets on. Many of the 'boys,' as I suggested earlier, were bad boys, very bad boys indeed. Some days I felt as though I spent more time on creative disciplinary strategies than I did on presenting the material in an interesting way. Many of the 'boys,' and no doubt some of the girls, as well, thought I was a crazed communist. But I think that the amount of visible, occasionally painful hostility I faced was due at least as much to the fact that I integrated women into my lectures (though, rarely even saying the word feminist — I know, I checked), and that I was female.

My worst experience occurred in a class on contemporary labour issues. A row of boys would sit at the back of the lecture theatre, arms folded across their chest, refusing to write down a word that I said, sneering down at me. After a while, as long as they were quiet, I didn't much care what they did. (I had long since stopped trying to charm them with my sense of humour.) One of the teaching assistants passed on to me a curious mid-term exam he got back from this class: the mid-term was directed to him, but he had no record of this students' name in his group. The exam was a stream-of-consciousness rant: against people who don't speak English who take jobs away from Canadians, about large breasted "Russian babes," about anything at all which popped into his head during the 50 minutes he had to write. I don't think it was coincidental that the t.a. to whom the exam was submitted to was, the only non-Anglo teaching assistant in the class. We discovered that the name under which the exam was submitted was not registered in the class, and indeed was an upper year student in another department who had a very good academic record. The name triggered faint bells in my head, finally I remembered that the person named had recently run for student council president, and he had been an openly gay candidate. Someone had submitted a fake exam, under a fake name, but it seemed like considerable trouble to go through, particularly since the person seemed to have sacrificed his own mid-term examination in the process. I trusted my instincts about the boys in the back row, and, with the help of my department chair, tracked down the name of one of them. (This is not an easy thing to do in a class of two hundred students.) The chair, and the Dean, called this young man in, and he caved in and ratted on his friend (having learned little about solidarity from my lectures). He used to drive a friend of his home from school, and his friend sometimes chose to wait for his ride by attending the class. The friend, then, was the author of a fake exam, written to impress his buddies, and to voice his opposition to women, non-whites, and gay men in one brief prank.

This boy got a stern lecture from the Dean, wrote a meaningless letter of apology to me, and received no academic penalty. Since he wasn't in the class, I couldn't even have the satisfaction of failing him. As much as I would have liked to jump up and down, and demand that he be sent to feminist re-education camp, the term, and my contract, was over and it was easier for me at that moment to close the book, a decision I still have reservations about.

Would I have had these problems if I were teaching in a less ideologically charged atmosphere? I think so, and the stories I have heard of young women teaching in science and engineering classes suggest so also. I think, however, that the three features of my experience: my sex, my labour politics, and my feminist politics, were all of a piece, and all combined to make some students extremely uncomfortable. When I was teaching the section on the economic value of domestic labour, people were literally squirming; I think some students thought I was telling them that their mothers did not love them. I am convinced that a male professor covering exactly the same material, with exactly the same perspective, would not have been treated with such obvious disrespect as I was.

In light of these experiences, I have viewed the continuing debate about the so-called backlash against the politically-correct tyranny now allegedly gripping the universities with incredulity. There have been many fine and thoughtful responses to the charge that purists of varying political stripes have taken control of the minds of our youth.<sup>2</sup> My response, I'll admit, is much more hamfisted: I think these anti "politically correct" people are on some sort of paranoia inducing drugs, I don't know what they are talking about. I'd like to suggest to the Dinesh Desousa's and the *Macleans* Magazine writers of the world, that they should chill out, they have lost neither the battle, nor the war. But that doesn't mean we are not still fighting.

<sup>2</sup>See, in particular, the many articles in the *Women's Review of Books*, February, 1992.



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