

## Teaching Labour History

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Volume 31, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt31tlh02>

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### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

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### Cite this article

Frank, D. (1993). Teaching Labour History. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 31, 293–301.

# Teaching Labour History

David Frank

I WOULD SIMPLY LIKE TO REFLECT on some of my experience in teaching labour history. I interpret the scope broadly and so I will make some comments on the satisfactions and frustrations of teaching labour history in three areas — the university, the labour movement and the wider public sphere.

In the early 1970s the only undergraduate course in labour history available to me at the University of Toronto was Bill Dick's course in American labour history at Scarborough College. It was a fine course and even included a visit by a then little-known American historian named Herbert Gutman. By the 1980s labour history had become an established teaching field at many universities. In my own case, I was brought to the University of New Brunswick not only to teach Canadian history and edit *Acadiensis*, but also to encourage work in labour history, which my department viewed as an exciting and welcome new subject in Canadian history.

At the graduate level, this has largely taken the form of encouraging MA theses on various aspects of labour and social history in New Brunswick. My first two graduate theses turned out to be about New Brunswick workers in the 1930s — Patrick Burden's study of the New Brunswick Farmer-Labour Union and Carol Ferguson's study of unemployed workers in Saint John. The department has long emphasized the study of Atlantic Canada and specifically of the province. I felt that I was able to help open up a new area in New Brunswick history and, importantly, that the department welcomed my doing so. On the other hand, there has been an element of frustration as well in the graduate field. Arriving in New Brunswick fresh from graduate studies about industrial Cape Breton and from teaching assignments at the (then) College of Cape Breton, it was unrealistic to expect students at the University of New Brunswick to share all my interests. Most of them came with topics already decided and were not looking for me to assign them topics. In addition to various New Brunswick topics, I also supervised one in American labour history and, most recently, a fine study of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion. At the same time I have been fortunate to have had two excellent graduate students who followed up on neglected aspects of my own earlier work. There is

something surprisingly flattering about that. Rusty Bittermann wrote about social and economic change in rural Cape Breton and Danny Samson explored the origins of the coal town of Inverness. I don't expect there is anything unusual about my experience, and indeed I have been fortunate in coming to a university with a strong graduate program and a strong commitment to regional studies. I should add, however, that I have only once taught a graduate seminar on the subject of working-class history (and none of the students who took it were writing theses in the area). Instead, most of my formal graduate teaching has been in the Atlantic Canada graduate seminar, which is one of the required courses for students in Canadian history.

In undergraduate teaching, meanwhile, I have had the opportunity to teach, somewhat irregularly, two one-term courses, *The Canadian Worker in the 19th Century* and *The Canadian Worker in the 20th Century*. Ideally they should be taught back-to-back each year; in fact the pressure on my teaching time has been considerable and required classes such as the introductory, Honours and graduate courses have taken priority. The labour history courses have actually been taught on an average of only once in every three years and there certainly are students who wanted to take one or both of these classes and have missed the opportunity to do so. Because the courses are not offered frequently, I have not accepted enrollment limits and the average class now is running about 60 to 70 students in size. This is somewhat larger than I would like, but it does attract an interesting mix of students.

Labour history, like women's history and other kinds of social history, can have a special interest for students since it can intersect with their own life experiences (or those which they expect to have — I still remember the comment on one course evaluation form to the effect that this course should be compulsory for every student who expects to have a job after graduation). I have been struck by the number of thoughtful observations on local labour history which have come up in the class, even in the forbidding context of writing a test or exam. In discussing domestic labour, one student described her mother's experience raising two children and working at an outside job as well. In discussing collective bargaining and grievances, another student wrote about her own experience of union meetings. One mature student remembered the relief camps which existed in New Brunswick in the 1930s, even though this is something most labour historians associate with the West: "I can remember men from the neighborhood where I was brought up going to Minto to work in the woods. They were paid 20¢ a day. Also got room and board and their tobacco. That was bad but the living conditions were even worse. It was cold, dirty and most of them caught body lice." Occasionally I have also had glimpses of former students appearing in practical life as subjects of their own labour history: I think particularly of the student who discovered firsthand the limits of the existing system of industrial legality when he later became involved in an effort to organize a union at his workplace.

The richness of recent work in working-class history has had one discouraging effect. It used to be that courses in this area were described as courses on "Labour and the Left," emphasizing the political relations of the working class and the organized Left. Something has been lost with the rise of the new working-class history and there may be some justice in the complaint that we sometimes teach a kind of labour history "with the politics left out." Within the limits of a one-term course there are no easy solutions, and I have now proposed a third course on the history of the Canadian Left as a sequel to the survey of the working-class experience.

Finally, I would add that the teaching of labour history at the university has had an impact on my colleagues and on how we teach the introductory courses — something that has also happened with the introduction of women's history into the curriculum. It seems to me that undergraduate students in general survey courses are now expected to have some knowledge of the history of Canadian workers. I would say that knowing something about the role of native labour in the fur trade or of immigrant labourers on the railways or of the origins of unemployment insurance can in each case have something to add to that perennial preoccupation of history courses, the search for the Canadian identity. Indeed, in these days of concern about the so-called "sundering of Canada," it seems to me that labour historians can play a part in providing a fresh perspective on the sources of unity in Canadian history.

If the university has benefited from the growing quality and supply of labour history in Canada, the teaching of labour history within the labour movement itself has been more of a demand-side experience. From time to time people like us are asked to respond to requests from local unions and labour councils, federations of labour and labour schools. It seems to me that there is these days a perception on the part of the labour leadership that labour history is useful. The reason is simply, as Bill Gillespie once explained to a labour history workshop in New Brunswick, that labour history reminds union members how often the labour movement has been on the right side of history — in an impressive number of causes from the regulation of factory conditions to the struggle for women's rights.

It is also true that especially in the last few years there has been a lessening of anxieties about the suitability of university people as instructors within the labour movement. Much of this has to do with generational changes on both sides. There is a recognition that university staff are more likely now than in the past to come from working-class backgrounds and have broad sympathies with the labour movement. Similarly, a new generation of labour leadership has sometimes been through the same university classrooms and shared in some of the same activist political experiences of the 1960s and 1970s which helped to shape at least my own immediate generation of labour historians. Of course, more could be done by the labour movement itself to encourage work in labour history. In planning for this workshop, for instance, we consulted a number of union staff involved in labour

education and it is worth noting that we were not able to identify a single union staff person in Canada for whom labour history itself is a principal responsibility.

The challenge to teach labour history in the labour movement is a good one, as it forces us to deliver the findings of labour history without putting off conclusions to "the next lecture." Still, labour audiences can be demanding. There is a tendency to want the outside expert to deliver "the last word" on the subject; as teachers we are more likely to concentrate on getting across "the first word" and point out how much more needs to be known. From this kind of experience we ourselves can learn what we don't know. Those provocative "need to know" kinds of questions help to identify topics that can be usefully researched. When was slavery abolished in New Brunswick? When did unions become legal? When was child labour abolished (or was it)? What were the assumptions of workers' compensation when the plan was first started? Under what terms did collective bargaining become established in this province? And just what is the record of third party politics in the Maritimes?

One problem with the various requests from the labour movement is that it is not always easy to improvise a presentation tailored to the needs of the specific group. The ability to bring in practical examples from the group's own community or workplace can help illuminate broader themes very effectively. One method is to bring in copies of the routine kinds of documents we use in our own research — extracts from royal commission evidence, excerpts from official correspondence, clippings from the press, highlights from local histories and memoirs. It can be a learning experience, too. In one case, on the basis of newspaper evidence, I mistakenly identified two union spokesmen in Saint John as roadmen from international headquarters; in fact, it was pointed out gently, these individuals were local officers and local residents, still remembered in the community.

One of my regular experiences in this area has been teaching labour history sessions for the Atlantic Region Labour Education Centre (ARLEC), which is a residential school held twice a year at St. Francis Xavier University. Although it is organized by the Extension Department in Antigonish, it is sponsored jointly by the labour federations in the four Atlantic Provinces and policies and practices are governed by a board representing the federations. The students come from all provinces and are chosen by the federations. I have been impressed by their willingness over the years to bring in a wide range of outside instructors (and also by the careful attention to teaching methods and student evaluations).

I have tried to structure the ARLEC class as a general overview of the three, possibly four, periods in the history of Canadian workers, from the emergence of the labour question in the 19th century through the labour wars of the early 20th century and on to the historic compromises in the 1930s and 1940s which established some basic rights for workers within a framework of industrial legality. When the class works well, students come to see how the current crisis of restructuring represents a new historical period and one in which they themselves are the subjects of history. Over the years I have evolved a method of treating these

themes which uses a number of one-page historical documents and excerpts from secondary sources. These are distributed to the class and then used as the basis for reports and discussions. In this way we are able to cover a lot of ground without dwelling excessively on the detail. It also gives the participants something to take away and look at more fully at another time. These documents are focused exclusively on the history of labour in Atlantic Canada, so the documents also serve as a regional corrective to more general accounts of Canadian labour. Meanwhile, of course, the students have also been plied with information about publications such as *Labour/Le Travail* and encouraged to seek them out at local libraries or have their own local take out a subscription.

ARLEC normally runs separate schools in English and in French, although they are held at the same time and there is some interaction between the groups. Interestingly, over the last two years they have agreed to run the spring labour history session jointly in English and French, with Raymond Léger and I as the two instructors. Using simultaneous translation, the students from both schools sit together and go through parallel materials. The experience works well. It seems to me that this works as a practical example of cooperation across language boundaries and shows us that working-class experience gives workers a shared legacy in Canadian history.

I should add that in teaching for ARLEC I have not experienced interference in using my own judgement as to content. I do wish there was more consultation among instructors of the various sessions. The instructors themselves never have met as a group to compare experiences and discuss general objectives. Also, I am struck by the discrepancies between the subject material I cover in the labour history class and some of the supplementary materials such as reading lists which are distributed as part of the students' learning materials. These are areas where constructive improvements are possible, but they will require a larger commitment of time to the preparation of labour education materials than most university professors can personally provide.

Finally, I would like to make a few observations about the problems of educating the wider public to the work of labour history. To take the work of the academy back to the people was one of the underlying objectives for some of us who entered the field in the 1970s. Ian McKay has spoken of a "long march through the institutions," which it was believed would help produce a new popular history for Canadians. Others have thought more modestly in terms of the "trickle-down" effect which takes place when new materials are introduced at the university level and eventually find their way into the high schools and a wider public discourse. As the specialization of the labour history field has advanced, however, the goal of public dissemination has seemed to retreat. I do not here question the success of labour historians in publishing their work in journals and monographs; what I have in mind is the wider public which is not easily reached by publications of this kind.

Sometimes the news media have offered opportunities, but these have often been fleeting ones. As one of the few practising labour historians in New

Brunswick, I get telephone calls from time to time asking me to comment on a variety of questions usually related to current events. For instance, I have been asked to provide short comments (and I do mean short — from 30 seconds to several minutes in length) for radio and television on subjects such as the condition of daycare workers (and why we need daycare in the first place) and the origins of collective bargaining in New Brunswick (especially in the public sector). Once I was asked for a short working definition of a “scab” for an early morning show in Saint John. Another time the regional phone-in show focused on the idea of the boycott; I was able to give some of the history of this form of organized consumer power while Raymond Léger, who had actually organized a successful boycott against Coca-Cola (and wrote a history of the strike for his union), also participated in the discussion. One point to keep in mind when dealing with the media is that, unless it is a live broadcast, you will be edited; furthermore the time goes quickly, so it is useful to settle in your own mind beforehand what are the major points you want to get across.

There lately have been other, more-concerted projects of popularization in the region. The Theatre New Brunswick Young Company two years ago prepared a fine workshop production of a play about railway workers, “On the Rails in New Brunswick.” It opened at MacAdam, New Brunswick and then toured the province and played to high schools and some labour audiences. The director of the play, Kathleen Flaherty, who came from a railway family in western Canada, did not hesitate to contact local unions and labour historians to talk about her work. Similarly we have had some fine research and writing by the journalist Sue Calhoun. Some years ago she wrote *The Lockport Lockout*. Last year she published *A Word to Say: The Story of the Maritime Fishermen's Union* (Nimbus Publishing, Halifax, 1991); this is one of the very few individual union histories published in the region; and she is now completing a book about the life of J.K. Bell, the founder and longtime leader of the Marine Workers' Federation. These are welcome efforts and labour historians can only be encouraged that the cause of public dissemination is being taken up by such competent and enthusiastic practitioners.

As labour historians we do need to wonder if we are always presenting information in the most accessible form. In the wake of the Westray mine disaster, I began receiving telephone calls. One journalist, about to appear on *Sunday Report*, wanted to know the total accumulated number of mine fatalities in Nova Scotia, a reasonable question to ask a labour historian, and fortunately I was able to provide a more or less accurate statistic for this grim total. But I could do so only by consulting three or four books and the footnotes to my thesis, so the information was hardly very accessible. The point perhaps is that we need to be ready to respond to such questions and even, occasionally, to push ourselves forward with answers.

Recently, of course, Canadians have had a crash course in labour and working-class history. Little did I think when I took my Davy lamp into class a few months ago to demonstrate the hazards of methane gas in the mines that we would

soon have a tragic practical example on view for the entire country. In the wake of the Westray disaster, millions of Canadians have listened to discussions about the political economy of development in the coal industry, the depth of working-class culture in the coalfields, the narrow limits of industrial legality in the area of safety regulation, and even the aspirations for workers' control in this industry. The most eloquent testimony came from the men and women of the coal towns who were given this rare opportunity to present a public form of collective oral history to their fellow Canadians on channels such as Newsworld. My own brief contribution was to write about 1,000 words on the history of workplace conflict in the coal mines. After a brief telephone conversation, I sent it up to the *Globe and Mail* by fax. It was published within a few days. You may be interested to know that there was only one significant amendment to the text I submitted, and that was a transitional sentence which stated the following: "All through this history the coal miners were strong supporters of unions. Although they often fought fiercely about which was the best union, few coal miners doubted the importance of having a strong union in such a dangerous workplace." The omission caused one of my students to observe that the point of my article was "a bit veiled" — obviously not my intention.

I can end then with a final observation. I do not disagree with Michael Bliss when he argues that historians have a responsibility to place themselves in the public eye when they have something worthwhile to say about the meaning of the Canadian experience. Out of all our new work in Canadian history, it seems to me that we do have something of universal interest to say to Canadians. There is much more to labour history, as there is to regional history and women's history and ethnic history as well, than a long catalogue of particular grievances and parochial conflicts. Like other historians, we are also engaged in an effort to help Canadians understand the meaning of Canadian history. Our particular contribution is to help shift the terms of discourse in Canada towards a working-class perspective. This is a worthwhile objective both intellectually and politically, it seems to me, and can in its own way be understood as a contribution to defining the Canadian identity and the common goals shared by Canadian workers.



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