

Labour/Le Travailleur



Notebook / Carnet

Andrew Parnaby and Richard Rennie

Volume 43, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt43nb01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Parnaby, A. & Rennie, R. (1999). Notebook / Carnet. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 43, 301–310.

NOTEBOOK / CARNET

Andrew Parnaby and Richard Rennie

THE NOTEBOOK/CARNET section of *Labour/Le Travail* is a space for short essays, op-eds, thought pieces, and commentaries on any issues related to labour and the working class. Politics, popular culture, current events, and trends are all fair game. The ideal length for such pieces is 1000 words or less. The Notebook/Carnet also publishes "calls for papers" and other information on conferences and projects. Submissions should be sent c/o Rick Rennie and Andy Parnaby, Notebook/Carnet, *Labour/Le Travail*, FM2005, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NF, A1C 5S7. Or e-mail them to rrennie@plato.ucs.mun.ca

The Burger International

Liza Featherstone

DINERS MAY COMPLAIN about the dry burgers and the soggy rolls, and Wall Street may complain about sagging market share, but McDonald's has done a fine job at what it does best — taking over the world. It is the largest retail property owner in the United States, and with 23,500 restaurants in 113 countries, also the world's largest food-service corporation. The Golden Arches is the second most recognized symbol in the world (topping the Christian cross but lagging behind Olympic rings). McDonald's is also very good at union-busting. It may be one of the most doggedly anti-union companies on Earth. In the 1994-1997 British "McLibel" trial, McDonald's executives acknowledged quashing some 400 unionization efforts worldwide in the 1970s. Nonetheless, in July 1998, when Tess Lowinger and Jennifer Wiebe, both now seventeen, were fed up with working conditions in a McDonald's in

Squamish, BC, they decided to join a union. "It seemed like the only way," Lowinger recalled. "We'd tried rap sessions with managers, everything else."

To the two young women, management's disrespect was the primary problem. "If we spilled a drink or forgot a cheeseburger," Lowinger remarked, "we'd be yelled at in front of the public and our peers." Scheduling was also unfair — seniority was no guarantee of more or better shifts — and sick workers were responsible for finding their own replacements. Their equipment was dangerous too. "One light switch had no panel," Lowinger said. "You'd actually get a shock when you touched it." And these conditions were not limited to the Squamish outlet. Lowinger talked to McDonald's workers in Montréal, Ontario, and Ohio, and found "we all have the same problems, with management, with unsafe working conditions." It was against this backdrop that Wiebe and Lowinger called Canadian Auto Workers Local 3000, and two days later, met with 24-year-old Ryan Kreil, the CAW's youth organizer (and former fast-food worker). After four days of organizing they signed up more than 55 per cent of their co-workers and applied for certification under the BC labour code.

The day after Wiebe and Lowinger began their sign-up campaign, the McDonald's franchise hired 28 new employees, and challenged the certification on the grounds that the newcomers should be allowed to vote. A local lawyer, Randy Kaardal, also challenged the bid, representing a group of workers who had signed up for the union but claimed to have changed their minds. Kaardal claimed that under BC's infants act, they could not join a union without their parents' permission. (He charges \$260 an hour, while the 'kids' he represented make seven dollars per hour — who was paying his fee?) But the CAW's unfair labour practices complaint against the Squamish McDonald's for the timing of its new hires was strong enough that after two days of hearings, both Kaardal and McDonald's withdrew their challenges. Then, on 19 August 1998, the Squamish franchise became the first unionized McDonald's in Canada. (None of its nearly 13,000 US stores are unionized). Neither Wiebe nor Lowinger realized that their victory would be such a historic first. "They told us after we had won," Lowinger remarked. "Jen and I just looked at each other and went 'Whoa.' Kind of puts Squamish on the map, doesn't it?"

The CAW successes have been watched with intense interest by fast-food workers and unionists throughout North America, among them a group of McDonald's employees in Macedonia, Ohio. In April 1998 the workers, mostly high school and college students, shed their visors and hairnets and organized a five-day strike — the first ever against a US McDonald's. The strikers succeeded in getting management to sign a contract agreeing to some of their demands, including "people skills" classes for rude supervisors, paid vacation for full-time workers, some salary hikes, and "no repercussions" for employees who participated in the strike. But the aftermath was disappointing; managers did improve their manners, but for some workers, per hour starting wages declined by 25 cents. The ensuing



McDonald's Demonstration, Squamish, 28 November 1998. *Photo courtesy of Elaine Brière, Mission, BC.*

campaign to join Teamsters Local 416 ground to a standstill after two pro-union workers showed up to work with "Go Union" painted on their faces and got into a fight with a manager who tried to photograph them. The two workers, one the fry cook who had organized the strike, were fired — and, surreally, banned from eating at any of the franchise's outlets. The two have filed an unfair dismissal complaint with the US National Labor Relations Board. But Dominic Tocco, president of the Teamsters local predicted that "if the labour board rules in their favour the kids will start up again."

McDonald's sheer might — and barely legal tactics — have proved the biggest obstacles to organization. The \$130 billion-dollar fast-food behemoth has the resources to beat unions into the ground. In 1997, McDonald's hired 15 lawyers to fight workers at just one restaurant in Québec. The company has quashed union efforts in Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and worldwide. McDonald's strategy in Squamish — sudden and unnecessary new hires, odd challenges from expensive lawyers mysteriously hired by near-minimum wage workers — was typical of what CAW organizer Roger Crowther calls "the Big Mac Counter Attack" to a union campaign. In the CAW's push to organize a McDonald's franchise in Rutland, BC, one vocally pro-union employee was fired, and ten new workers were hired. In St. Hubert, Québec, after 51 out of the 62 McDonald's workers signed a request for Teamsters' certification, franchise owners closed the restaurant. (They first tried other ways to break the union, including an "employee challenge" similar to the one in Squamish.) Workers seeking to join the Teamsters in a Montréal McDonald's had enough signatures for certification, but McDonald's delayed labour board hearings until December 1998, a year after the union filed its application. With the typically high turnover of employees in fast-food work, only one of the union's original supporters was still working at the restaurant.

It would be tough for anyone to fight a corporate giant with that much economic force at its fingertips. McDonald's workers have long been cited as the classic unorganizable group, at least in North America. As in most of the retail sector, turnover is high. The mostly young (at the Squamish outlet, 80 per cent of the workers are under 19) employees have preferred, quite understandably, to see their jobs as short-term, and to leave as soon something better — school or a better-paying job — comes along. Young workers' inexperience is also a huge obstacle. As Lowinger pointed out, McDonald's is a first job for many people; indeed, more than 10 per cent of Americans are estimated to have worked their first job at McDonald's — "so they don't know they have rights." In the summer of 1998, a Teamsters effort to unionize one McDonald's in every major city in Québec failed miserably. Management consistently outsmarted the union. If unionists were waiting in the parking lot to talk to employees, managers would give the kids a ride home. According to Teamsters organizer Rejean Levigne, on one such occasion, "they took all the kids to see Titanic! What can you do?"



McDonald's Demonstration, Squamish, November 1998. *Photo courtesy of Elaine Brière, Mission, BC.*

But CAW Local 3000 has a history of successes in this sector. Over the past two years, the local has unionized 12 Vancouver Starbucks stores [see Notebook/Carnet in *Labour/Le Travail* #42] and secured a contract, a global first for the chain. Local 3000 has represented Kentucky Fried Chicken workers in its area for decades and has also applied to represent a Denny's restaurant, which, if successful, will be

another global first. Part of the CAW's unusual success with fast-food workers can be attributed to its willingness to treat young people as a serious constituency. Local 3000 is working overtime to overcome the generation gap that often turns these workers away from unions, and the perception — easily and often exploited by management — that they can only serve the interests of aging, well-paid, white men.

More and more young North American workers are braving the chains. Behind this youthful organizing fever — as evidenced by recent campaigns at Wal-Mart in Ontario, Borders Books & Music in Des Moines, Chicago, and New York, and Barnes & Noble stores across the United States — there is considerable desperation. Too much of the economy's endlessly vaunted "growth" is in McJobs. Most Gen-Xers are not educated for the much-hyped explosion of chic infotech jobs, which is not much of a gusher anyway. As United Food and Commercial Workers president Beth Shulman pointed out in the November/December 1996 issue of *American Prospect*, "Wal-Mart is the largest creator of jobs in the United States — not Intel, not Boeing, not Microsoft." Younger workers used to see retail jobs as transitional, but now many have to stick with them indefinitely. Hoping for better wages, benefits, and working conditions, they are turning, increasingly, not to other industries, but to unions. It still remains to be seen just how well unions will accommodate the new activists. Unions have historically shunned the young, low-wage workers that staff the retail sector, but that may be changing.

The CAW has cultivated these workers partly as a matter of its own survival; the region has had a fast-food dependent economy for years. Increasingly, that model is dominating the North American labour market. Fast-food workers, once the antithesis of organizable labour, now look like organized labour's future. Some smart organizers are starting to think like the chains: big. That means spending money and coordinating efforts. Taking on a multibillion-dollar, multinational chain is a tough job for a small union local. As Patsy Shafer, an organizer working on several Wal-Mart campaigns in northern Wisconsin, has observed: "What I'd like to see is a unified, national Wal-Mart campaign, maybe through the AFL-CIO. That would be a big strain on the company — they couldn't be everywhere all the time." But do not ask Tessa Lowinger about organizing any more McDonald's franchises: "We've still got to get through bargaining with this one."

A version of this article originally appeared in the New York-based publication Left Business Observer (250 W 85th Street, NY, NY, 10024-3217; 11 issues \$22; \$55 for institutions/high income; e-subs 10% lower; email: dhenwood@panix.com) It appears in Labour/Le Travail with the kind permission of Ms. Featherstone and with the assistance of LBO.

AWARDS

VALUED AT \$250, the David Alexander Prize is awarded annually for the best undergraduate essay on any topic related to the history of Atlantic Canada. To qualify, a candidate must be a part-time or full-time student enrolled in a degree program at an accredited university or college. Submissions must be written as part of the requirements of an undergraduate credit course during the 1998-99 academic year. Research, interpretive, or historiographical papers, 1500 to 5000 words in length, in either French or English, will be considered. Entries must be typed, bear no comments or grade, and be submitted by course instructors no later than 25 June 1999. Submissions will be judged by a panel of distinguished historians and the winner will be announced in the fall of 1999. Entries (and inquiries) should be directed to: The Secretary, *Acadiensis*, Campus House, University of New Brunswick, P.O. Box 4400, Fredericton, NB, E3B 5A3.

The Canadian Labour Congress will be awarding two A.A. Heaps Scholarships this year. Named in honour of A.A. Heaps, member of parliament, labour alderman, and participant in the Winnipeg General Strike, the scholarship is open to applicants — in particular mature students — undertaking full-time undergraduate or graduate studies at a Canadian university or college. Each award is valued at \$3000. To apply, applicants must submit a typed essay of 500-1000 words detailing her/his education, employment history, background in community work, financial need, and commitment to social ideals. The essay should also demonstrate a knowledge of the contribution that A.A. Heaps made in the field of social reform. Along with a short essay, applicants must provide academic transcripts and the names of two references who are both "prominent in the community" and "knowledgeable about the philosophy underlying the scholarship." Letters may be requested from the references. Applications must be post-marked by 20 June 1999, and should be sent to: A.A. Heaps Scholarship Committee, Canadian Labour Congress, 2841 Riverside Drive, Ottawa, ON, K1V 8X7. Fax: 613-521-4655.

Remembering the Mac-Paps (Update)

THE MONUMENT HONOURING the Canadian veterans of the Spanish Civil War is almost completed. On 4 December 1998, Spanish Civil War veterans from Canada, Britain, Denmark, Israel, and the United States witnessed the unveiling of a plaque and eight stone columns near the provincial legislature in Victoria, BC. The plaque provides a short history of the Spanish Civil War and describes the role the Canadian volunteers played in the fight against fascism. The eight stone columns symbolize the rough terrain of the Spanish battlefields. In order to complete this tribute to the Mac-Paps, the BC Monument Committee has asked Jack Harman, one of Canada's leading sculptors, to provide the centerpiece: a seven-and-a-half foot

bronze statue, the "Spirit of the Republic." To complete the "second phase" of the project, the BC Monument Committee is asking you, or your organization, to consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Association of Veterans and Friends of the MacKenzie-Papineau Battalion. For more information regarding the project, or to make a donation, contact committee leader Tom Kozar at 3906 Creekside Place, Burnaby, BC, V5G 4P9. Telephone: (604) 432-9762.

How to Put Together a Successful Conference Panel

THE NOTEBOOK/CARNET routinely publishes calls for papers and conference announcements. For most labour and working-class historians, writing a proposal, having it accepted by a programming committee, and presenting a paper at a conference or workshop is a familiar part of academic life. But for those who do not work at a university or college — undergraduate students, independent historians, trade unionists — this process can appear inaccessible or even intimidating. The following advice to novices comes from Ed O'Donnell of the Department of History at Hunter College, City University of New York. It was originally "published" on H-Ethnic, with whose permission this version is reproduced.

In the course of having three AHA/OAH sessions accepted, I have come to see the following as the essential elements to a successful proposal:

1. Present your paper as part of a panel session. If properly arranged and well-written, your proposal arrives as a package deal. Conference planners love this because it means they will not need to fit your paper into one of dozens of sessions on wide ranging topics. Putting the package together takes more time, but it greatly enhances the chances for acceptance.
2. Find out the theme of the conference. As you think about formulating a trio of paper presenters, consider what the title of your session will be and how you can explicitly link it to the conference's theme.
3. Decide what you want to present a paper on. Ideally, if you are a student, it should be part of your dissertation research for the simple reason that it draws upon work you need to do anyway.
4. Find two other presenters. This has become easier in the age of the Internet. The guiding principles in choosing these people are diversity and coherence. You want your panel to be diverse in its racial/ethnic/gender composition. You also want to make sure the presenters are from different universities. The fourth and fifth people you need for a session — the chair and the commentator — should be included in the quest for diversity. How do you find people? Just ask around. In all three cases where my session proposals have been accepted, I invited a friend from a different university to present and then found a third person. If possible, the chair and the commentator should be people who are firmly established in the field.

5. Create a coherent package. Put together the three one-page abstracts and edit them. Use them to create a well-written one-page session abstract that justifies the session by explaining clearly why the papers are important and how they collectively contribute to the goal and title of the session.
6. Take the time to retype/reformat everyone's abstract and c.v. Neatness counts.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE of Historical Sciences has chosen Oslo, Norway, as the site of the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences to be held 6-13 August 2000. The Congress, the largest regular meeting of professional historians in the world, will be organized around three major themes, twenty specialized themes, and twenty-five round table discussions. The program is varied and stimulating, and topics range from generalist to highly specialized. It includes sessions on: memory and collective identity; family structures, demography, and population; regions and regionalization; masculinity as practice and representation; changing boundaries and definitions of work across time and space; gay and lesbian history; law, norms, and deviance; comparative history; teaching history; and historical journals. For more information, contact the organizers at: 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Department of History, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1008 Blindern, N-0315, Oslo, Norway. Telephone: (+47) 22 85 69 07. Fax: (+47) 22 85 52 78. Or contact: www.hf.uio.no (and follow the links).

The Eighth Annual World History Association International Conference will be held at the University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia 24-27 June 1999. The main theme of the conference is colonialism, with special emphasis on colonial policy and native land, the environmental consequences of colonialism, gender issues in colonial contexts, and colonialism and the early modern world economy. If you wish to attend the conference, contact Ralph Crozier, Department of History, University of Victoria, P.O. Box 3045, Victoria, BC, V8W 3P4. Telephone: (250) 721-7404. E-mail: oldcro@uvvm.uvic.ca.

"Merchants and Mariners in Northern Seas" is the theme of a maritime history conference which will be held at the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College campus of Memorial University of Newfoundland, located at Corner Brook, Newfoundland, 8-14 August 1999. Sponsored jointly by the Association for the History of the Northern Seas and the Canadian Nautical Research Society, the conference will feature sessions on a wide variety of themes, including whaling, the fish trade, and maritime labour. The academic sessions will be followed by a three-day excursion to the Norse habitation at L'Anse aux Meadows, located on Newfoundland's Northern Peninsula, and to the remains of a Basque whaling station at Red Bay, Labrador. For more information, contact Olaf U. Janzen, Division of Arts, Sir

Wilfred Grenfell College, Corner Brook, NF, A2H 6P9. Telephone: (709) 637-6282.
E-mail: olaf@beothuk.swgc.mun.ca.

The Atlantic Canada Workshop, a biannual meeting of researchers from many fields whose work focuses on Atlantic Canada, will convene at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, 14-16 October 1999. The workshop will focus exclusively on the relevance of the "development" paradigm to regional studies. Have scholars entered a period after "development" in their regional work? Has cultural studies effectively condemned earlier approaches as unappealing examples of economism and determinism? Can those empirical and theoretical issues which were traditionally regarded as central to our understanding of the region be jettisoned in favour of a new cultural studies paradigm? At the end of the 1990s, has "region" itself survived as a framework for meaningful analysis? These questions, and many others, will be taken up by workshop participants, and it is hoped that the papers presented at this forum will appear in book form. Requests for information should be sent to: Ian McKay or Jim Kenney, Department of History, Queen's University, Kingston, ON, K7L 3N6. E-mail: mac@kos.net, or jk29@post.queensu.ca.

The Canadian Association for American Studies and the American Studies Association will hold their Joint Annual Meeting in Montréal, Québec, 28-31 October 1999. The theme of this year's meeting is "Crossing Borders/Crossing Centuries", and the Program Committee invites colleagues in American Studies and related disciplines to submit proposals for individual papers, performances, films, roundtables, workshops, conversations, or entire sessions on any topic dealing with American cultures. The committee welcomes submissions on: the arts; religion; sexuality; politics; environments; expressive traditions; and global capitalism. The committee especially invites sessions which challenge us to rethink conventional wisdom about the United States' historical and contemporary relationship to its neighbours. Submissions may be presented in French or English. Proposals must be postmarked by 23 January 1999, and should be sent to: 1999 CAAS/ASA Program Committee, c/o American Studies Association, 1120 19th Street, NW, Suite 301, Washington, DC 20036. Phone: (202) 467-4783. To confirm receipt, include a self-addressed, stamped postcard with your submission. No fax or e-mail submissions will be accepted. The complete Call for Papers, along with rules and guidelines, will be published in the next issue of the *Canadian Review of American Studies*, and in the September issue of *American Studies Association Newsletter*. It is also available at the CAAS website: <http://www.caas.uwindsor.ca>. You may also contact Bruce Tucker, President, Canadian Association for American Studies, Department of History, Philosophy and Political Science, University of Windsor, Windsor, ON, N9B 3P4. Phone: (519) 253-3000, ext 2347.
E-mail: tucker1@uwindsor.ca.