

## Madeleine Parent (1918–2012)

Bryan D. Palmer, Andrée Lévesque, Joan Sangster and Madeline Parent

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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

### Madeleine Parent (1918–2012)

#### *Introduction*

**Bryan D. Palmer**

SMALL IN STATURE, MADELEINE PARENT had a decidedly large impact. Few women stand as tall in the history of Canadian and Québec labour, and none, it might be argued, have left legacies of significance that link together as many causes associated with organized labour, peace movements, civil liberties, and the rights of immigrants, women, and Native peoples as did Parent. Celebrated Québec painter, sculptor, and glass maker, Marcelle Ferron, once called Parent, “The greatest figure of our time, the one who did the most to change Quebec.”<sup>1</sup> Alongside her life-long partner, Kent Rowley, Madeleine helped, certainly, to change the face of Canadian trade unionism.

When Madeleine Parent died in a Montréal nursing home on 12 March 2012, Canadians and Québécois lost an iconic figure of the left. The outpouring of appreciative obituaries, the well-attended memorial celebrations of her life in Montréal and Toronto, and affectionate reflections of many activists touched by Madeleine’s example and schooled in her disciplined approach to social transformation all spoke of how Parent had, indeed, altered history, and very much for the better.

In remembering Madeleine Parent’s convictions, commitments, and causes, *Labour/Le Travail* presents commentaries by two feminist historians, Andrée Lévesque and Joan Sangster. We close this remembrance of Madeleine Parent with one of the many speeches she delivered over the course of decades of organizing, activism, and agitation. The occasion of Parent’s address was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul Robeson’s historic Peace Arch open-air concert. Robeson, a huge artistic talent nurtured in the Harlem Renaissance, graduated from Columbia’s Faculty of Law but renounced a legal profession because of

1. Quoted in Rick Salutin, “Madeleine Parent, 1918–2012: Death of an Icon,” *Toronto Star*, 15 March 2012.



Madeleine Parent, Labour Day march (approx. 1947)

the racism rampant in the field in the 1920s. A distinguished theatrical and movie actor, Robeson was also a celebrated singer, his rich bass-baritone voice associated with the popularization of African American folk songs/spirituals. By the 1930s he was increasingly affiliated with radicalism, endorsing the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and becoming more and more outspoken in his resistance to racism. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, he led mobilizations against lynch law in the American South and spoke out against the Canadian government's proposal to deport thousands of Japanese Canadians. Targeted in the anti-communist witch-hunt of the McCarthy era, Robeson had his passport seized by the United States government, prohibiting him from leaving the country. A supporter of militant unionism, Robeson was invited to sing at the Fourth Canadian convention of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, to be held in Vancouver in February 1952. But because his international movements were restricted, his appearance before the assembled Mine-Mill delegates was blocked. In protest, Robeson

sang across the US-Canada border, his concert delivered from the back of a flat-bed truck at the Blaine, Washington and Douglas, British Columbia Peace Arch. A crowd of 40,000 assembled in international solidarity to hear Robeson, and demonstrate their opposition to the reactionary political climate of the times.

On 18 May 2002 a “Here We Stand, Paul Robeson Memorial Concert” was organized to commemorate the original 1952 event. Madeleine Parent was a logical person to deliver a speech, and her remarks, reprinted below, reach back to the height of the Cold War, when Robeson’s victimization moved thousands to take a stand on social justice issues. It was a period in which the related vilification of Parent was commonplace. That attack, as Lévesque and Sangster show, came from a variety of quarters, none of which managed to sustain the kind of principled dignity and defence of the downtrodden that animated Parent’s life of struggle and its varied legacies.

## ***A Life of Struggles***

**Andrée Lévesque**

SHE WAS NOTORIOUS, she was vilified, and she was worshiped, Madeleine Parent (1918–2012), a militant since her student days at McGill University, never left anyone indifferent. Every social movement owes her an immense debt for her leadership and the inspiration she has given over three generations of activists.

Madeleine Parent was born in Montréal on 23 May 1918. It is important to remember this as she was later deemed to be a Russian spy, when the powers that be were convinced that a foreign origin would discredit her, or make her actions more understandable. She was first educated in convent schools, and then sent to a prestigious English high school by parents who valued education. She attended McGill University from 1936 to 1940, at a time when women were a distinct minority, but also when this conservative institution counted some progressive social scientists such as Leonard Marsh, and a lively student movement. Everett Hughes left his mark on her and her fellow students, as did Frank Scott and scientist Grant Lathe. Madeleine involved herself in various student clubs, as well as participating in the Canadian Students Assembly. She is best remembered for her part in the Canadian Students Movement campaign for scholarships for needy students, in which she argued the case for increased financial assistance before McGill Chancellor, Sir Edward W. Beatty, and other members of the Montréal business elite.

In 1939, at a Civil Liberties Union meeting at McGill, Madeleine met union organiser Lea Roback. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship. They had a memorable cup of coffee together and Lea, fifteen years her elder, became Madeleine’s role model and her mentor. Both women shared a dedication to

social justice, a will to do something to improve the lot of the working class whose living and working conditions in Québec were amongst the worst in North America, and, more importantly, the conviction that something could be done. With Lea's encouragement, Madeleine decided to become a union organiser. Having graduated from McGill, she worked for the Montréal Labour Union Council, organised in the war industries, and subsequently in the textile mills in the Montréal districts of Saint-Henri and Hochelaga.

For a few years she was married to fellow organiser Val Bjarnason, during which time she met Kent Rowley who was organising workers in the war industries in Valleyfield. He suggested she join him to help organise the textile workers of the giant Montréal Cotton plant. The rest is history. Working conditions were dismal, mothers sometimes brought their children to work, and although the textile industry had a long history of sporadic organising, the company was known to break its contracts and the Sisyphean task had to start all over again. In 1946, Madeleine led a 100-day strike for better working conditions and decent wages. This started the long tug-of-war between Premier Maurice Duplessis, the Québec Catholic church, and the feisty young and beautiful Madeleine Parent.

The following year, 1947, the textile town of Lachute was shaken by another strike led by Madeleine and Kent. Declared illegal by Maurice Duplessis, violently opposed by the company, this strike was crushed but not before Madeleine, Kent, and organiser Azélus Beaucage were arrested and charged with seditious conspiracy, and jailed for a short time. When they were out on bail, there ensued the longest trial in the annals of Québec. In 1955, after almost eight years the case was dismissed on a technicality, the court clerk having died and nobody was able to read his notes.

For years to come, Madeleine was to be accused of being a Bolshevik. She always denied this and there is no hard evidence of Party membership, yet she was surely a fellow traveller. "Some of her best friends," such as Lea Roback and Danielle Cuisinier-Dionne, were in the Party, and she did briefly collaborate with the communist newspaper. Madeleine consistently opposed capitalism and imperialism, and during the Cold War this was enough to denounce her as a member of a seditious organisation.

In 1952, another strike shook the city of Valleyfield. By then, Madeleine was already an iconic figure in the workers' homes and, despite being denounced by local bishop Emile Léger, having the union office raided, and giving rise to acts of violence and harsh police repression, the strike was popular amongst the women and men of Dominion Textile. For Madeleine, the outcome of the conflict was a time of labour betrayal: the United Textile Workers of America did not support this strike, and it expelled Parent and Rowley. Feeling betrayed yet undeterred, the couple set up their own Canadian Textile and Chemical Workers Union. This step marks the beginning of Madeleine's commitment to Canadian nationalism, which was to explode on the Left and the Right in the 1960s.

Kent and Madeleine had married in 1953. Soon after their expulsion from the UTWA, Kent left for Ontario and for years they commuted between two homes until Madeleine joined him in Brantford in 1967. Kent passed away in 1978, and Madeleine came back to Montréal and retired from the CTCU in 1983. While she never stopped making her voice heard in the labour movement, her activism took on a whole new focus as she became increasingly involved in issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. A founding member of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC), she became Québec representative for eight years, while being active in the *Fédération des Femmes du Québec* where she defended pay equity and reproductive rights. One became used to seeing Madeleine, often next to Lea Roback, in street demonstrations where she would often address the crowd. She invariably linked the event – be it opposition to the war in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, defence of reproductive rights, or resistance to the imposition of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – to broader issues, pointing out the evils of imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. She addressed the crowds at the 1995 Bread and Roses March as well as at the 2000 World March of Women, and from every podium never stopped denouncing all forms of capitalist exploitation, siding with the oppressed and the marginalised.

From the start, at NAC she defended the rights of Native women, supporting Mary Two-Axe Early in her demand for the recognition of reserve rights for women who married non-Native men. In Québec, she supported the Native Women's Association and the testimony given by Native women at her memorial movingly recalled that aspect of Madeleine's life. In Ontario, Madeleine was very sensitive to the plight of immigrant women, exploited at the bottom of an exploited class, and in Québec she pursued this work by involving herself with the South-Asian Women's Centre and with the Centre for Immigrant Workers. She was also actively involved with the *Ligue des Droits et Libertés*, and with Alternatives, a progressive NGO dedicated to international development, and a number of other organisations committed to those on the margins and at the bottom of society.

In her retirement Madeleine was finally respectable. The Union nationale was a thing of the past, the Catholic Church had lost its power over the population, and nationalism had veered Left. In 1960, she had gone to China with, amongst others, Pierre Elliott Trudeau; years later she was now on intimate terms with leaders of the *Parti québécois*. The CTCU was in the CAW and Canadian-based unions were far more acceptable in the Canadian labour movement. The goal of pay equity was accepted, at least in principle, by all the unions, and feminism had become institutionalised. Madeleine understood that the battles had not yet been won, and she would remind people of the wage gap between women and men, pointing to the growing wealth discrepancy. As the years went by, Madeleine used her dignified appearance, her studied elocution, and her white hair, to put forward the most radical messages. She was a living example that one should not go by appearances.

A sometimes-misunderstood action on her part was her support for Québec sovereignty. She stood for the *Oui* at the 1980 and 1995 referenda, and she publicly supported the Parti québécois. She had lost respect for all the federal parties and, for lack of anything further Left, and because of her support for Québec's sovereignty, she put her hopes on the left wing of the PQ. This was at times misunderstood in English Canada where people failed to conceive that she could at the same time be a Canadian nationalist opposed to free trade, and fight for Québec independence. She may have helped some people understand that in Québec this is not a contradiction.

In her dedication to social justice, Madeleine was generous with her time: she sent letters to members of Parliament and to the Québec legislature, she wrote to the papers, gave interviews, signed petitions, went to meetings, and took to the streets. The years never diluted her message and her outrage at the injustices of the world. When the government ordered the expulsion of a Salvadorian woman and her Canadian-born child, she untiringly contacted politicians until they were allowed to stay in Montréal. Madeleine was the most determined person I have ever known.

Madeleine never retired to cultivate a garden or withdraw from the world. Generous with her time and energy, in 2001, she accepted to sit on a "tribunal of the oppressed" at the People's Summit in Québec City. The next day, she joined thousands of marchers and held a banner for many kilometres in the heat, protesting NAFTA. She was always well-informed, read three newspapers a day, plus the *New York Times* on weekends, and she remembered what she read; she annotated and clipped articles, and if she was sick, newspapers would accumulate by the door, for she did not want them to be thrown away without being read.

Madeleine got public recognition in her lifetime. Eight universities granted her a doctorate *honoris causa*. In 2002, filmmaker Sophie Bissonette did a documentary on her life, *Tisserande de solidarité*, and since 1997 the headquarters of Québec women's organisations was named the Maison Parent-Roback. About ten years ago, Madeleine was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease but her illness remained under control and she persisted in accepting speaking engagements and marching in the streets. Gradually she became confined to her home, but she never remained inactive. As long as she could, she went on reading the newspaper, signing petitions, phoning politicians, and answering those who solicited her opinion. She never relinquished her judgement; she remained critical; and, most importantly, Madeleine Parent never lost hope for a better world. That remains the hallmark of who she was and the legacy she left us all.



## *Historical Legacies*

### **Joan Sangster**

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD MADELEINE PARENT speak, I was attending a rally for the Local 1005 Stelco strikers in Hamilton in 1980. For the first time in many years, women workers were more visible on the picket line, thanks to the recently fought “Women Back Into Stelco” campaign. Rumours circulated that union president, Cec Taylor, had invited Parent to speak, at a time when it was still unusual to allow this union ‘renegade’ onto the podiums of international unions. However some rebellious 1005 members, including Taylor, had picketed with the Canadian Textile and Chemical Workers Union (CTCU), the independent Canadian union led by Parent and her partner Kent Rowley, during the 1971 Texpack strike in nearby Brantford, despite orders by the internationals not to do so. It was undoubtedly this old connection between activist union leaders that led to Parent’s presence. Having never seen her in person, I initially wondered how this tiny woman, in very respectable dress, would rouse a crowd of steelworkers. If I had contemplated her history more carefully, I would not have asked that question. Parent may have seemed incongruous to the scene, but once she started to speak there was no doubt that she could make a crowd listen: her clear, direct speech identified the class battle unfolding as well as her political commitment to the strikers as they took on one of the more powerful corporations in Canada. Many photos of Madeleine similarly show her in respectable attire, often wearing a seemingly incongruous pill box hat. Yet despite the disarmingly conventional headdress that Madeleine routinely donned, she was a rebel to the core. This is what we rightly remember and celebrate.

Madeleine’s death this year led to many laudatory reassessments of her immense contributions to feminism, trade unionism, socialism, and other political causes. I want to focus on some contributions of special relevance to labour history. There are many more. In this kind of forum, our re-evaluations of Parent’s life will not be questioning and critical; I leave that to future historians writing biographies fully immersed in the sources. It is important, in the long run, that we do not simply create one-dimensional labour leader heroines in our scholarly work, and most of us who knew or had interviewed Madeleine would acknowledge that she remains a complex figure. Madeleine guarded her own history carefully; she was aware that she was leaving a legacy, and she wanted to have some control over it. Moreover, like others who were scarred by very real experiences of persecution – in her case, not only by Premier Duplessis but also by the vicious Cold War battles within labour – she was wary of historians who she thought might not get her story ‘right.’ When I asked for access to her papers at Library and Archives Canada in order to write an article on the Texpack strike, she would not talk on the phone, or even



convey her thoughts on paper. Instead, one was summoned to Montréal for meetings to talk about the strike. These interviews – her interviewing me as much as me her – were a pleasure, not only because she had a sharp memory and could offer many details of the strike, but also because our political discussions ranged more broadly, revealing her inspiring, unwavering commitment to working-class struggles. But there was no doubt that she was the story teller in command of her history.

Whatever emerges from historical analyses to come, I think there are some things we should commemorate as her legacy to labour history. The five contributions I address below also have something politically important to say to us today.

First, Madeleine's long commitment to organizing unorganized, and often quite marginal, workers, needs to be noted. There are some workplaces which are inherently difficult to organize due to their size, organization, location, or the ethnic/gendered makeup of the workforce; there are also workplaces which, for political reasons, those with economic and political power will do everything to keep out of the union fold. Madeleine did not let these factors determine her work; rather, she and her partner in life and politics, Kent Rowley, tried to devise ways to organize despite these constraints. She faced these obstacles head on, and did not walk away from organizing when bad economic times or repressive state measures made it all the more difficult – surely an issue still facing us today. Madeleine will be remembered especially for her work organizing textile workers in Québec under both the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the United Textile Workers of America (UTWA), particularly evident in the Dominion Textile strikes of the 1940s. This Québec organizing of textile workers (which would later be extended into Ontario drives under the auspices of the CTCU) was not just difficult work; it also entailed absolute courage of one's convictions. Madeleine faced denunciations from the pulpit and the state, with Duplessis, in particular, targeting her on a number of occasions. Her organizing work in Valleyfield and Lachute in 1946–1947 (by which time her union was faced with raiding by a rival union) put Parent under great pressure: she faced seditious conspiracy charges that were dragged out in the courts for years, threatening her with the prospect of time in prison.

By the time Madeleine and Kent were organizing in Ontario in the 1950s and 1960s, they had been ousted from the UTWA (by corrupt American leaders aided by Canadian opponents) and the dissident duo formed their own Canadian union, the CTCU. They faced staunch and predictable opposition from powerful, mainstream international union leaders. To be a woman leader in this cauldron of repression and hatred also meant that attacks were gendered in a particular way. On the one hand, Parent was trivialized as the 'glamour girl of Québec labour,' but on the other she was also vilified as a traitor, variously to the Québec and Canadian states and the conventional union movement. The United Steel Workers of America published a pamphlet

that depicted Parent as a witch descending on Sudbury, riding a broom into a strike led by the then-ostracized 'red' Mine Mill and Smelter Workers union. As Denyse Baillargeon points out, in Québec the Duplessis government identified her publicly as "Dame Vladimir, alias Valdimir Bjarnason"; the reference to her first husband's Scandinavian name was meant to imply she was a Russian spy, following in her 'foreign' husband's footsteps.<sup>2</sup> Such vicious attacks made Parent's life and work difficult, and they inevitably left lasting scars, however resilient the diminutive Madeleine appeared.

To continue organizing more marginal workers under these conditions, in industries where anti-union sentiment was immensely strong on the part of management, was quite heroic. There was a certain relentless determination about Madeleine that I suspect could slide into stubbornness, but it also kept her committed to her goals. After being unjustly thrown out of the UTWA, she stayed in Montréal, trying to regain some UTWA locals for the new union, the CTCU. She was at the Dominion Textiles gate, day-after-day, speaking with workers. The same determined commitment to the grinding routine of organizing was evident in her Ontario labour movement work, and in the steely determination that characterized her attempt to confront the many legal strictures on unions. She challenged the Unemployment Insurance Commission after the Texpack strike in 1971, for instance, so that the striking workers could collect what she saw as their proper due. Parent's dedicated and relentless determination, combined with her ability to analyze issues in a precise, careful, incisive, and critical manner, led to her success on that count, and in many contract negotiations.

Second, Madeleine was committed to the union movement as a form of working-class politics, and she brought a class-struggle analysis to bear on the labour movement, though one inflected by an understanding of the oppressions of gender and ethnicity. She was not interested in organizing workers only to boost trade union numbers or to promote a complacent business unionism. Parent combined a unique anti-capitalist vision with on-the-ground organizing of workers, indicating that a choice need not be made between these two goals. There is no doubt she stood 'on the left,' though her actual commitment to a particular party at different points in time has been, and will continue to be, discussed by historians. Leftists have historically wrestled with how they can keep an anti-capitalist critique front and centre, while fighting over more immediate issues, from union organizing to contracts, grievances and benefits. Parent had a sense of the importance of both, yet in union organizing she knew some compromises always had to be made. She believed, however, that one had to draw the line at compromises that infringed on basic political and union principles. During the Artistic strike in Toronto, she knew that giving in to the management rights clause which allowed the company to unilaterally

2. Denyse Baillargeon, "Textile Strikes in Quebec, 1946, 1947, 1952," in Andrée Lévesque, ed., *Madeleine Parent: Activist* (Toronto 2005), 66.

fire workers for any breach of discipline would be disastrous: a union would not have been worth its salt if it gave management such rights. As Ian Milligan says in his article on the Artistic strike, Parent could not and would not give in, for to do so she “would have sold out the workers.”<sup>3</sup>

When discussing the Texpack strike with me, Parent made the emphatic point that every strike can be interpreted as a political issue, and it is the responsibility of the union to make those politics clear. Most strikes are never just economic contests over contracts, she argued, as they often expose larger political issues that must be publicized if unions are to win on the picket line. At Texpack, the issue of US control of the Canadian economy was central; in the early 1970s, concerns about American economic domination sparked the growth of a New Left-nationalist movement which lent its support to the strikers. The employer, the American Hospital Supply Company, Parent claimed, was turning the Brantford factory into a warehouse, moving production elsewhere, and also importing Korean War-vintage bandages, made in the US, and repackaging them in Canada, without re-sterilizing them. Getting some of these bandages and unrolling them for the media, doing so in a meeting with federal MP and Minister of Labour John Monroe, pilloried the anti-union company decisively and dramatically.<sup>4</sup> The same politicization of labour struggles was apparent at Artistic, with the union’s focus on the super exploitation of immigrant workers, and at Puretex, where the surveillance of women workers by workplace cameras emerged as a critical political and moral issue. By exposing labour struggles as political struggles, both unionists and supporters were supposed to see organizing strikes, boycotts, and the like as far more than the expression of employer-employee discord: rather, they were evidence of wider class and political conflict, highlighting the need for social change on a much broader scale.

Madeleine’s understanding that labour struggles were inherently political meant that she and Kent had a realistic sense of labour’s relationship to the law. Although they would use the law to its fullest to defend themselves and the workers they represented, they were also aware that the law, at its base, was an institution more inclined to defend private property than to establish and extend the rights of workers. She believed that class conflict was an ongoing reality in capitalist society, and whatever legal rights unions won, they should not be the end game for working-class struggle. Parent did not press workers to disobey the law – for she knew this could have an immense cost – but she conveyed a realistic understanding that the law might have to be challenged frontally to win a strike: in other words, one had to fight in the courts, but also on the picket line. This understanding of labour law was undoubtedly

3. Ian Milligan, “‘The Force of All Our Numbers’: New Leftists, Labour, and the 1972 Artistic Woodwork Strike,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 66 (Fall 2010), 37–71.

4. Joan Sangster, “Remembering Texpack: Nationalism, Internationalism and Militancy in Canadian Unions,” *Studies in Political Economy*, 78, (Fall 2006), 41–66.

nourished by Parent's commitment to low-wage, female, immigrant, marginalized workers – precisely those workers who were outside the usual protections of Fordism in the postwar period, and for whom the increasing legalism of the post-war settlement offered little solace.

Third, Parent's class politics incorporated an understanding of gender, race, and ethnic oppression. Her commitment to feminism and anti-racism was a critical part of her historical legacy, particularly because of the alliances she helped to build in the 1970s and 1980s. Parent urged the feminist movement to take account of working-class women's issues, and the labour movement to take account of women's issues, pushing both towards a more socialist-feminist analysis. In the CTCU Bulletin, from the early 1970s on, there were calls to link women's and labour struggles: under Madeleine's urging, the CTCU gave its support to women's reproductive rights and to the "Strategy for Change" conference in 1971 that produced the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC). Madeleine's participation in this important women's organization has been documented by many feminist writers. She saw the potential for NAC to develop a strong emphasis on economic and labour issues, and she became active in the committee on the economic status of women, which not only looked at legislation and policy, but also initiated actions in support of women's on-the-ground struggles, such as the strike of workers at Dare Cookies in Kitchener-Waterloo. In bargaining, too, she brought the needs and perspective of women to the table, in the process becoming an expert on pay equity. Workers from immigrant backgrounds, who lacked facility with English and did not conform to the 'ideal' Anglo-Celtic image, faced special problems in the workforce. Parent understood this and while her textile organizing often focused on white women from European backgrounds, she also became a strong advocate of Aboriginal women and women of colour.

Fourth, and perhaps most unusual in terms of many trade union leaders, Madeleine Parent had the courage to march to a different political tune than the powerful, mainstream labour movement. When she and Kent Rowley formed the CTCU, and when they brought together a larger union central, the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), they were disparaged and ridiculed. They were also endlessly red-baited. Union locals they organized were raided continually by international union rivals. We can say now that Madeleine and Kent were on the right side of history. At the time, however, they faced a continuous onslaught of vilification, in part because many internationals and powerful trade union centrals, like the Ontario Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress, rejected the CTCU's nationalist perspective. Precisely because Parent and Rowley refused to endorse the Cold War project that, at the time, was a dominating force within mainstream Canadian labour circles, they were highly suspect in the eyes of powerful conventional trade union figures. During Texpack, for instance, the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) issued pamphlets trying to damage the strike and break the local, claiming it was destined to be ineffectual. One TWUA attack stated of the

CTUC that, “its president [Rowley] was a communist, kicked out of the labour movement because of his communist tactics, and its secretary treasurer [Madeleine] was also a well known Communist supporter who travelled to red China for conferences of her party.”<sup>5</sup> The hostility of the international unions may have been shaped by an irrational anti-communism, but it also emerged because Madeleine Parent and Kent Rowley were leftists who criticized the union leadership, and called for more rank-and-file militancy. Madeleine’s courage in defending a ‘different union pathway’ should be lauded. Being denounced by Duplessis is one thing, and to be expected; having union leaders join the chorus is something else entirely. Madeleine’s commitment to militant, nationalist, socialist workers’ mobilization put her on the margins of the labour movement that she cared deeply about. This was not a place many unionists, let alone union leaders, want to be, then or now. Yet without critique from within, including a left critique, unions can easily drift into consensus, complacency, and a lackluster liberalism. Again, Parent’s legacy has something of importance to say to us today.

Ironically, Parent was later welcomed back into the House of Labour after there was a shift in trade unionism’s perspective. The CTCU merged with the Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) and Madeleine’s accomplishments were increasingly recognized. She even received honorary degrees, including from McGill, which surely would have ostracized her during the Cold War. In the light of this historical recognition, there could be an inclination to lose sight of Parent’s earlier role as an indefatigable critic of conventional trade unionism in Québec and Canada. But a crucial part of her legacy for the present should be recognition of the importance – and difficulty – of being a working-class activist while being opposed to the political paths taken by some elements of the trade union leadership.

Last, but not least, we should recognize the political inspiration Parent bequeathed to a generation of new labour activists. Parent was positioned at a key moment in history, situated as she was between Depression organizing and the Fordist union movement, between the Cold War and the rise of the New Left, between a repressive French Canada in the Duplessis era and the more expansive possibilities of post-Quiet Revolution Québec. She passed on knowledge and political commitment throughout her career, but one era of such knowledge transfer was especially important in labour history: that of the late 1960s to the early 1980s. As a new generation of labour and left activists emerged in this period, they looked to people like Parent for advice and inspiration. Parent and Rowley were critical in shaping the political ideas and practice of this generation, which cut its teeth in anti-Vietnam War protests and in student/community/New Left organizations, looking also to engagement in working-class struggles as a key to social change. The wave

5. Library and Archives Canada, Textile Workers Union of America Fonds, Vol. 12, ‘Texpack’ file.

of organizing in southern Ontario that was symbolized by struggles such as Texpack, Artistic, Puretex, and Parent's work in NAC, are but examples of this political knowledge transfer. Some of Madeleine's and Kent's protégés, like Laurel Ritchie and John Lang, went into important work in the CAW; others, such as Rick Salutin, carved out artistic careers as critics of the status quo. There were those who walked picket lines with Madeleine and Kent who went on to make significant left-wing contributions to Canadian intellectual life, becoming, like Mel Watkins, salutary academic activists. And many more infused labour, community, and left circles with energy and ideas for years to come. When I wrote this piece, I looked over some of the documents from the archives involving the Texpack and Artistic strikes, and the arrest lists of those arraigned by the courts during these strikes caught my eye; they include many people who remained active in labour, women's, peace, and left causes for decades. To have nurtured and taught a legion of activists was one of Madeleine Parent's most important legacies. It is difficult indeed to categorize easily where Parent's bequest to subsequent generations in this area starts and ends. She was involved in such a range of causes and campaigns over the course of her life that her influence must be recognized as exceptionally broad, encompassing not only the labour-focused struggles I have been primarily concerned with here, but also First Nations women, racialized and immigrant women, international solidarity, and anti-imperialist struggles. For those of us reared in the socialist-feminist politics of the 1970s, however, Parent's work in the labour movement remains centrally important in her varied inspirations. It reminds us that we should question the easy path of mainstream consensus for labour, always keeping the vision of an anti-capitalist future somewhere within our political hopes and work.

***Keynote Address, 18 May 2002, 50th Anniversary of Paul Robeson's Concert at the Peace Arch, Blaine, Washington/Douglas, British Columbia***

**Madeleine Parent**

I stand here today under great stress because I dare, as you do – all of you, to fight for peace and for a decent life for all men, women, and children.

Paul Robeson, 18 May 1952

I'VE BEEN MANDATED TO BRING fraternal greetings to you from the Falconbridge Miners and Smelter Workers of Sudbury, Ontario. They are the survivors of the Mine-Mill Union tradition on the continent. In 1993 they voted to join the Canadian Auto Workers and are now called the "Sudbury



Mine-Mill and Smelter Worker's Union Local 598 CAW." I am proud to be a lifetime member of their Retirees' Chapter.

I had the privilege of hearing Paul Robeson in Montréal during wartime when he sang there and of meeting him at two private receptions. Half a century ago today, when Paul Robeson sang here, he did so in solidarity with the Mine-Mill and Smelter Workers' Union, which the mining bosses had decided to destroy.

In 1952 the Cold War was at its height in the USA and spilled over into Canada, distracting many people from their dream of peace and of building a freer and more humane social order. Sir Winston Churchill had gone to Fulton, Missouri USA where, in a dramatic speech, he accused a wartime ally, the Soviet Union, of drawing "An Iron Curtain" across the middle of Europe and threatening our own freedoms across the Atlantic. Churchill's speech shocked thousands of people and launched the Cold War that was to serve as a justification for re-armament in place of social policies and progressive programs.

In the US, Senator Joseph McCarthy launched a witch-hunt by the Committee on Un-American Activities against those who worked to build a more humane society. McCarthy ordered individuals to appear and turned the spotlight on each of them. Unless persons responded as strong anti-communists and gave damaging information on friends, relatives and acquaintances, they were under suspicion and in jeopardy. The FBI obliged by tracking down men such as the great scientist Albert Einstein, [who] had joined Paul Robeson in efforts to stop the lynching of Black men.

Paul was devoted to the struggle for justice of his own people and he extended his solidarity to all others who suffered injustice. He would join their struggle wherever he could. Robeson had developed an articulate English diction and played masterfully the title role in the Shakespearean tragedy, *Othello*. And as we have all heard, he also acquired a magnificent bass singing voice, which he used to get his message across.

If he were alive today, Paul Robeson would commit his persuasive speaking and singing in the cause of peace and oppose George W. Bush's call for continuing wars against those he says are "terrorists." He would denounce Bush's growing list of enemies in his war against the so-called "Axis of Evil." From Afghanistan, Bush threatens again oil-rich Iraq and Libya, also Iran, North Korea, Syria and Somalia and it can be expected that he will add more to the list.

Today, Robeson would plead for peace for the Palestinian people and denounce Ariel Sharon's aggression with weapons supplied by the USA. He would appeal for help from industrial countries to poor nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, further impoverished by policies of the globalization of commerce, by the World Bank, and other financial institutions.

I congratulate you in BC for standing up against the Campbell government's attacks on the *Labour Code* that would put working people still more at the





Madeleine Parent  
at the inauguration  
of the *Maison*  
*Parent-Roback*,  
1988

mercy of ruthless employers. Congratulations also in your protests against the privatization of hospitals, protests against allowing bosses greater freedom to contract out work, and protests against changes that threaten pay equity and job security. I hope you can build greater unity between public-sector and private-sector workers, knowing as we do, that when a government takes away previous gains from one sector it is only a matter of time before it evokes the precedent to take away comparable gains made by another sector.

Labour unity is further enhanced by solidarity with organizations in the community of women, seniors, minorities, of young people, concerned about the environment and their future.

As the federal government abandons more and more of our country's independence to Washington's strategy of joint US-Canada military command, leading to greater military control over Canada, we must support those organizations dedicated to protecting our population against further US control. Such policies are no help to us and they are no help to the American people. They only lead to more control over all of us by the hawks.

We must defend the right of all people to clean air and drinking water, as primary rights to life itself. We must strengthen solidarities with the Native peoples, still and always threatened with betrayal of their rights. We must work more closely from province to province to defend our democratic rights and statutory freedoms. If the issues are explained well, more people from Québec would cross the Ottawa River to join you in protest on Parliament Hill.

I want to express solidarity with those Americans who stand for peace and the priority of social and human rights policies over the hawkish plans of the Bush administration.

Un salut chaleureux à mes cousins et cousines de langue française.

Je souhaite que la direction de Radio-Canada enlève bientôt le bâillon sur la bouche de nos travailleurs culturels du Québec et de l'Acadie afin qu'on puisse s'entendre parler d'un but à l'autre du Canada que les autorités se vantent d'être bilingue.