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Windsor, April 1979

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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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REVIEWING a conference poses some particular problems. Unlike a book, against which any comments and criticisms can be compared directly, conferences are ephemeral entities where live people articulate and interpret, gesticulate, perspire, and fretfully await the intervention of the discussant and audience. In most instances copies of the papers take the form of the proverbial hen's teeth — a difficulty that becomes compounded when it is acknowledged that the reviewer failed to attend each and every session. Naturally, this was to some extent unavoidable as different sessions ran concurrently and the selection process ran its inevitable course: "Struggle For Control" versus "Labour Force Patterns," "Industrial Conflict" versus "The State and the Worker," or "Class and Class Consciousness" versus "The Canadian Postal Worker." Taken together such factors make a somewhat subjective process even more personal. The reader of this review is forewarned.

The Third Conference on Blue Collar Workers and Their Communities can be assessed in two inter-related ways. The first involves a comparison of the Windsor conference with its 1977 London predecessor. At first glance such an exercise reveals what seems to be some striking similarities. Side by side both programs listed sessions centering on women, unemployment, primary production, class consciousness, and Quebec. (It is an unfortunate similarity that both conferences held the major sessions on Quebec on the last day.) Moreover, both conferences involved men and women from outside the academic community thereby allowing for more broad-based and informative discussions. And, finally, many authors in both conferences attempted suggestions for constructive and creative change along with the radical critique. Nevertheless, both conferences did not have equal value; a fact due mainly to a differing orientation that underlay all the nominal similarities.

The delineation of such differences begins by observing the "stretching" of the "blue collar" orientation of the Windsor conference. Due in part to complaints stemming from the London meetings, and in part from the increasingly obvious necessity to incorporate such an analysis into any examination of life in capitalist society, two sessions were scheduled on "Women and Trade Unions" and "Women Workers." Such stretching was evident in the latter of these two sessions but was also manifest in the former in which quite diverse papers were woven together into a carefully argued and highly constructive

comment/critique aimed at widening our understanding of the role of women to include the situations of women who work both outside *and* inside the home. Aside from the blatant necessity of such a perspective, the real intent of the critique was to point us in the direction of its implications. If the wife does work what effects does this have on the traditional relationships between the woman and the man within the family? What are the salient variables of this "double ghetto" for the active participation of women in trade unions? These are only two of the multitude of questions and difficulties — both theoretical and methodological — which spring from a perspective which rightly assumes the central and inter-related nature of work and family life in understanding the economic, social, cultural, and political attitudes and behaviour of women (and men) in the context of everyday life. Indeed, it was in this context that the movie, *With Banners and Babies*, proved most inspiring and refreshing. Chronicling the role of women in the 1930s strike wave in the American automobile industry, the film revealed not only the firm and active support of the wives and daughters of the striking autoworkers, but the reluctance on the part of their husbands and the union itself which the women had to overcome in order to express their support in the first place.

A second, somewhat less tangible, difference was associated with the location of the conference itself. London is a nice, clean, quiet city and the socialist transformation must reach into the offices of the many insurance companies that dot the cityscape as surely as it must percolate through the steel factories of Hamilton and the coal mines of Cape Breton and Vancouver Island. It seemed, however, that the Ford and Chrysler plants, coupled with the overwhelming working-class presence and character of the city, gave more immediacy to the tenor of the Windsor meeting. Indeed, it was appropriate that in a city where in 1945 the workers stood the gaff of the Ford Motor Company and won the Rand Formula (thus helping to pave the way for the victories of the 1946 strike wave) that many of the presentations dealt directly with working-class initiative and resistance. Gone were sessions concerned with "The Historical Integration of the Working Class" and "Workers' Participation — Job Enrichment," to be replaced with papers entertaining the "Struggle For Control" and "Industrial Conflict."

Naturally the choice of Windsor was not responsible for this shift in orientation. But neither was it simple coincidence. As the Canadian economy continues its precipitous decline and as the unemployment and inflation figures continue to climb, the Canadian working class is increasingly confronted with many of the same problems and issues thought solved during the years of World War II. It was during those years that many of the most significant and hard-fought battles were waged simply for the right to collective bargaining and union recognition. Present-day bank workers can readily attest to the obstacles they face in their efforts to organize as can an accelerating number of blue collar service sector workers who even after securing union recognition are stifled in efforts to secure a first contract by intransigent employers and the

complete indifference of the various levels of government to enforce the very laws they have passed. Thus, the conference in its own way articulated the most pressing problems of the current moment: how best to fight back? As such it was natural that the question of trade unions and trade unionism assumed a central place in the debates. This was particularly true in the session on "Industrial Conflict" which addressed the nature and role of trade unions as organs of resistance and workers' control in the early twentieth century to the more ambiguous and controversial stirrings and activities of industrial unions in the 1940s. How do we understand the formation of these unions? Were the aspirations and desires of the rank and file thwarted by a conservative and bureaucratic union leadership as some would have it; or, is the answer more complex, involving us in a real and honest attempt to comprehend the lives and aspirations of these men and women as they actually lived and expressed them. These are important historical questions which carry with them the added weight of contemporary relevance, especially given the recent overtures of the organized labour movement in the direction of tripartism; and, most particularly, the failure of the C.L.C. and its constituent unions to support C.U.P.W. in their struggles with the Federal Government.

This discussion leads to the second major way to analyze the Windsor conference: the question of relevance. The question of "what does this all mean anyway?" can be asked of any conference, but it is an especially sticky one for a conference on blue collar workers precisely because they have been and remain at the centre of the most viable and vital theories of social change. Thus, any discussion which addresses itself to the first must necessarily take up the second.

Given this tension between the need for theory and the necessity for practice, it was perhaps inevitable that the session on the "Canadian Working Class: Retrospect and Prospect," drew the most fire. Presenting papers on the contributions of economist H.C. Pentland to an understanding of the role of the Canadian working class in Canadian national development (G.S. Kealey), as well as on the evolution of working-class culture in the nineteenth century (Bryan Palmer), the participants were immediately asked about the relevance of such concerns to the on-going struggles of workers on the shop floor and the unemployed. Stripped of polemic it was an important question, one of the most significant of all that were posed over the period of the conference.

As I sat there I found myself in agreement with both sides of the argument. Yes, and importantly, there is a place and a need for academic or intellectual work; and yes, such work must both be relevant *and* accessible to the workers and the struggles they must wage. Once stated, however, we are still faced with the seemingly insurmountable problem of how to bring them together. Certainly the suggestion that the next meeting take more heed of this problem is solved in part by unions and workers themselves taking as active a role as possible not only in the presentations but in the actual formulation of the conference itself. But neither of these suggestions are easily accomplished. The division between manual and mental labour is an intrinsic and conditioning feature of capitalist

society, one developed most intensely at the point of production in what Harry Braverman has termed the "separation of conception from execution." Reappropriating this skill and this knowledge, consciously undermined by decades of management efforts to control the labour process, is a slow, painful process and although it is far from clear what contributions meetings and conferences of this nature ultimately can make, it is nonetheless evident that radical theory needs such gatherings to flourish just as the individuals involved can utilize them as a partial means to develop the cultural skills and self-confidence necessary to help construct a hegemonic working-class movement. It is absurdly obvious to remind ourselves that such transformations will not be in place by the convening of the next conference in Hamilton. Still, the bringing together of trade unionists, rank-and-file activists, sociologists, historians, and political economists is an important step in the preparations for what very well may be a return of the "turbulent years."