

## "Society for the Study of Labour History" An Anniversary Celebration, London, May 1980

Gerry Friesen

Volume 6, 1980

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t6cr02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Friesen, G. (1980). "Society for the Study of Labour History": An Anniversary Celebration, London, May 1980. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6, 177-180.

interested audience. The McGill conference was well organized and exceptionally well attended with nearly two hundred people at most sessions. In my view the conference was a great success, and although certain issues could have been discussed in greater depth, the range and quality of scholarship revealed bodes well for labour studies in the near future. If it was published as a collection of essays I would urge you to buy it.<sup>2</sup>

## ***"Society for the Study of Labour History:" An Anniversary Celebration, London, May 1980***

Gerry Friesen

THE ENGLISH SOCIETY marked the twentieth anniversary of its inaugural meeting by holding a conference "to examine labour history's present position and possible future developments" at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, on 31 May 1980. The president of the society, Sidney Pollard, in welcoming the audience, commented on the great changes that had taken place since 1960 when a mere handful of enthusiasts, many of them refugees from the Worker's Educational Association, had conceived of an organization to promote labour studies. He noted the continuing interest of some of those founders, including Eric Hobsbawm and Asa Briggs, and said he was delighted to note that labour history had since assumed a central place within the historical discipline.

The conference had three sessions. R.J. Morris, author of *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution*, addressed the classic topic of such meetings, "progress and prospects," and was followed by no fewer than six commentators. The plenary session then divided into special interest sub-groups, including politics and ideology, archives and museums, women, and trade unions. Finally, the group reconvened for papers and discussion on the topic of "What is the use of Labour History?" The sessions were marked by an informality that seemed both customary, gracious, and entirely in keeping with the subject matter; even when discussion became barbed, there was no sense of individual tension or personal crisis — that an outsider could discern at least — as is sometimes the case at our own gatherings. Rather, one had the impression that the participants were pursuing "truth," however they chose to define it. The audience of about 150 consisted of both professional scholars and interested laymen including a number of union members. It was a normal conference in most ways — the usual numbers of acute and less helpful comments from panelists and the audience, a wide range of political perspectives —

<sup>2</sup> [Editor's note: A selection of these papers will be published in *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981).]

and no doubt was only of mild interest to British habitués of the labour history scene, but to an outsider it provided an interesting introduction to the world of the British academic left.

Robert Morris had by far the most difficult task and, as a visitor from Scotland, little hope of a group of defenders. Rather than permit his commentators to arm in advance, he had the sense to ignore their entreaties for a copy of his paper and thus left the panel in the same position as the rest of us. His critics seemed little bothered by the lack of preparation, however, and handled his paper as vigorously as if they had been poring over it for some time.

Morris had been asked to survey the course of English labour history since 1960. The field had emerged as a distinct section of the discipline, separate from economic and political history, in the early 1960s, he suggested, and E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* was central to its achievement of maturity. As a consequence of Thompson's influence, class consciousness became a dominant theme in labour studies, as did class conflict or the development of class relationships. Morris argued that this emphasis tended to obscure the great areas of consensus between classes and to ignore loyalties such as sex, religion, age group, and ethnicity which cut across class lines. Thus, he suggested, a Whiggish inevitability pervaded the discussion of class development in England and resulted in a lack of attention to alternate claims on popular loyalty. Morris also argued that because labour specialists had been disappointed in economic history as a discipline, they had refused to pay attention to such "economic" aspects of their subject as feasible resource allocation and possible mechanisms of distribution; rather, labour historians have assumed the easy attainment of the best of all possible worlds, and have attributed a freedom of action to owners and managers that was never in fact enjoyed by the decision-makers. It is now time, Morris said, for sensible profit-and-loss accounts of strikes in which the open market is taken as an important constraint on the bargaining process. Morris argued, too, that scholars must pay close attention to the non-economic rewards of labour organization, especially the workers' defence of their hard-won skills. Finally, Morris suggested that historians have exaggerated the differences between the cultures of the working and middle class; such ideals as independence and respectability, for example, were shared by the two classes.

W.G. Runciman, the first commentator, took up the issue of the Marxist inclinations of labour historians, suggesting that they have been too much preoccupied with why England has failed to fit their preconceptions — that is, why it has failed to produce a class-based revolution. Referring to Anthony Giddens's work, *Class Structure in Advanced Society*, he suggested that workers actually collaborated in the creation of a stronger state.

John Foster, author of *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*, took a number of aggressive swings at the Morris offering, but his main theme seemed to be that the periodization of labour history, and thus of English history, had altered markedly in the last 20 years. He did not suggest what was new or old,

however, so his audience was left to divine his meaning.

Janet Blackman, a social historian, was not satisfied with Morris' discussion of inter-class consensus and argued that the crucial topic of attention must remain a study of how capital acted to structure society and to control it.

Barbara Taylor argued that Morris had missed an entire dimension in his paper by neglecting the influence of the domestic sphere upon the work place. The maintenance of domestic relations, she argued, can be more important than the work place in determining historical change: thus, if males insisted upon primacy as family breadwinners, and women were thereby excluded from certain roles in the economy, the pattern of subordination outside the factory would affect the relationship within it.

Sally Alexander, author of *St. Gile's Fair*, extended this argument in her comments by insisting that the labour-capitalist relationship was no more important than the internal family relationship as a topic of historical inquiry. Thus, in English labour history, the primacy of the concept of "craft" has worked to exclude women or to place them in a subordinate status.

E.P. Thompson began his commentary by noting that he had dropped out of historical study in recent times and that, at a moment when nuclear annihilation seemed entirely possible, these conferences might seem less than urgent. However, once launched, Thompson did indeed add to the discussion. Noting that highly-embattled social movements are not self-conscious, he suggested that we may have arrived at the end of an era and, thus, that our interest in labour history was one facet of a "nostalgia boom." He noted the recent debates about whether labour history had, since his book of 1963, become "sociologized," and suggested this was not a bad thing except that it would eventually lead to stasis. The key problem with his approach, he said, was that it put too little emphasis upon the place of power and the state. Thus, he asked his listeners to recall that the labour movement was, by its very nature, an oppositional force, a shelter or carrier for intellectual currents from anarchism to environmentalism that were from time to time important in political life. Finally, Thompson left his audience with the charming thought that they must never shrink from "friendly disagreements of a sharp kind."

In contrast to the lively discussion in the full session, the two workshops I attended (politics and trade unions), seemed far less spontaneous and creative. The one message of note was injected by Raphael Samuel, who lamented (to some degree) the Thompson influence on the course of labour history because it had taken attention away from the union as such. What is needed now, he argued, is study of union organization, of the relationship between union leadership and union members, of the social institution of the union which has resulted in a "workers' state within the state."

The final session on the use of labour history revolved around the topics of extension education and labour history societies. While the discussion was interesting, it was more important for listeners in the British Isles than for observers from overseas. Aside from the common complaints about Mrs.

Thatcher's cutbacks, which are seriously affecting labour studies and continuing education, the principal message was the need to communicate labour research to members of the unions and the general public.

The conference was a noteworthy land mark. It demonstrated that the number of people interested in the field was large, that the range of knowledge of English labour was vast, and that the ideological spectrum of the specialists was diverse. The strongest caucus, or viewpoint, expressed in the plenary sessions was that of the so-called "women's movement," especially as presented by Taylor and Alexander; it is clear that socialist historians whose attention is concentrated upon women's issues will exert a powerful influence upon labour history in the coming years. And the most common reference point in discussion, after Thompson and Hobsbawm, was the *History Workshop* collective. Its journal, its interest in the history of work processes, and in local and oral history of workers has obviously been an important source of vitality for labour history circles in London. The conference will have struck each participant differently, of course, but it seemed to me a celebration of past achievements as much as an introduction to the next decade of labour studies.

## *Procès-verbal de l'assemblée générale du Comité d'histoire des travailleurs canadiens tenues à Montréal le 5 juin 1980*

Jacques Rouillard, secrétaire

VINGT-CINQ MEMBRES du comité environ assistaient à l'assemblée présidée par A.E. LeBlanc. Le président R. McCormack et N. Stunden se sont excusés de n'être pas présents à la réunion.

- 1) Adoption du procès-verbal de l'assemblée du 4 juin 1979 (Saskatoon).  
Adopté à l'unanimité.

- 2) Rapport du président McCormack.

Le rapport écrit fait état de notre affiliation aux organisations internationales et relate ses efforts pour mettre sur pied la conférence du Commonwealth sur l'histoire des travailleurs. (Rapport adopté à l'unanimité).

- 3) Rapport du trésorier Kealey.

Le rapport financier pour 1979 montre des dépenses de \$17,307.80, avec un léger déficit de \$257.18. Le nombre d'abonnés à la revue qui a augmenté depuis l'an dernier se chiffre maintenant à 812. Tant que le Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines et sociales renouvellera sa subvention, l'avenir de la revue est assuré. (Le rapport est adopté à l'unanimité).