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A Note on the Toronto Printers' Strike, 1872

Robert H. Babcock

THE TORONTO PRINTERS' STRIKE of 1872 stands out as one of the most important events in Canadian labour history, and the story has already been told from several different perspectives. Two decades ago the biographers of Macdonald and Brown presented it from the viewpoint of their protagonists, while Bernard Ostry placed the episode in the context of Grit and Tory politics in the 1870s. More recently Sally Zerker has covered some of the same ground, but from the standpoint of the Toronto printers' union. John Battye treats the strike in relation to the Nine-Hours movement in central Canada, while Greg Kealey interprets it as part and parcel of an emergent working-class consciousness in the Queen City.¹

None of these authors has cited the letter reprinted below, a recollection by one of the major participants in the strike which was composed some 35 years after the event. John Armstrong, a leader of the Toronto Typographical Union and later president of the International Typographical Union, was closely affiliated with the Conservative party. After the strike he served as president of the Toronto Trades and Labour Council, and Macdonald appointed him in the 1880s to the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital. Still later he became secretary of the Ontario Labor Bureau, where he was working when this letter was written. He sent it to Edmund Bristol in response to a telegraphed request, but unfortunately the exact nature and purpose of Bristol's query is not known. Bristol, a well-known Toronto lawyer and Conservative party supporter, had succeeded E.F. Clarke as MP for the Toronto Centre riding in 1905.² Armstrong's letter to Bristol sheds some new light on details surrounding the strike, and, more importantly, lends weight to the conclusions of some interpreters, while undermining the arguments of others.

¹ D.G. Creighton, "George Brown, Sir John Macdonald, and the 'Workingman'," *Canadian Historical Review* 24 (1943), 362-76; J.M.S. Careless, *Brown of the Globe*, vol. 2, (1962), 287-99; B. Ostry, "Conservatives, Liberals, and Labour in the 1870's," *Canadian Historical Review* 41 (1960), 93-127; S.F. Zerker, "George Brown and the Printer's Union," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 10 (1975), 42-8; J. Battye, "The Nine Hour Pioneers: The Genesis of the Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 4 (1979), 25-56; G.S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980), 124-38.

² H.J. Morgan, compiler, *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (1912), 141.

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The letter supports contentions by Careless and Zerker that the printers stood in the forefront of the Nine-Hour movement in Toronto. It states flatly that they wanted shorter hours, not higher wages, thus undermining John Battye's recent assertion that they lacked cohesiveness and were interested in wages as well as hours. Nor does the letter support Battye's contention that Brown was an "easy target." Not only was the *Globe* owner the *eminence grise* behind the Master Printers' Association, but he went so far as to attempt to deny the striking printers access to legal counsel! No wonder, as Zerker writes, that the workers' anger at Brown stands out above all other features of the strike. After the printers' arrest on conspiracy charges, both sides appeared before Judge Macnabb with "an impressive array of learned counsel" (Careless), but only because of Armstrong's alertness in retaining a law firm. The letter also provides a motive for the breadth of Macnabb's decision by suggesting that the judge knew about Macdonald's bill at the time.

Did the Tories gain the good graces of workers as a result of the strike? Careless doubts it; Battye suggests that Toronto labour was being manipulated by Tory politicians in any case. Yet the fact that Armstrong saw Alexander Mackenzie meet with the Master Printers' Association in the basement of the Mechanic's Institute "on more than one occasion" helps explain both the depth of worker resentment and the means by which it was readily transferred from Brown to the whole Grit party. Kealey points out that the Tories went on to win two of Toronto's three seats in the next provincial election. Of course, the letter does not resolve the question of whether the episode illustrates an emergent class consciousness or merely political partisanship. But no one letter ever will.

Document

Handwritten letter from John Armstrong, Toronto, to Edmund Bristol, Esq., House of Commons, 7 February 1907, in Borden Papers, File Folder #167 (Trades and Labor Congress), Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa. Spelling and punctuation as in original.

Just received your telegram. The difficulty was in 1872 and *not* in 1892. The printers took the initiative for the shorter workday, commonly called in those days the "nine hour movement," viz., the Saturday afternoon holiday. The employing printers started an association to oppose this movement, which, all organized labor in Toronto was favorable to. The late Hon. Geo. Brown was the recognized head of this association. Big money was offered to the men in lieu of the short time. But it was Saturday afternoon holiday that was wanted and not an increase of wages. The master printers issued, a circular, signed by all the job offices and newspaper offices which had job offices attached, to them. The *Globe* paper had come in with its job office. The association of employers wouldn't arbitrate in the matter. Their meetings were held principally in basement of Mechanics' Institute, in Church and Adelaide streets. It was then dual representation in Canada. The late Hon. Alex. Mackenzie was Provincial Secretary in the Provincial Legislature, and also leader of the Opposition (Reform) at Ottawa. I saw him go into the masters' association in the Basement of the Mc. Institute

on more than one occasion, no doubt to encourage them by his presence. That was the opinion at that time; it was mine then, and is now. Late Detective P. Neil, of Ottawa, was employed by the Employing printers to get up a case against us. Evidence was procured, under the obsolete conspiracy Act, and, the late E.F. Clarke, myself and, 24 others were arrested. Of course we heard warrants were out, but not issued till a few days after a big labor parade. During this time the late Sir John Macdonald pushed through a bill in three days doing away with the conspiracy Act. The bill meant that any striker committing an overt act was tried, as an individual at common law. Hon. Alex. Mackenzie, leader of the Opposition, objected to the hasty passage of the bill, and desired it (I think he moved it) to be left over till next session. This didn't obtain. If it had been left over, hundreds of workmen would have remained in jail. We were taken to the Police Court from the old Police station under the old City Hall. McNab was magistrate; the late Kenneth McKenzie (afterwards Judge, and Judge Falconer was his senior clerk) was prosecuting lawyer, and Dr. McMichael was ours. Master Printers endeavored to procure every legal firm in the city. But I happened to have a retainer of \$25 booked with Cameron & McMichael, . . . minutes before bookkeeper of *Globe* came in to capture him also. Magistrate McNab said on that occasion he would accept bail for the prisoners, knowing that a bill was being passed at Ottawa to do away with the Conspiracy Act, and he had no doubt it would become retroactive to cover this case. We are still out on bail. The old *Leader* was the only paper that stood by us in the fight. Of course the *Mall* stated after the struggle commenced, but would not join against the strikers although asked to do so. It would take too long a time to get clippings from papers; but they must be on file in the library at Ottawa. The arrest took place about the latter [undecipherable] of April, or early in May, 1872. All the papers in the Province was full of it. The late Geo. Brown, and Alex MacKenzie were the recognized heads of the Reform Party in Ontario at that time I should judge. It would take a few days here to gather the facts; I would willingly do it, but I am winding up my report of the Bureau for the printers. But if you instructing me here to gather them I will tell [undecipherable] the short way to go about it. Hoping these few pointers may be of some benefit,

I remain

Respectfully yours

John Armstrong



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