

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 Bissonnette 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.