

## *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 Baillgeron 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