

OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

Farewell, Ed Finn: An Early *Labour/Le Travail* Board Member Who Used Critical Thought and Journalistic Skill to Expose Wrongdoing

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Courtesy of: The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

ED FINN DIED ON DECEMBER 27, 2020. Among his many roles in the labour movement and on the political left, he was a *Labour/Le Travail* board member. Those of us who knew him and worked with him, as well as the millions who read his prolific outpouring of critical thought, lament his passing. He was 94.

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The CBC summarized Finn as “a rabble-rousing union man, journalist and politician from Spaniard’s Bay, Newfoundland,” where Finn was born in 1926.¹ An autodidact, he had no formal academic training, but his straightforward analysis of the Canadian political scene won him a place on the *L/LT* board from 1977 to 1980. The journal was founded in 1976.

Finn began his 70-year career as a printer’s apprentice for his hometown newspaper, the Corner Brook *Western Star*, eventually becoming a reporter and editor. During the Newfoundland loggers’ strike of 1958–59, Finn defended the workers. Meanwhile, Premier Joey Smallwood backed management throughout the dispute. So did the newspaper. Rather than tow the anti-labour line, Finn quit the paper. Soon he and two friends launched a worker-friendly newspaper called *The Newfoundland Examiner*.

Politics interrupted his journalistic career when, incensed by the feisty Smallwood’s anti-worker premiership, Finn reluctantly became the first leader of the Newfoundland New Democratic Party. During his four years in the job he ran both provincially and federally. However, journalism again beckoned and he joined the staff of the *Montreal Gazette*.

In 1962, he worked with another NDP leader, Tommy Douglas, in promoting and defending Medicare. In 1963, Finn moved to Ottawa and took a job with the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport & General Workers (CBRT & GW, now part of Unifor). As editor of *Canadian Transport*, he guided it to many awards as the best labour newspaper in the country.

In 1968, in a surprise move, the *Toronto Star* gave Finn a labour column that served as a podium for his growing critical assessment of labour-management relations. He wrote his *Star* column until 1982, “upsetting labour and corporate leaders about equally along the way,” as a colleague noted.

Ed Finn was a truly principled man. He was honest, direct, and candid, and it did not always win him friends. He cared about people and spoke out against the suffering of others at the hands of exploiters and wrongdoers. He was a Catholic, but in another era he might have been seen as a Christian socialist.

He cared about the world and wanted it to be a kinder, fairer place. He was fearless in defence of the less fortunate. He could be ruthlessly frank if he saw an injustice being perpetrated. The same was true of violations of workers’ rights. For example, when CBRT support staff went on strike decades ago, he refused to cross the picket line. His support was invaluable, but it came with consequences.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) picked him up after he left his CBRT job, and what a great catch he was. An indefatigable writing machine, Finn was a practitioner of the hunt-and-peck method of typing and his two fingers flew over the keyboard. He had so much to say that he tightened the

1. “Legendary Labour Fighter Ed Finn, First Leader of NDP in N.L., Dies at 94,” CBC News, 29 December 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/ed-finn-obituary-1.5856364>.

margins on his typewriter so he could fit more words on each page. Then computers came along and solved that problem. Finn could write non-stop and his colleagues and readers were the beneficiaries of his output. (See his blog, *The Nonagenarian's Notebook* [<https://edfinn.ca>], for some of his recent opinions.)

At CUPE, he edited *The Facts*, a much-quoted journal. Later, readers awaited his insightful commentaries in *The Monitor*, the monthly newsletter of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), a union-backed think tank. It was at the CCPA that he re-established himself after he retired from CUPE in 1991, and he worked with CCPA into his 90s.

His keyboard never stopped humming. In fact, Finn was so anxious to move on to the next writing assignment that he often failed to file his work. He knew I was a habitual filer; so he would often visit my office to ask if I had a copy of an article he had written. I often did. His words were worth saving.

He was a clear-sighted analyst of the political scene and tolerated no nonsense from union leaders or politicians. He was a sophisticated thinker who had the journalist's knack of simplifying a complex event. I suspect it was Finn who coined the pithy slogan "Fairness – Not a Lot to Ask For," the all-purpose line that was printed on more than a few CUPE leaflets and advertisements. He was also a scholar of Roman history who studied every volume of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Finally, Finn was a storyteller who delighted everyone with his many tales of growing up in Newfoundland or his adventures with the labour movement. In *Ed Finn: A Journalist's Life on the Left* (2013), for example, he recalled his sister once asking him why he went to confession every Sunday: "I suppose you plan to invent and confess more fictitious sins?" He looked puzzled. "Look, Eddy," she said, "If every Catholic was like you instead of me, the Church would go out of business. Why do you think I swear so damn much?"

In November 2020, the Canadian government recognized Finn's salutary contribution to Canadian society when it awarded him the Order of Canada "for his lifelong contributions to Canada's political discourse as a trade unionist, journalist, writer and politician." It was a well-deserved honour to a man who devoted himself to the service of the rest of us. He made a difference in my life and that of countless others.