

## ARTICLE

# Let Us Rise: Dialectical Thinking, the Commodification of Labour Power, and the Legacy of the Socialist Party of Canada

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**Abstract:** Members of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) played a prominent role in the labour revolt of 1919, the One Big Union, and the Winnipeg General Strike. The “failure” of all three has led labour historians to focus on the inability of the party to connect with Canadian workers, an inability fuelled by dogmatism, “impossibilism,” and the exclusion of women and workers of colour. This article turns this approach on its head, pointing out that these events have been unequalled in Canadian history, and seeks to explain why this should be so. It challenges the perception of the party as being wed to evolutionary thinking that caused its members to wait around for the revolution to happen. Instead, it reveals the powerful influence of the dialectical method developed by G. W. F. Hegel; its focus on human action was the philosophical underpinning of the SPC’s relentless attack on the wage system and the capitalist system’s commodification of labour power. Far from being “metaphysical” or “otherworldly,” the SPC’s insistence that workers must gain control of the product of their own labour spoke directly to them, including women and workers of colour. In the creation of the One Big Union, in the solidarity of the Winnipeg General Strike, and in the promise of the labour revolt of 1919, we find the legacy of a party committed to workers rising up.

**Keywords:** dialectic, labour, commodification, Marxism, impossibilism, class, evolution, revolution, women, race

**Résumé :** Les membres du Parti socialiste du Canada ont joué un rôle de premier plan dans la révolte ouvrière de 1919, le One Big Union, et la grève générale de Winnipeg. «L'échec» des trois a conduit les historiens du travail à se concentrer sur l'incapacité du parti à établir des liens avec les travailleurs canadiens, une incapacité alimentée par le dogmatisme, « l'impossibilisme » et l'exclusion des femmes et des travailleurs de couleur. Cet article renverse cette approche en soulignant que ces événements ont été sans égal dans l'histoire du Canada, et cherche à expliquer pourquoi il devrait en être ainsi. Il remet en question la perception du parti comme étant marié à une pensée évolutionniste qui a poussé ses membres à attendre que la révolution se produise. Au contraire, il révèle la puissante influence de la méthode dialectique développée par G. W. F. Hegel; sa focalisation sur l'action humaine était le fondement philosophique de l'attaque incessante du Parti socialiste du Canada contre le système salarial et la marchandisation de la force de travail par le système capitaliste. Loin d'être «métaphysique» ou «d'un autre monde», l'insistance du Parti socialiste du Canada pour que les travailleurs

doivent prendre le contrôle du produit de leur propre travail s'adresse directement à eux, y compris aux femmes et aux travailleurs de couleur. Dans la création du One Big Union, dans la solidarité de la grève générale de Winnipeg, et dans la promesse de la révolte ouvrière de 1919, nous trouvons l'héritage d'un parti engagé envers les travailleurs qui se soulèvent.

**Mots-clés :** dialectique, travail, marchandisation, marxisme, impossibilisme, classes sociales, évolution, révolution, femmes, races

IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES of the 20th century, Marxism was the leading socialist tendency in the British Columbia labour movement. It was firmly entrenched in the coal mines of Alberta and Nova Scotia and in the railway shops of Winnipeg and Montréal. In the Ukrainian, Jewish, and Finnish left-wing organizations in many Canadian cities, both large and small, Marxism and socialism were virtually synonymous. Socialist locals in Dawson City, Yukon; Cobalt, Ontario; and St. John, New Brunswick, made Marxian socialism a national phenomenon.

From its founding in 1905 until the formation of the Workers' (Communist) Party of Canada in 1921, the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) was the leading exponent of Marxism in the country.<sup>1</sup> It was no small accomplishment, given that the party had between 2,000 and 3,000 members on the eve of World War I.<sup>2</sup> The size of the party has made it possible to pronounce Marxism "largely irrelevant within the Canadian political milieu."<sup>3</sup> The emphasis the SPC placed on educating the Canadian working class in Marxist theory made Marxism's main exponent equally so, leading to dismissals of the party as otherworldly and out of touch with the political culture in which it had its being.

In contrast, this article focuses on the ways in which the message of the SPC spoke to the Canadian working class. There was nothing otherworldly about the party's attack on the wage system, its message that workers should control the product of their own labour. By making the Socialist Party's critique of the commodification of labour power our central concern, we open up new ways of seeing the SPC's relationship with the Canadian working class, including women workers and workers of colour. In the process, we gain a greater appreciation of the ways in which the efforts of these proletarian philosophers had a real-world impact.

Given that many prominent members of the Socialist Party were born and grew up in Great Britain, it is important to situate the critique of the scholasticism of the party in the context of the transatlantic, English-speaking

1. The decision to form the Socialist Party of Canada was made in December 1904, but the SPC itself gave the founding year as 1905.

2. Martin Robin places SPC membership at 2,000 in August 1913, while Ian Angus puts the figure at 3,000 in 1914. See Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labor* (Kingston: Queen's University, 1968), 113; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks* (Montréal: Vanguard, 1981), 3.

3. Ken McNaught, "Socialism and the Canadian Political Tradition," in Sandra Djwa & R. St. J. Macdonald, eds., *On F. R. Scott: Essays on His Contributions to Law, Literature, and Politics* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 90.

world. Stuart MacIntyre, writing about the “working-class philosophical tradition” in Great Britain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, claims that this tradition’s thinking was “non-empiricist, metaphysical, systematic and highly dogmatic.”<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre, a former member of the Communist Party of Australia, a writer who without a hint of irony calls Marxism a “faith,” puts into sharp relief the difficulty of digging Marxian socialists of this generation out from under accumulated decades of misrepresentation and contempt.<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Rée begins his examination of these “proletarian philosophers” by declaring that their hopes “became perplexed, derided, and stifled; and finally, so far as I can see, utterly defeated.” He ends his story with the declaration that “the aspirations of the proletarian philosophers have been annihilated.”<sup>6</sup>

In a similar vein, the Socialist Party of Canada has been declared sectarian and sterile, dogmatic and doctrinaire. The template was set in the 1960s when Martin Robin described the SPC as a “dogmatic sect spreading the light of pure Marxism in the Valley of the Heathen.”<sup>7</sup> They were the exponents of a metaphysical worldview, men and women who turned socialism into a secular faith.<sup>8</sup> Marxian socialists dealt with the failure of so many workers to see the “truth” by turning the “science” of socialism into “a source of unchallengeable authority, like religion.”<sup>9</sup> In the process of rejecting one god they embraced another, advancing the inevitability of class struggle leading to the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of a socialist society. They espoused a secular religion, replete with unchallengeable orthodoxies. As a result, Desmond Morton claims, they were “as immune as they could make themselves to the contradictory and confusing events of their own time.”<sup>10</sup>

4. Stuart MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917 to 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 128–29.

5. MacIntyre, 129.

6. Jonathan Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 5, 132.

7. Robin, *Radical Politics*, 275.

8. Ross A. Johnson, “No Compromise – No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia” (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 1975); Gerald Friesen, “‘Yours in Revolt’: The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labor Movement,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976): 139–157; Ross A. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899–1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Peter Campbell, *Canadian Marxists and the Search for a Third Way* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999); Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008); Peter E. Newell, *The Impossibilists: A Brief Profile of the Socialist Party of Canada* (London: Athena Press, 2008); David Buchanan, “Yours for the Revolution: Communication and Identity in the Western Clarion,” *English Studies in Canada* 41, 2–3 (2015): 133–164.

9. Clifford D. Conner, *A People’s History of Science: Miners, Midwives, and “Low Mechanics”* (New York: Nation Books, 2005), 13.

10. Desmond Morton with Terry Copp, *Working People* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1980), 93.

In more recent times, Ian McKay has made a major effort to rescue the Marxian socialists of this generation from the slings and arrows of their critics. In *Reasoning Otherwise*, McKay seeks to abandon judgement, understand the Marxian socialists of the turn of the 20th century on their own terms, and set us on the road to reinventing the left in the 21st century.<sup>11</sup> McKay defines what he calls the “first formation” of Canadian leftists as “a school of socialists who saw their movement as a practical science of social transformation founded upon the insights of evolutionary theory.” It “offered a way of identifying, organizing around, and ultimately transforming the concrete, real-world problems it encountered by situating them within an all-embracing evolutionary theory.” It must be acknowledged, however, that McKay does not characterize Marxian socialists as blind adherents of Darwin’s theory of evolution, pointing out that many first-formation socialists were “acutely aware of the complexities of evolutionary theory.” They were characterized not by “a heedless embrace of natural selection and biological determinism, but a more judicious attempt to weave themes from evolutionary theory and revolutionary politics together.”<sup>12</sup>

The weakness in McKay’s approach is that he unintentionally perpetuates the stereotype of Marxian socialists as metaphysicians, arguing that they situated “real-world” problems within evolutionary theory rather than using the insights of evolutionary theory to deal with real-world problems. D. G. McKenzie, SPC secretary and editor of the party’s paper *The Western Clarion* from 1908 to 1911, argued in 1910 that party members had taken up the dialectic “whose watchwords are experiment and observation.”<sup>13</sup> More than a decade later F. J. McNey observed that it “is by observation, experiment, and comparison, that we arrive at all our knowledge.”<sup>14</sup> Alf Budden stated simply, “The dialectic will enable us to reach the truth.”<sup>15</sup>

We cannot understand either the SPC’s evolutionary theory or its revolutionary politics without appreciating the impact of G. W. F. Hegel and dialectical thinking.<sup>16</sup> We need to begin, as Bertell Ollman points out, by recognizing

11. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 10–11.

12. McKay, 29, 118, 70, 76.

13. D. G. McKenzie, “Are We Anti-Christian?,” *Western Clarion*, 12 February 1910. Donald George McKenzie was born in India, likely in 1876. He succeeded E. T. Kingsley as editor of the *Western Clarion* in 1908 and resigned in 1911. He worked as a clerk from 1912 to 1914 and then managed a fox farm in Port Alberni until his death on 11 January 1918. See John Harrington, “A Tribute,” *Western Clarion*, February 1918.

14. F. J. McNey, “Dialectics,” *Western Clarion*, 2 January 1922.

15. Alf Budden, “A Prosperous Year,” *Western Clarion*, 9 December 1911.

16. I can do no better, given the voluminous writing on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) and his ideas, than to refer the reader to the Marxists Internet Archive (<https://www.marxists.org/>). Significant influences on my own thinking include Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003);

that dialectics “is not a rock-ribbed triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis that serves as an all-purpose explanation; nor does it provide a formula that enables us to prove or predict anything; nor is it the motor force of history.”<sup>17</sup> For generations, this mistaken understanding of Hegel’s dialectic has allowed anti-Marxists to ask the supposedly devastating question: If feudalism is the thesis, and capitalism the antithesis, why does the dialectic stop with communism, the emerging synthesis? Why is communism not the thesis of a new dialectic?

The answer, in the case of the SPC, is that its members never understood the dialectic in this way; for them, it was simply an affirmation of the power of human action, and recognition that the only constant is change. The dialectic was the wellspring of a materialist conception of history that, in the words of Friedrich Engels, “absolutely excludes the intervention of action from without” the natural world. In our “evolutionary conception of the universe,” Engels argues, “there is absolutely no room for either a creator or a ruler.”<sup>18</sup> Building on Engels’ message, Toronto SPCer Frank Wilkinson set out the party’s core definition of the materialist conception of history when he wrote that “we accept the universality of the law of cause and effect; that every occurrence, every event has a tangible cause and can be explained from within not from without the material universe.”<sup>19</sup> As Bill Pritchard observed, “the agency of the divine hand in social development” had been replaced by man as “a conscious factor in the changing of conditions.”<sup>20</sup>

For SPC members, changing conditions meant one thing: overthrowing the capitalist system. Workers needed to understand that a small minority of capitalists owned the means of production and controlled – indeed, enslaved – the great majority of wage workers. At the end of the day, the only struggle that really mattered was the class struggle. In 1977 Ross McCormack set the interpretive template by arguing that the socialism of the SPC “was impossibilism.”<sup>21</sup> The Socialist Party of Canada was “impossibilist” because it rejected reforms that steered workers away from the main task and delayed the overthrowing of the capitalist system.<sup>22</sup> Workers and their unions struggling

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David McGregor, *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

17. Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, 12.

18. Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880; New York: International Publishers, 1985), 13.

19. Frank Wilkinson, “An Important Question in the Philosophy of Socialism,” *Western Clarion*, 3 December 1910.

20. William A. Pritchard, “Our Function in the Light of Historical Materialism,” *Western Clarion*, November 1916.

21. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 53.

22. Ian McKay provides an insightful analysis of the problems with using the term “impossibilist” in a pejorative manner; see McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 543–544n188.

for better wages and working conditions advanced the cause of reform, not revolution. Attempts at reform involved tinkering with effects, not eradicating the cause. It meant engaging in the commodity struggle, not the class struggle.

The irony is that the continual attacks on advocates of the commodity struggle in the Socialist Party of Canada is, in and of itself, the evidence that not all members of the party were impossibilists. Given that more than half of the SPC's members belonged to trade unions, it means that they were involved, in one capacity or another and on a daily basis, in the commodity struggle.<sup>23</sup> They rubbed shoulders with workers who had more immediate things to think about than the revolution – holding onto their jobs and feeding their families. The SPC's message to them could not afford to be metaphysical, utopian, or divorced from their everyday experience; it had to speak to their immediate situation. There was nothing metaphysical about the core message of the SPC to the workers of Canada: the capitalist system was based in the commodification of their labour power.

Addressing the striking workers of Vancouver in June 1919, "C.K." argued that the immediate issue of the general strike wave was collective bargaining but that "the struggle" was of much greater significance than a fight over wages and working conditions. C.K. observed that "this is working-class solidarity of a scope that has never before been equaled" in Canada.<sup>24</sup> It has not been equalled since. The big unanswered question is simply this: If the members of the SPC were so metaphysical, so detached from the world in which they lived, how did this happen? How did the party speak to the immediate situation of thousands of workers who were not members of the party, if it was so divorced from their day-to-day struggles?

We can begin to understand the leading role the Socialist Party of Canada played in the creation of the One Big Union (OBU), the Winnipeg General Strike, and the labour revolt of 1919 by realizing that impossibilism was a political stance taken by some leading party spokespersons and not the party's philosophy, which was the dialectical method.<sup>25</sup> In order to appreciate the legacy of the SPC, we need to reconstruct its intellectual universe, beginning with its understanding of the rise of industrial capitalism and the impact it had on making the shift from metaphysical to dialectical thinking. We need to gain an appreciation of the ways in which dialectical thinking fostered a belief in the power of human activity, to provide a counterbalance to claims that the

23. Bryan Palmer states that "as much as 75 per cent" of members were trade unionists, while Ross McCormack gives a figure of 60 to 90 per cent. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 183; McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 55–56.

24. C.K., "What Means This Strike?," *The Red Flag*, 14 June 1919.

25. On the context, meaning, and significance of the labour revolt of 1919, see Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labor Revolt," *Labor/Le Travail* 13 (1984): 11–44; Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

SPC was sitting around waiting for the revolution to happen. Then, in order to explain the impact of the SPC on the labour revolt of 1919, we need to look in some detail at the debate that played out from the party's beginning to the Winnipeg General Strike, the conflict between advocates of the commodity struggle and advocates of the class struggle. Out of the dialectical relationship between the commodity struggle and the class struggle emerged the Socialist Party's key role in the moment that was 1919.

In order to change existing perceptions of the SPC we need to begin with the development of Marxist thought in the 19th century. The widespread perception, even among Marxists, has been that Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx developed a "scientific socialism" that relegated the "utopian" socialism of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon to the dustbin of history.<sup>26</sup> Engels and Marx were part of the late-19th- and early-20th-century shift in Western thought from the philosophical tradition to the age of social science.<sup>27</sup> The case for this, at first glance, seems incontrovertible. In his preface to the first German edition of Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Engels suggests that "in trouncing Proudhon," Marx has broken all ties to the philosophers.<sup>28</sup>

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which McKay describes as "the Bible of the first formation" of Canada's Marxian socialists, Engels seemingly drives the last nail into the coffin of the philosophers and utopian socialists.<sup>29</sup> Published in English translation in 1892, the work is an abridged and reworked version of his earlier work *Anti-Dühring*. What SPC members thought of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* cannot be inferred from later characterizations such as Rée's dismissal of *Anti-Dühring* as "ponderous and cantankerous."<sup>30</sup> Pritchard, editor of the Socialist Party's *Western Clarion* newspaper from 1914 to 1917, called *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* a "masterly little work."<sup>31</sup>

In his 2008 book, *Reasoning Otherwise*, McKay portrays *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* as a thoroughly Darwinian work, quoting historian David Stack to the effect that Darwinism formed the foundation for the politics of Canada's

26. Major influences on my understanding of Robert Owen include J. F. C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America: Quest for the New Moral World* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969); Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993). On Charles Fourier, see Alexander Gray, *The Socialist Tradition: Moses to Lenin* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947); Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Teachings of Charles Fourier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). On Proudhon, see Alan Ritter, *The Political Thought of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

27. H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 25.

28. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847; New York: International Publishers, 1963), 7.

29. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 56.

30. Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers*, 1.

31. William A. Pritchard, "The Philosophy and Policy of a Revolutionary Party," *Western Clarion*, 16 December 1911.

Marxian socialism. Their “scientific language,” McKay argues, was largely drawn from Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer.<sup>32</sup> The linking of Engels and Darwin is not wrong, but it is one-sided. Understanding the politics of the Socialist Party of Canada involves rereading Engels and appreciating the powerful impact of Hegelian dialectics on his thinking. Engels’ approach in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* emerges out of his belief that Hegel developed an evolutionary theory in philosophical thought that preceded Darwin’s theory of evolution.

The Hegelian influence in the work of Engels is immediately apparent, beginning with the fact that a section on dialectical thinking precedes the section on the materialist conception of history. Engels was not just a dialectician but a historian of dialectics as well, arguing that the dialectic was first formulated by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who observed that “everything is and is not, for everything is fluid, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away.”<sup>33</sup> In spite of his attack on utopian socialists, Engels recognizes Fourier’s contribution to the school of dialectics, praising him as one who “uses the dialectic method in the same masterly way as his contemporary, Hegel.”<sup>34</sup> On the basis of the dialectic method, Engels argues, Hegel put an end to thinking in terms of an immutable God. Hegel replaced metaphysics, thinking beyond the material, with dialectics.

The reading of a lesser-known Engels work, *Dialectics of Nature*, reveals the fundamental problem with making too much of Canada’s early Marxian socialists basing their theory of social evolution on the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer – that is, on biological analogies. Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature* was not available in English translation until 1940, so was not a direct influence on the thinking of SPC members.<sup>35</sup> It was written in the 1870s, the same period as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and contains a striking refutation of the claim that it is a Darwinian, cosmic evolutionary text.<sup>36</sup> Engels argues that “the whole Darwinian theory of the struggle for life is simply the transference from society to organic nature of Hobbes’ theory of *bellum*

32. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 41, 56. Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), English philosopher, sociologist, and biologist, was one of the English-speaking world’s most influential thinkers in the late-19th century. Most famous for coining the phrase “survival of the fittest,” Spencer’s social Darwinism is widely condemned on the contemporary left as proto-fascist. In the World War I period, Marxian socialists were drawn to Spencer’s magisterial theory of evolution, his critique of patriotism and militarism, and his belief that war was becoming increasingly dysfunctional. For a critique of McKay’s reliance on Spencer’s influence, see Bryan D. Palmer, “Radical Reasoning,” *Underhill Review* (Fall 2009): 14–16.

33. Engels, *Socialism*, 45.

34. Engels, 39.

35. Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers*, 1, 134n4.

36. Ian McKay locates *Dialectics of Nature*, the title notwithstanding, firmly within the Darwinian, cosmic evolutionary school. See McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 56.



*omnium contra omnes*, and of the bourgeois economic theory of competition, as well as the Malthusian theory of population.” Engels points out that “it is very easy to transfer these theories back again from natural history to the history of society, and altogether too naive to maintain that thereby these assertions have been proved as eternal natural laws of society.”<sup>37</sup>

Members of the SPC may not have been reading *Dialectics of Nature*, but they got the message. D. G. McKenzie recognized that arguing from biological analogies and Darwinian evolutionary theory was employed by socialist reformers to justify reform and condemn revolution. McKenzie rejected British labour leader Ramsay MacDonald’s argument that human society is evolving harmoniously with “revolutions and such like unpleasantness entirely eliminated. All this is done by a most learned and plausible chain of reasoning from biological analogies, which are none too safe to reason from at any time.”<sup>38</sup> As Bryan Palmer points out, McKay’s “reconnaissance” approach to the history of the Canadian left lends itself to the misrepresentation and obfuscation of critical distinctions that enrich our understanding of particular left tendencies.<sup>39</sup>

McKenzie’s critique of arguing from biological analogies does not change the fact that scientific socialists, the advocates of real, positive science, needed a sense of certainty in a socialist future. Darwin’s theories of nature gave Engels a response to Fourier’s position that every historical period “has its period of ascent and also its period of descent.”<sup>40</sup> Nature, Engels argues, “does not move in the eternal oneness of a perpetually recurring circle, but goes through a real historical evolution.” For him, that evolution involved working-class people understanding that class struggle led to the “inevitable downfall” of the capitalist system and the creation of a socialist society.<sup>41</sup> For that to happen, dialectics had to replace metaphysics; purposive human action had to replace the unseen hand. What has been overlooked is that Engels argued that Darwin dealt “the heaviest blow” to the metaphysical conception of “nature.”<sup>42</sup> Hegel remained indispensable to Canada’s Marxian socialists because it was he who dealt the heaviest blow to the metaphysical conception of human society.

Unlike so many thinkers and writers around the world, including Marxists, members of the SPC understood Engels and interpreted him correctly. There is no doubting the influence of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* on John Harrington, who argued that “Hegel, like old Heraclitus, taught that forms do not exist for all time, but constantly change.”<sup>43</sup> Fixity belonged to the era

37. Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (1883; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1946), 208–209.

38. D. G. McKenzie, “A Three Horned Organism,” *Western Clarion*, 20 August 1910.

39. Palmer, “Radical Reasoning,” 10–11.

40. Engels, *Socialism*, 39.

41. Engels, 48, 52.

42. Engels, 48.

43. John Harrington, “Marx and Hegel,” *Western Clarion*, 1 January 1910.

of religious faith and metaphysical reasoning; fluidity characterized the era of dialectical thinking. Even the archetypal Darwinian Herbert Spencer was considered a Hegelian in the SPC because he “taught the world that our social institutions are fluid and not fixed.”<sup>44</sup> As Edward Thompson points out, the analogies of natural science in the 19th century “were, at least, analogies derived not from structure but from process,” even though they were at times improperly applied to human society.<sup>45</sup>

McKay’s good intentions notwithstanding, the Socialist Party’s emphasis on process, on change, on fluidity, gets lost in his positing of the cosmic, evolutionary worldview derived from Darwin and Spencer. Being a “scientific socialist” was not anchored in biological analogies; it was anchored in recognizing the transitory nature of all seemingly fixed states of being and understanding that the only law is the law of change itself.<sup>46</sup> McKay’s mistake is based in a false dichotomization of the philosophical tradition, of the age of Hegel, Fourier, and Proudhon and the age of natural, scientific, or positive science that supposedly replaced it. We have come to associate the SPC’s thinking on evolution with the latter, when it actually emerges from the former. Harrington argued that “Hegel dealt the death blow to the metaphysical form of reasoning by introducing evolution into philosophy.”<sup>47</sup> Charles Lestor, his disagreements with Harrington notwithstanding, agreed that it was Hegel who developed the “evolutionary method of reasoning.”<sup>48</sup>

For members of the Socialist Party, the evolutionary method of reasoning replaced the metaphysical method of reasoning. The problem was that they were living in a society founded on metaphysical reasoning, a society that educated workers to think metaphysically. Religion was in the way of getting the

44. Peter T. Leckie, “Materialist Interpretation of History for Beginners,” *Western Clarion*, 1 October 1920.

45. Edward Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 109.

46. J. Stewart cites Hegel to the effect that “nothing is, everything is becoming.” Stewart, “The Changing Order,” *Western Clarion*, 23 April 1910.

47. Harrington, “Marx and Hegel.” John David Harrington (born 30 June 1879, died 7 May 1970) worked as a freight inspector with BC Electric.

48. Charles Lestor, “As to Marx and Hegel,” *Western Clarion*, 15 January 1910. Charles Lestor died in London, England, at 80 years of age in December 1952. A legendary speaker, a master of “outdoor propaganda,” the corner where he held forth in downtown Vancouver became known as Lestor’s Corner. In the late 1920s he moved to Winnipeg to become editor of the *One Big Union Bulletin*. He left for England in 1934 where, as a member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, he educated a new generation in Marxian economics. *The Western Socialist* (March–April 1953); *The Socialist Standard* (January 1953). His daughter Joan was a British Labour Party MP (1966–83, 1987–97) and outspoken defender of the rights of children, unwed mothers, and abandoned wives. Her fierce opposition to apartheid earned her the nickname “The African Queen.” See Sarah Lyall, “Joan Lestor, 66, a Crusader in Britain for Children’s Rights,” *New York Times*, 1 April 1998.

party's message to the workers, and for this it had to be attacked. In that sense, religion was not unlike the trade unions; both served a purpose, but at the same time both impeded the realization of the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system. As "Gourock" noted, a doctrine that preaches "that one and all should content themselves with the position in life in which God has been pleased to place them, is diametrically opposed to revolution in any form."<sup>49</sup> Trade unions, in a sense, performed the same role as religion.

As editor of the *Western Clarion* from 1908 to 1911, McKenzie argued that the SPC attacked Christianity "on the same grounds and in the same manner as it would attack any other institution which it caught in the act of upholding capitalism and misleading the worker."<sup>50</sup> At the same time, he stated that "anyone writing to the *Clarion* merely with a view to attacking religion, is not likely to see his attack in print."<sup>51</sup> Another party "impossibilist," Alberta farmer Alf Budden, argued in November 1911 that attacking "the Christian Socialist ... is not doing propaganda work, 'tis but an ostentatious display of our own mental sterility, for is not wrong, right? and right, wrong?"<sup>52</sup> McKenzie agreed, claiming that "it is no part of the policy of the Socialist Party of Canada to go out of its way to attack religion, and we deny that it is the practice of the party's organizers or of its organ."<sup>53</sup>

McKenzie was whistling past the graveyard. Even Budden, in an article revealingly entitled "Dare to be a Dogmatist," declared that endorsing the class struggle is "death to all known forms of religion."<sup>54</sup> McKenzie was able to pursue the dialectical method in the pages of the *Clarion*, but he had no real control over the SPC's spokespersons. In the fall of 1910, the Socialist Party was embroiled in controversy when Moses Baritz, a secular British Jew speaking on behalf of the party, claimed that a socialist could not be a Christian and a Christian could not be a socialist.<sup>55</sup> As McKay points out, Baritz's claim became a cause célèbre in the *Toronto Globe* in September 1910.<sup>56</sup> Then, at a meeting of the Ottawa SPC local in early October 1910, Baritz repeated his claim that "a Christian cannot be a Socialist, and a Socialist cannot be a believer in Christ or God."<sup>57</sup> Baritz was adamant that religious believers,

49. Gourock, "Socialism and Religion," *Western Clarion*, 22 May 1909.

50. D. G. McKenzie, "Christian Socialism," *Western Clarion*, 15 May 1909.

51. D. G. McKenzie, "Answers," *Western Clarion*, 29 May 1909.

52. A. Budden, "Keep to Your Task: Analyze and Expose the System – Don't Waste Time on Particular Organizations," *Western Clarion*, 18 November 1911.

53. McKenzie, "Christian Socialism."

54. Alf Budden, "Dare to Be a Dogmatist," *Western Clarion*, 12 February 1910.

55. Baritz was a member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain.

56. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 251–253.

57. "Ottawa, Ont.," *Western Clarion*, 5 November 1910. At least one member of the Ottawa

including Jews as well as Buddhists and Muslims, should not be members of the Socialist Party.<sup>58</sup>

Having acknowledged the hostility of some SPC spokespersons, we need to remain dialectical thinkers ourselves and recognize the negation of the negation. The Anglo-Celtic Protestant Henry Harvey Stuart, a Methodist lay preacher from Newcastle, New Brunswick, argued that not only the Jew “should be welcomed to our party” but also “the enlightened and honest Mohammedan, Buddhist or Agnostic” who believes “in our political program.”<sup>59</sup> Stuart, the Anglo-Celtic Protestant, welcomed Jews into the Socialist Party while Baritz, the secular Jew, wanted to keep them out.<sup>60</sup>

The perception of Socialist Party members as intolerant and dogmatic on the religious question has left little room for an appreciation of debate and dissent within the organization. A significant, meaningful example of this occurred in 1915, when the SPC, contradicting dialectical thinking, hardened its stand on religion. In June 1915 the *Western Clarion* declared that the party’s “laxity” on the religious question had to end, and it was resolved that the SPC adopt the position set out in the Socialist Party of Great Britain’s pamphlet *Socialism and Religion*.<sup>61</sup> The change was spearheaded by Bill Pritchard and Jack McDonald, and opposed by J. H. Burrough, who preceded Pritchard as editor of the *Western Clarion* and trained him. Burrough was the author of a 1912 SPC pamphlet entitled *Religion Thy Name Is Superstition* that, as McKay points out, was replete with hyperbolic denunciations of religious believers.<sup>62</sup> Yet it was Burrough who, three years later, was to charge that the change in the SPC’s position on religion had not been submitted to party members for discussion and a vote and was therefore “not binding upon our organisers and lecturers.” Arguing like a good dialectical thinker, Burrough pointed out that a “non-religious, irreligious or anti-religious working class is not necessarily class conscious and revolutionary.”<sup>63</sup>

In the summer of 1912 the *Western Clarion* published an article entitled “That Is Why.” Likely written by Burrough, it argued that “any cause that fears attack cannot be founded upon the bedrock of truth.”<sup>64</sup> The author was asking

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local resigned because of Baritz’s position.

58. Robert Barltrop points out that Baritz was even feared by his friends for his “rabid, conscienceless attacks.” See Barltrop, *The Monument: The Story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1975), 41.

59. H. H. Stuart, “Christianity and Socialism,” *Western Clarion*, 22 October 1910.

60. On Stuart, see James K. Chapman, “Henry Harvey Stuart (1873–1952): New Brunswick Reformer,” *Acadiensis* 5, 2 (Spring 1976): 79–104.

61. See Newell, *The Impossibilists*, 95–101.

62. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 243, 244, 246.

63. Burrough, “Re Religion,” *Western Clarion*, August 1915.

64. “That Is Why,” *Western Clarion*, 24 August 1912.

why Christians would fear being attacked, given their belief that Christianity was the truth. Burrough and like-minded sPCers stood for a now-discredited philosophy on the left, that truth is dialectical. It emerges from the conflict of ideas, and even Christians in the sPC recognized the principle; on occasion, they even came to the defence of the “impossibilists.” Reverend A. F. Cobb of Okotoks, Alberta, encouraged sPCers to continue their attacks on professed Christians who stood “with the oppressor and against the oppressed.”<sup>65</sup> Another Christian sPcer, R. G. Grey, argued that an atheist “who works for Socialism is doing his duty to his neighbor better than the professed Christian who ‘passes by on the other side.’”<sup>66</sup> A week later the *Clarion* observed, “Comrade R.G. Grey, of Saturna Island, B. C., just to show that the Christianity discussion hasn’t made him very mad at Mc, drops in with \$2.50 for *Clarion* maintenance and an equal amount for free speech.”<sup>67</sup>

It is this dialectical back-and-forth, not dogmatism and impossibilism, that is our key to understanding the role the sPC played in the creation of the One Big Union, the Winnipeg General Strike, and the labour revolt of 1919. The central debate in the sPC, the one we can chronicle from the founding of the party to 1919, is the one seemingly opposing the commodity struggle and the class struggle. It is an opposition in appearance only, because we must see it in terms of a key dialectical principle, the interpenetration of opposites. The leading role that sPC members played in 20th-century Canada’s most important moment of working-class revolt evolved out of almost fifteen years of dialectical back-and-forth.

At the heart of the sPC’s existence were the educational efforts to get workers to understand the way in which the capitalist system commodified their labour power. The working class becoming a class *for itself*, consciously and actively engaged in the pursuit of its own interests, requires knowledge and understanding of the capitalist system and the place of the workers in it, that is, that their labour power is a commodity. The *Western Clarion*, under the guidance of E. T. Kingsley, went to great lengths to get readers to understand that capitalist property makes labour power “a commodity bought and sold in the market like potatoes, onions, cow-hides or any other commodity.”<sup>68</sup> According to Charlie O’Brien, it was the role of the workers, “in this great mission of the working class,” to acquaint themselves “with the true function of capitalist property and the commodity nature” of their labour power.<sup>69</sup> In this

65. Reverend A. F. Cobb, “A Sky Pilot’s View,” *Western Clarion*, 29 May 1909.

66. R. G. Grey, “Another View,” *Western Clarion*, 22 May 1909.

67. “Here and Now,” *Western Clarion*, 29 May 1909. “Mc” is *Clarion* editor D. G. McKenzie.

68. C. M. O’Brien, “Some Joys of Life in a Smelter,” *Western Clarion*, 8 April 1905.

69. O’Brien, “Some Joys.” Charles M. O’Brien (1875–1952) was born in Hastings County, Ontario. While working for the railway he moved west in 1899 to Alberta, where he became an organizer for the Socialist Party of Canada. He was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Alberta (1909–13), where he became a noted orator and fighter for the rights of coal miners. He

mission SPCers were inspired by *The Communist Manifesto*, which describes the proletarian movement as “the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”<sup>70</sup>

In an article entitled “The Class Struggle,” Kingsley argued that workers are both sellers and buyers – they sell their labour power and then enter the market to purchase food, clothing, and other goods.<sup>71</sup> No class struggle can develop, Kingsley argues, between buyers and sellers. The class struggle “cannot occur over the price of things,” as it is “a political struggle between those who would perpetuate the present system of property and those who would overthrow it.”<sup>72</sup> From the beginning of the party, therefore, critics of the commodity struggle, such as Kingsley, were caught in a contradiction. In condemning the commodity struggle, and the trade unions that led it, they were arguing against themselves, because the educational efforts of the SPC were centred around getting workers to understand the way in which the capitalist system commodified their labour power.

Opposition to the commodity struggle and condemnation of trade unions was far from dominating the Socialist Party, even in the early years of its existence. R. Parmenter Pettipiece, a typographer who often represented the views of Marxian socialism at conventions of the Trades and Labor Congress, believed that trade unions were, as Marx argued, “schools for socialism.” Wallis Lefeaux, asked about anti-trade union feeling in a 1961 interview, suggested that it was never a central position of the party. Lefeaux recalled that Kingsley had made it an issue in the pages of the *Western Clarion* for a year or two but had given it up.<sup>73</sup>

Lefeaux’s recollection leaves out of the picture the fact that the SPC was

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later moved to California, which is where he died. See Alvin Finkel, *Working People in Alberta: A History* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 54–55.

70. Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848; Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967), 92.

71. Eugene Thornton Kingsley (1856–1929) was the SPC’s most influential “impossibilist.” An American, Kingsley became a double amputee as a result of a railway accident near Missoula, Montana, in 1890. He came to British Columbia in 1902 and made his greatest contribution by publishing the *Western Clarion* from January 1905 until November 1912. He supported the *Clarion* financially and was its editor (1905–08, 1911–12). Despite his disability, Kingsley was one of the SPC’s most prominent organizers. His reputation as an “impossibilist” has overshadowed the fact that in the spring of 1919 he supported the One Big Union in its efforts to wrest power from the capitalist class. “E.T. Kingsley on the O. B. U.,” *BC Federationist*, 4 April 1919. See Ravi Malhotra & Benjamin Isitt, *Able to Lead: The Legal Politics and the Life of E.T. Kingsley* (Vancouver: UBC Press, forthcoming); see also “Able to Lead – Capable de Conduire,” <https://abletolead.wordpress.com>.

72. “A Class Struggle,” *Western Clarion*, 24 February 1906.

73. Transcript of Interview with Wallis Lefeaux, 1961, Woodsworth Memorial Collection, #35, box 10A, General Manuscript Material, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

launched the same year as the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Chicago in June 1905.<sup>74</sup> Rejecting the trades unionism of the American Federation of Labor, the IWW focused on organizing itinerant industrial workers in mining, longshoring, railway construction, textiles, and harvesting. Its constitution echoed that of the SPC, positing a class struggle between employers and workers and calling for the workers of the world to overthrow capitalism and put an end to the wage system. The IWW identified class struggle with industrial unionism, and in the early years of the Socialist Party its members were impelled to discredit the IWW because it associated industrial unionism with the commodity struggle.

On the surface of things, it appears that Lefeaux was wrong, that Kingsley's position on the issue was the dominant one in the Socialist Party. J. H. Hawthornthwaite dismissed the industrial unionism of the IWW as "another sorry attempt to hold jobs and keep up wages."<sup>75</sup> Pettipiece agreed, dismissing industrial unions as being "within the limits of the wage-system."<sup>76</sup> In the fall of 1909 Charlie O'Brien seemingly confirmed his reputation as an impossibilist in comments he made on a talk given by IWW spokesperson and Western Federation of Miners leader Big Bill Haywood. O'Brien charged that Haywood "confuses the struggle between the buyers and sellers of commodities with the class struggle – the struggle between masters and slaves for ownership of the means of wealth production."<sup>77</sup>

O'Brien was splitting hairs – and he knew it. Most members of the Socialist Party recognized that the relationship between the commodity and class struggles was as much or more dialectical as oppositional. It was O'Brien who arranged for Haywood's ten speaking engagements in Alberta, and he also "fixed dates" for him in Saskatoon, Regina, Moose Jaw, Brandon, and Winnipeg. His message to the organizers of Haywood's lectures in Ontario, Québec, and the Maritimes was that they provided "good propaganda," and he

74. On the history of the Industrial Workers of the World, see Philip S. Foner, *The Labor Movement in the United States*, vol. 4, *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917* (New York: International Publishers, 1965); Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: The Story of Syndicalism in the United States* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967); Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1969); Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). On the IWW in Canada, see Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star, 1990); Peter Campbell, "The Cult of Spontaneity: Finnish-Canadian Bushworkers and the Industrial Workers of the World in Northern Ontario, 1919–1934," *Labor/Le Travail* 41 (Spring 1998): 117–146; Michel S. Beaulieu, *Labor at the Lakehead: Ethnicity, Socialism, and Politics, 1900–35* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

75. J. H. Hawthornthwaite, "Good Natured Controversy," *Western Clarion*, 18 November 1905.

76. R. P. Pettipiece, "Wage System, Trades Unions and Socialism," *Western Clarion*, 27 October 1906.

77. C. M. O'Brien, "Haywood on the Stump," *Western Clarion*, 23 October 1909.

assured them that their efforts would be well worthwhile.<sup>78</sup> It was a revealing statement for a so-called impossibilist, given that the Socialist Party liked to pride itself on being the only true dispenser of “good propaganda” in the world, let alone Canada.

In the Alberta provincial election held on 22 March 1909, O’Brien was elected for the new riding of Rocky Mountain. As a member of the legislature, O’Brien became known for his advocacy of the cause of the coal miners of Alberta, an advocacy that of necessity impelled him to spend much time dealing with wages and working conditions. O’Brien tried to stay true to impossibilism, arguing on 1 March 1910 that the question of wages “is no part of the class struggle, it is a commodity struggle.”<sup>79</sup> Yet later that same year, O’Brien acknowledged that SPC members elected to office had to take part in the commodity struggle, and the reforms they advocated were part of the commodity struggle. O’Brien observed that revolutionists “occupy the inconsistent position of being compelled to take part in the commodity struggle in order to exist, and at the same time taking part in the class struggle, which is an endeavor to overthrow the commodity struggle.”<sup>80</sup>

O’Brien’s wrestling with the relationship between the two struggles signals the emergence of a significant change of direction in the politics of the SPC. McCormack argues that, beginning in 1912, “a new group of young activists” became influential in the Socialist Party, which “made significant revisions in tactics and doctrine.”<sup>81</sup> These young activists were more open to militant industrial unionism, more willing to switch the focus of the party from electoral politics to the general strike. Lost in the discussion of that switch in focus has been the effect on the SPC’s relationship with working-class women. The party’s emphasis on taking over the “reins of government” by electing SPCers had always been a nonstarter for working-class women, given that they still did not have the vote. The switch in focus to militant industrial unionism made the party more inclusive, as working-class women could relate to workplace struggles in a way they could not relate to electoral politics. Their workforce participation was increasing, which represented both a threat and an opportunity to members of the Socialist Party.

As a number of historians, myself included, have pointed out, most SPC members had great difficulty letting go of a Victorian conception of women, motherhood, and domesticity.<sup>82</sup> In addition, the increasing workforce

78. O’Brien, “Haywood.”

79. “O’Brien Turns It Loose,” *Western Clarion*, 12 March 1910.

80. C. M. O’Brien, “O’Brien Replies,” *Western Clarion*, 8 October 1910.

81. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 76.

82. Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 142–149; Janice Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900–1918* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 99–101; Campbell, *Canadian Marxists*, 15–17.



participation of women threatened to lower men's wages or throw them out of work. In the summer of 1913, "C. Nel." noted that Marx and Engels "say that the more modern industry becomes developed, the more is the labor of man superseded by that of woman." Women are taking the places of men at an "accelerating rate." The labour power of woman is cheaper, but the value of the commodity is the same. With the aid of machinery, women provide "the same duration and quality of service" at a cheaper cost in wages.<sup>83</sup> The same process of mechanization that was throwing craftworkers out of a job and weakening their unions was facilitating the increased workforce participation of women. The industries in which working-class women tended to be employed tied them directly to the shift from craft to industrial unionism.

Working-class women were being drawn to the class struggle, but the suffrage movement and its bourgeois leadership was threatening to draw working-class women away from it in support of a reform that, in the opinion of SPC members, would do little or nothing to hasten the social revolution. Bourgeois men and women were positing the existence of a "sex struggle" that was designed to mislead working-class women into betraying their class interests. In that sense the sex struggle was analogous to the commodity struggle. As with the commodity struggle, it is tempting to see only opposition, when a closer examination reveals the ways in which the sex struggle actually existed in a dialectical relationship with the class struggle. We need a better appreciation of the SPC's understanding of that dialectical relationship in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of its efforts to include working-class women in the coming labour revolt.

Members of the SPC were decidedly of two minds concerning the impact of capitalism on working-class women. The SPC's belief was that human beings comprised a single organism, with male and female halves.<sup>84</sup> The sexes were characterized by "complementariness." As one author put it, the "normal functions and characteristics of the two sexes do not compete or clash. They dovetail into and complete one another."<sup>85</sup> There was nothing "impossibilist" about the argument; Olive Schreiner's feminist classic *Woman and Labor*, published in 1911 and highly praised in a review in the *Western Clarion* in 1912, claimed that the two sexes "are not distinct species but the two halves of one whole."<sup>86</sup>

83. C. Nel., "Women in Industry," *Western Clarion*, 19 July 1913.

84. W. B., "What of the Women?," *Western Clarion*, March 1916. The source of the argument that men and women are two halves of a whole and complement each other is quite possibly Jean-Jacques Rousseau. See Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 81.

85. "Sex Equality," *Western Clarion*, 31 August 1911.

86. Olive Schreiner, *Woman and Labor* (1911; Mineola, New York: Dover, 1998), 102. In his review A. Percy Chew claimed that *Woman and Labor* "has done for the woman's movement what the Communist Manifesto did for the movement of the proletariat." "Woman and Labor,"

The Socialist Party's position was based in an idealistic rendering of pre-capitalist societies, heavily influenced by the works of Lewis Henry Morgan and the reliance of Marx and Engels on his work.<sup>87</sup> George Paton, an Alberta farmer, argued that human society was once matrilineal, if not matriarchal, and women "had a say in the making of the laws and took an active part in the development of the social structure."<sup>88</sup> According to Budden, the sex relation in "communist" societies was based in free love, "with man and woman in correct relation to nature."<sup>89</sup> There was no "sex struggle" in the precapitalist era; the sex struggle arose as a result of the rise of private property and the capitalist system.<sup>90</sup> On this issue McKay is quite right to point out the reliance of sPCers on the theories of Engels, whose explanation of the origins of women's oppression "was schematic and economic, rendering it merely an aspect of the rise of private property."<sup>91</sup>

According to members of the sPC the rise of capitalism did something else: it changed the nature of women. Women began to throw off passivity and take on the male characteristic of activism.<sup>92</sup> The argument that capitalism had tempered the conservatism of women was made at least as early as 1911 and continued to be made after the labour revolt of 1919. Jack McDonald argued that in the factory the "old female characteristics of passivity and ease were removed, and in their stead the male attributes of activity and unrest were instilled."<sup>93</sup> McDonald's analysis was based in a core Hegelian principle, the interpenetration of opposites, based in the idea that men and women are

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*Western Clarion*, 27 April 1912.

87. Lewis Henry Morgan (1818–81) was an American ethnologist and author of *The League of the Ho-dé-nau-so-nee, or Iroquois* (1851) and *Ancient Society* (1877). Friedrich Engels' classic *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) was inspired by Morgan's central argument that matrilineal clans preceded patriarchal society.

88. George Paton, "Woman in Society," *Western Clarion*, 3 August 1912.

89. Alf Budden, "In Reply to Comrade Rees," *Western Clarion*, 21 September 1912.

90. The critique does not acknowledge that most "enlightened" thinkers of the age, notably Edward Carpenter, advanced the same argument. Carpenter argued in *Love's Coming-of-Age*, which was sold by the Socialist Party of Canada, that it was "perhaps not altogether unnatural that Man's craze for property and individual ownership should have culminated in the enslavement of woman – his most precious and beloved object." Carpenter, *Love's Coming-of-Age* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1909), 41–42.

91. McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, 292.

92. sPCers were not unquestioning believers in the "natural" passivity of women. John Harrington observed, "The non-participation of women in active national affairs, and the narrow sphere in which they moved for so many centuries naturally produced a narrow viewpoint. This sufficiently accounts for their undoubted conservatism, without attempting to give it a biological bias, and found it on physiological causes." See "Woman's Rights," *Western Clarion*, 1 March 1917.

93. Jack McDonald, "Family Life through the Ages," part 3, *Western Clarion*, 1 November 1920.

not “two distinct entities that absolutely exclude all encroachments from the other direction.”<sup>94</sup> For members of the Socialist Party, the increasing activity of working-class women, women who resisted the influence of capitalist and clergyman, represented the victory of dialectical over metaphysical thinking.

Janice Newton has argued that the Socialist Party “dismissed consideration of issues rooted in the relations between the sexes or in men’s power to exploit women.”<sup>95</sup> In fact, Budden noted that women who applied for jobs were subjected to the “horrid attentions” of men. Speaking directly to women, Budden observed that in the workplace the boss “can exploit you in a double sense, and forever destroy any self-respect you may have had.” The escape from sexual harassment in the workplace offered by the Victorian age – that is, marriage and home – he described as an illusion, because they condemned women to a life of “household drudgery.”<sup>96</sup> There is, however, a fundamental problem in that Budden fails to acknowledge the sexism of working-class men; the oppression of women is portrayed as entirely a function of private property and the capitalist system. That said, it is an analysis that makes working-class men and women allies in a common struggle.

George Paton, like Budden an Alberta farmer, argued that woman must “fight side by side with her proletarian male partner.” Echoing Budden’s analysis, Paton argued that instead of joining the fight, woman in the modern world “is shut up within the walls of her prison (home, they call it), performing her maternal duties under the most strenuous circumstances.” Fighting with her male partner, woman can restore her lost liberty and equality and establish a home “where peace, happiness and plenty will be the rule.”<sup>97</sup> On the one hand, Paton frees women to become active in the public life of society; on the other, he advocates the Victorian idealization of domestic bliss and returns women to the home. There is no critique of the home per se; in fact, Paton is defending the home, which is fast being destroyed by capitalism. Socialism will save the home, which will be a kind of heaven on earth.

Many members of the Socialist Party were unable to transcend their belief in the fixity of biological sex and the domestic destiny of women. This should not mislead us into seeing a cosmic, evolutionary, and Darwinian perspective

94. Jack McDonald, “Family Life through the Ages,” part 2, *Western Clarion*, 16 October 1920. Jack McDonald (1889–1968) was born on a Prince Edward Island potato farm, one of eight children. As a Sunday School teacher in western Canada as a young man, McDonald was persuaded to become a Marxian socialist by Charlie O’Brien. Following his days in the SPC, McDonald ran four different bookstores in San Francisco over a period of 40 years. McDonald’s Bookstore became a meeting place for all types of radicals and socialists. He was struck and killed by a car in Oakland, California, on 1 July 1968. “Jack McDonald, Bookseller, Dies,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 July 1968; *The Western Socialist*, no. 4 (1968).

95. Newton, *Feminist Challenge*, 101.

96. Alf Budden, “The Woman’s Place,” *Western Clarion*, 10 December 1910.

97. Paton, “Woman in Society.”

in everything party members thought on the woman question. The world of Hegel, Fourier, and Morgan was not so easily left behind. There is absolutely no doubting the profound Hegelian influence in the analysis of Budden. He argued that the “correct” character of the sex relation suffered its “first negation with the negation of property from communal to private.” Continuing with a core Hegelian principle, the negation of the negation, Budden argued that this first negation of property would be followed by the second, and out of it “shall grow the old, old communism.” Out of the second negation “shall emerge again, clean and beautiful to behold, the archaic love of woman for man, ennobled by education and intelligence. Dominant man, madam, is part of the slave question. Help us, help us throw it down and a rebalancing of all other conditions follow.”<sup>98</sup>

Budden’s allusion to “dominant man” reveals that the party did critique patriarchy; he is positing a dialectical relationship between patriarchy and the capitalist system. In precapitalist societies there was balance, impelling Budden’s point that “rebalancing” human society means dealing with male dominance as well as capitalist dominance. Even more compelling is Budden’s appeal to working-class women to unite with working-class men in the struggle against male dominance. The party’s intemperate dismissal of the “sex struggle” does justify Newton’s claim that party spokespersons such as Budden argued that the woman question “had nothing to do with socialism.”<sup>99</sup> It is also true that they took positions based in the idea that the woman question had everything to do with socialism.

The woman question had everything to do with the “slave” question, or the commodification of labour power. The SPC’s advocacy of the class struggle was based in the relentless stressing of the commodity nature of labour power. The party’s position was that the inferiority of women is a commodity inferiority, not a sex inferiority.<sup>100</sup> Women are naturally equal – they are made inferior by the workings of the law of value. With working-class women, as with working-class men, the issue was the overthrowing of an identity that defined them within the capitalist system.

As working-class women increasingly joined the labour force during World War I, the masculinity of working-class men was challenged. Since the early years of the Socialist Party the thinking had been that the working man “will deserve to be painted as the embodiment of manhood” when he ceases to appear “as the embodiment of commodityhood.”<sup>101</sup> Now there was a new threat to working-class manhood: lower wages and unemployment caused by the lower wages paid to working-class women. Trade unions did not alleviate

98. Budden, “In Reply to Comrade Rees.”

99. Newton, *Feminist Challenge*, 68–69.

100. “Sex Equality.”

101. “A Pitiful Display,” *Western Clarion*, 6 May 1905.

the threat because within them the competition between men and women continued. The need was for an organization in which working-class men and women would be allies in the common struggle against the commodification of labour power.

The common perception is that women were excluded from this search because the Socialist Party's conception of the class struggle was gendered male. In fact, party members made arguments that included working-class women in the class struggle. We can turn to an argument that O'Brien made in the Alberta legislature in December 1910. In response to a mine manager's claim that wages were two dollars and a half, O'Brien pointed out that what seemed like good wages did not include the wives and children of the miners who were not paid directly in the cause of keeping the family alive. O'Brien argued that we must take into consideration "all those who are taking part in the production of coal around the mines ... who do not receive wages directly."<sup>102</sup> O'Brien was pointing out that the wives and children of the miners, while not part of the commodity struggle because they did not work for wages, were nonetheless part of the class struggle.

The great failure of the Socialist Party was the failure to make women workers full partners in that struggle. Too many party members took the easy way out, looking forward to a socialist world in which women would return to a home made joyful by the ending of the capitalist system. There was no acknowledgement of, or engagement with, the sexism of working-class men. Instead of finding ways to link the commodification of women's labour power with the commodification of the labour power of men, the focus became the threat posed by women's lower wages to those of men.

That said, it is not true that the SPC dismissed the sex question out of hand. In the SPC, property relations and sex relations existed in a dialectical relationship. Rather than being a side issue, sex relations were actually part and parcel of the party's understanding of the history of human evolution. The idea that a socialist society would restore women to their ancient status, as historically questionable as it may have been, was a central element in maintaining belief in the overthrow of the capitalist system. There was no sex struggle when men and women were in their "natural state," that is, before the rise of private property. Their blind spots and hypocrisy notwithstanding, SPCers did believe that the overthrow of the capitalist system would result in a better world for women. Even the "misogynist" D. G. McKenzie argued that the socialist revolution would leave women "economically independent and beholden to none."<sup>103</sup>

102. "Alberta Legislature," *Western Clarion*, 17 December 1910.

103. D. G. McKenzie, "The Red Light," *Western Clarion*, 19 June 1909. At a Soldiers' Parliament held at Victoria Park during the Winnipeg General Strike in honour of the striking girls and women J. S. Woodsworth stated that the strike was "part of the great movement for the emancipation of women." "Women Attend Soldiers' Parliament," *Western Labor News*,

For members of the Socialist Party the great weakness of working-class women was the failure to recognize the commodification of their labour power, not the fact that they were women. Women, as Ruth Lestor put it in her usual inimitable way, failed to understand that they were “commodity breeders.”<sup>104</sup> In the Socialist Party, failure to recognize their labour power as a commodity was a greater weakness than being female – or Black or Asian, for that matter. Members of the SPC were often arrogant, intemperate, and bluster, but they were not elitist. No member of the Socialist Party, including the Anglo-Celts, ever said that any human being, on the basis of sex or race, was incapable of understanding the dehumanization that results from the commodification of labour power. Paton observed that when Marx stated in 1848 that workers should unite “the world over” he “did not specify any single race or group of workers.”<sup>105</sup> No working-class person, on the basis of identity, was incapable of undergoing the “mental revolution” required to overthrow the capitalist system and establish the cooperative commonwealth.

Critics of the SPC have great difficulty dealing with the party’s continual use of the term “wage slavery,” considering it a racist argument that fails to understand and appreciate the severity and ugliness of Black chattel slavery. There is no denying the inability of dialectical thinkers to overcome the prejudices of their political culture; the racial attitudes of many party members were a barrier to greater working-class unity. On the other hand, when J. Stewart argued that “the ignorance of the workers ... is about the biggest barrier that stands between us and our freedom,” his message was directed at white workers, not workers of colour. He recognized that Black slaves, for example, were not able to prevent the commodification of their bodies, but white workers could choose to deny the commodification of their labour power. Black chattel slaves had their masters forced upon them; the white wage slave was “the worst kind of slave,” the one “who goes looking for his master.”<sup>106</sup>

Stewart argued that “before a social revolution can take place the under dog must capture political power.”<sup>107</sup> In the Socialist Party the underdog had no colour. The failure of SPCers to recognize their own racism, and their inability or lack of willingness to confront the racism of the white working class, were major failings. That said, their conception of the working class was inclusive and did not exclude the “under dog” or workers of colour. In the spring of 1913 McDonald wrote, “We are slaves here. We are slaves in China or Japan; so our condition can be changed but slightly while the capitalist system lasts. We are not of any nationality; we are not white or black; but one thing suffices to make

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13 June 1919.

104. Ruth Lestor, “Woman and the S. P. of C.,” *Western Clarion*, July 1911.

105. George Paton, “The Farmers’ Forum,” *Western Clarion*, 16 February 1920.

106. J. Stewart, “Revolution and Evolution,” *Western Clarion*, 11 June 1910.

107. Stewart, “Revolution and Evolution.”

us all common; we are forced to sell labor power to another class in order to live."<sup>108</sup> McDonald's use of the first-person plural powerfully evokes the inclusivity of his conception of the working class, based in a shared recognition of the commodification of labour power.

In the spring of 1910 McKenzie made the crucial point that racial thinking is ruling-class thinking.<sup>109</sup> Racial thinking divides the working class, causing its failure to recognize the true source of its oppression. The great majority of the white working class in Canada was not ready for the racial inclusiveness of the SPC and did not recognize the true source of its own oppression. Party members must accept their share of responsibility for the failure to spread the message more widely and meaningfully, but as World War I approached they were struggling to find a vehicle for doing so.

As the war loomed on the horizon, the disagreement about the relationship between the commodity struggle and the class struggle went on apace, with a significant new development. By means of the "continual compulsory revolutionizing of the machine, the skilled laborers are being reduced to a level with the common laborer, thus trades unions are destined to pass away, and industrial unionism becomes inevitable."<sup>110</sup> Industrial unionism may have been "inevitable," but resistance to it remained strong in the Socialist Party. For some party members little had changed since 1905–06 and the foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World; for them, the struggle on the industrial field remained a commodity struggle. O'Brien, who had taken a more dialectical position on the relationship between commodity and class struggle in 1910, now appeared to be backtracking, claiming that "the commodity-struggle cannot take on the character of, or give expression to, the class struggle."<sup>111</sup> Another SPCer, presaging Burrough's position that being antireligious did not necessarily make workers class conscious, argued that the shift from craft unionism to industrial unionism did not necessarily mean workers were becoming more class conscious; workers remained competitors in industrial unions, selling their only commodity.<sup>112</sup> It remained a struggle for many members of the Socialist Party to accept that the "mental revolution" could occur on the industrial field, where reformist trade union leaders were misleading the workers into thinking there was an alternative to the complete eradication of the capitalist system.

The resistance was unable to impede the general trend in the direction of asserting a dialectical relationship between the two struggles. In the spring of 1913 "J.K." argued that "these commodity struggles, these conflicts of interest,

108. Jack McDonald, "The Oriental Peril," *Western Clarion*, 24 May 1913.

109. D. G. McKenzie, "Class and Class," *Western Clarion*, 14 May 1910.

110. Spider, "From the Strike Field," *Western Clarion*, 9 November 1912.

111. C. M. O'Brien, "Socialism and Unionism," *Western Clarion*, 30 August 1913.

112. T. Connor, "Industrial Unionism and Class-Action," *Western Clarion*, 16 August 1913.

forcing upon the workers a knowledge of their position in society will culminate in the class struggle wherein an intelligent working class conscious of their class interest, politically intelligent, will arise and wrest from the master class the power whereby they enslave us.”<sup>113</sup> The logical tendency would be to believe that the collapse of the Second International, and notably of the German Social Democratic Party, that led to millions of workers marching off to be slaughtered in the trenches would cause members of the Socialist Party to become even more critical of reformists and trade union leaders and even more committed to impossibilism.

In reality, the opposite happened. In May 1915 the *Western Clarion* quietly announced a change in the party platform of much greater import than meets the eye. Claiming it had the support of 90 per cent of SPC locals, the party’s Dominion Executive Committee decided to change the wording of the party platform. The “irrepressible conflict of interest” between capitalists and workers that “necessarily expresses itself as a struggle for possession of the reins of government” was changed to a conflict of interest that “necessarily expresses itself as class struggle.”

It was not until September 1915 that controversy over the change erupted, when Burrough, who had challenged the SPC’s change of position on religion, launched a challenge to this change in the party platform. At first glance, Burrough’s protest seems nonsensical; what can possibly be wrong with the SPC advocating class struggle? Burrough went overboard in his critique, claiming that the change can mean “anything or nothing.”<sup>114</sup> Yet he was prescient because he understood that the change opened the door to including under the heading of class struggle aspects of the conflict between capitalists and workers that had been considered part of the commodity struggle up until that point.

It is in Pritchard’s response to Burrough’s objections that we get to the heart of the matter. Pritchard argues that if the party accepts Burrough’s contention that “the class Struggle is the conscious effort of enlightened workers to obtain control of the machinery of government, then no such struggle exists until we become conscious of it.”<sup>115</sup> Pritchard quotes Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* to the effect that all past history is the history of class struggle. It is absurd, Pritchard argues, to claim that there was no class struggle in Canada before there were parties such as the SPC to make workers conscious of the existence of a class struggle. Pritchard’s argument opens the door to the creation of the One Big Union; as we shall see, the OBU’s definition of the class struggle revolved around the commodification of labour power,

113. J.K., “The Class Struggle,” *Western Clarion*, 10 May 1913.

114. J. H. Burrough, letter to the editor, *Western Clarion*, September 1915.

115. W. A. Pritchard, “Our New Platform and Other Little Things,” *Western Clarion*, September 1915.



one of the key aspects of the class struggle that took place, whether or not workers were conscious of it.

As powerful as the sPC's belief in the importance of education leading to the self-emancipation of the working class was, it was now shaken by the conscious decision of so many workers to fight in a capitalist war and forsake their working-class allies in other countries. sPCers like Pritchard were increasingly willing to look beyond the educational role of the party, to consider the lessons learned by workers, notably unionized workers, as being key aspects of their political education. At one time McDonald had insisted that overthrowing capitalism depended on workers understanding the nature of the capitalist system, without which organizing industrially was a waste of time. By 1916, however, he was grudgingly willing to acknowledge that industrial action, "under certain conditions," could become political action.<sup>116</sup>

It remained for Pritchard to formulate the relationship that would appear in the constitution of the OBU.<sup>117</sup> Pritchard argued in August 1917 that the purchase and sale of the commodity labour power "constitutes a struggle between classes, since the **buyers** are **always Masters** and the **sellers** always **Workers**."<sup>118</sup> Pritchard was refuting Kingsley's 1906 argument that workers are both buyers and sellers, because Kingsley's position contradicted one of the sPC's core arguments: that workers are exploited only as producers, not as consumers. In 1912 Wilfred Gribble argued that the only function of the working class was to produce; it was the function of the master class to consume. Workers consumed in order to produce, so their consumption was "merely incidental."<sup>119</sup> Gribble argued that workers have no power as buyers, but as sellers "they have yet a little power, and are using that little power in the way they know best to get as high a price for their labour power as they can."<sup>120</sup> For impossibilists in the Socialist Party, this was an endorsement of the commodity struggle, but Pritchard took Gribble's principle and turned it in a new direction.

Pritchard's formulation remains true to the party's core principle yet paves the way for the creation of an organization based in the dialectical relationship between commodity and class struggle. An organization based on class knowledge and taking class action will be, Pritchard argues,

116. Jack McDonald, "The Workers' Weapon," *Western Clarion*, June 1916.

117. On the One Big Union, see David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978); Robin, *Radical Politics*, 170–177; McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 157–158.

118. W. A. Pritchard, "Our Letter Bag," *Western Clarion*, August 1917.

119. Gribble's formulation includes, but at the same time excludes, working-class women from the class struggle.

120. Wilfred Gribble, "Workers Are Robbed as Wealth Producers," *Western Clarion*, 2 March 1912.

a class, not an industrial, organization.<sup>121</sup> Pritchard is refuting the critique of industrial unionism going back to 1905 by incorporating the commodification of labour power into the party's conception of class struggle. By the fall of 1917 D.G. McKenzie was arguing that the commodity struggle was developing into class war.<sup>122</sup>

The stage was set for the founding of the OBU. It took place at the March 1919 convention of the British Columbia Federation of Labour in Calgary, immediately followed by the Western Labour Conference on 13–15 March 1919. In the wake of the conference, as the momentum built toward the Winnipeg General Strike and the creation of the OBU, the SPC was linking its struggle to events in Russia, noting that the Bolsheviks had “uprooted the commodity status of labor power and of producing wealth.”<sup>123</sup> At home, the *BC Federationist*, the paper of the BC Federation of Labour and the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, noted a week later, “Amongst the members of the working class there is a growing sense of class solidarity, a development of class consciousness, of class knowledge; there is a growing appreciation of the only solution of the social problem, the destruction of the commodity characteristic of labor power.”<sup>124</sup>

The direct linking of the class struggle and the commodification of labour power took place when the OBU was formally organized in Calgary in the first week of June 1919. The influence of the SPC was much in evidence, as all five members of the OBU Central Executive Committee – R. J. Johns, W. A. Pritchard, Joseph Naylor, Joe Knight, and Victor Midgley – were members of the party. The constitution they adopted was the result of more than a decade of dialectical interplay between supporters of the “commodity” and the “class” struggles:

Modern industrial society is divided into two classes, those who possess and do not produce, and those who produce and do not possess. Alongside this main division all other classifications fade into insignificance. Between these two classes a continual struggle takes place. As with buyers and sellers of any commodity there exists a struggle on the one hand of the buyer to buy as cheaply as possible, and on the other, of the seller to sell for as much as possible, so with the buyers and sellers of labor power. In the struggle over the purchase and sale of labor power the buyers are always masters – the sellers always workers. From this fact arises the inevitable class struggle.<sup>125</sup>

At that moment a class struggle was taking place in Winnipeg and in the sympathetic strikes breaking out across the country. Those strikes may have been about wages and working conditions but, as G. W. Harrack of the

121. Pritchard, “Letter Bag.”

122. D.G. McKenzie, “The War to Come,” *Western Clarion*, October 1917.

123. “The Commodity Status of Labor,” *The Red Flag*, 22 March 1919.

124. “Two Speakers at the Empress,” *BC Federationist*, 4 April 1919.

125. “Constitution of the One Big Union,” *BC Federationist*, 13 June 1919.

Socialist Party had argued in 1910, workers attempting to get “either a part or all” of the surplus value of their labour power is a manifestation of the class struggle. Asserting a dialectical relationship between the commodity and class struggles, Harrack argues that strikes for higher wages and shorter working hours are “part of the working class resisting the capitalist class.”<sup>126</sup> It is, Harrack noted with astonishing prescience, a manifestation of class struggle “without an intelligent revolutionary aim.” Many years later Bryan Palmer made the same point, arguing that in Winnipeg in 1919 “working-class initiatives emerged out of the course of events rather than guiding those events in a strategic assertion of programmatic change.”<sup>127</sup>

We can choose to focus on this “failure,” or we can gain a greater appreciation for the lasting legacy of the Socialist Party of Canada. In the spring of 1910 George F. Stirling argued that the one purpose of the Socialist Party was “incessant war against capitalism.”<sup>128</sup> Prosecuting that warfare was based not, as McKay suggests, in a cosmic, evolutionary worldview derived from Darwin and Spencer but rather in the opposition of Marx and Engels to the commodification of labour power. In March 1913 Pritchard argued that the SPC had “no quarrel whatever with private property as such, but with class property, the property now held by a class and used by them to exploit the workers.”<sup>129</sup> Pritchard was echoing the position of Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* that Communists wanted to abolish “modern bourgeois private property,” not the private property of the workers, “not the right of personally acquiring property as the fruit of a man’s own labour.”<sup>130</sup>

In the midst of the Winnipeg General Strike, an article entitled “The Spirit of the Strike” appeared in the *Western Labor News*. Quoting Isaiah 65:21, the author declared that “they who build houses shall inhabit them and those who plant vineyards eat the fruit thereof.” The goddess of Justice, the author writes, says, “to the worker belongs the product of his toil.”<sup>131</sup> The opposition of the SPC and the OBU to the commodification of labour power had deep roots that spread far beyond their organizational confines.

In 1969 Pritchard published a piece on the Winnipeg General Strike in the Socialist Party’s paper *The Western Socialist*. In characterizing the lessons of the strike, he acknowledged that there had been improvements in the lives of Canadian workers in the previous 50 years, but they were “still wage recipients and the masters the beneficiaries of the surplus values extracted from the result of labor’s effort.” The master-servant dialectic remained in place and,

126. G. W. Harrack, “One Opinion,” *Western Clarion*, 15 October 1910.

127. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 204.

128. George F. Stirling, “Unite,” *Western Clarion*, 2 April 1910.

129. W. A. Pritchard, “Dealing with Objectors,” *Western Clarion*, 15 March 1913.

130. Marx & Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 96.

131. “The Spirit of the Strike,” *Western Labor News*, 6 June 1919.

according to Pritchard, nothing would change “until the workers in sufficient numbers free themselves from the concepts of this society, from the ideas that bind them to the notion that the present is the only possible social system.”<sup>132</sup> It was the heart of the dialectical understanding, that in “keeping in front of us the simple truth that everything is changing, the future is posed as a choice in which the only thing that cannot be chosen is what we already have.”<sup>133</sup>

It was the goal of the SPC and the OBU to restore the private property of the workers by ending the commodification of their labour power. They embodied the realization, as Georg Lukács argued the year after the labour revolt of 1919, that the worker “can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity.”<sup>134</sup> With that consciousness, members of the Socialist Party believed, the commodity struggle becomes class struggle.

On 12 June 1919 Pritchard addressed a mass meeting in Winnipeg’s Victoria Park. In the course of his speech, he asked the assembled workers to trust themselves, not leaders, saying that the great “appear great to us because we are on our knees. Let us rise!”<sup>135</sup> Three years earlier Pritchard’s friend and comrade, Socialist Party secretary Chris Stephenson, had urged, “Let us think about something healthy, insubordinate, revolutionary, and so may we amidst the movement and play of blind social forces, retain our respect for human powers.”<sup>136</sup> Hegel’s “Spirit,” as Marx pointed out, was simply human action, and Canada’s Marxian socialists believed that capitalism would be thrown from the saddle, not because the social revolution was evolutionarily inevitable but because the workers would get off their knees.

*I wish to thank the Labour/Le Travail reviewers for encouraging comments and insightful criticisms. Joan Sangster has done her usual outstanding editorial job, sometimes knowing what I meant to say better than I did myself. A heartfelt thank you to old Marxian socialists for their great legacy to the left, the gift of endless inspiration.*

132. Pritchard’s 1969 article in the *Western Socialist* was reprinted as “The Winnipeg General Strike,” *Imagine* 17, 1 (2019): 10–11.

133. Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, 20.

134. Georg Lukács, “III: The Standpoint of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Marxists.org, accessed 2 February 2021, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07\\_1.htm#s1](https://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/hcc07_1.htm#s1).

135. “Government Treachery Exposed,” *Western Labor News*, 13 June 1919. Often attributed to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the slogan “The great are only great because we are on our knees. Let us rise” has been traced to the French political philosopher Etienne de la Boétie (1530–63). It appears in the French Revolutionary journal *Révolutions de Paris* as “Les grands ne nous paroiffent grands que parce que nous sommes à genoux. Levons-nous.”

136. Chris Stephenson, “The Futility of Fatalism,” *Western Clarion*, March 1916.