

# HISTORIANS IN PUBLIC

## THE CASE OF LABOUR HISTORY

In the last issue of *Intersections*, the CHA President Adele Perry commended historians' longstanding willingness to connect their research to the present and to speak to communities beyond the classroom. She supported Joy Parr's contention in 2010 that historians should be attentive to contemporary concerns and engage with an active citizenry. Parr went even further in proposing that historians should not only involve themselves with the citizenry but should "engage in policy".

This clearly happens with labour historians since the labour movement was one of the first and most significant of non-government actors in society. Many labour historians go beyond objective accounts of union activity; they are sympathetic to union concerns and, explicitly or implicitly, they commend or criticize union actions in often difficult or complex situations.

Over the last generation, the structure of labour movements has changed, for instance with respect to the role of appointed (not elected) union staff. These are employed by unions to handle what were originally (and in some areas still are) regarded as specialized areas of concern, such as women's issues, GLBTQ, labour education, economics, health, safety and environment and social action — topics that go beyond collective bargaining, grievance arbitration, employment insurance and workers' compensation.

Just what a change this was can be illustrated by reference to my own union, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU, UK). In the nineteen seventies, the union had no paid staff, only a journalist on contract to edit the monthly magazine. All the work was done by the elected officers and through the voluntary work of the union rank and file. Despite the limitations of low union dues and the absence of services provided by the national office, the FBU was profoundly democratic and based on a model of mutual self-help at the grass roots. This is relevant to point I will want to make about the relationship between historians and social engagement.

Labour historians have responded to such changes in union structures. For some, the starting-point is to study those unions who reflect the political stance of the historian, broadly, labour organizations whose leaders and activists are on the Left and which are also militant, radical in both aims and means. The "new" issues or a selection of them are then taken up to build on the long-standing union agendas of recognition, wages and job security. The union strategies remain traditional: to mobilize the rank and file, which in turn depends on increasing the class-consciousness of union members and their rank-and-file

leaders. Unions that serve the cause are commended; those who are not in the ball-park are ignored as doing little that is significant for the progress of the labour movement.

The "engagement" of such authors is with elected leaders who are in the vanguard of such social change, with union staff (whose educational qualifications are often similar to those of the historians) and with militant members of the rank and file. In such cases, it is important to note the nature of the involvement. It is political, not broadly social or "societal". Union members welcome the attention from those they regard as allies, who see the relationship as helping to build the labour movement. But there is also a downside. Those whose politics do not accord with those of the historians can resent the meddling of outsiders, who seem bent on using the labour movement as the pawns in the achievement of an alien political agenda, union members as someone else's means rather than as ends in themselves.

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I do not question this historical approach, nor the benefits of the engagement for the labour movement; it's only to point out how circumscribed it is as a mode of historical inquiry. If we are talking of unionized labour, there are a large number of different types of union, from Christian to Communist, from "business unions" to "social unions", militant to quiescent, conservative to radical, each with a different perspective and outlook on society. All of these should be the subjects of historical inquiry.

Take, for instance, the case of a union which does not, at least explicitly, endorse radical ideals but which devotes its energy to organizing at the grass roots ("organizing the organized") and maximum participation in union activities of the rank and file. (One active union member, when interviewed, told me that workplace health and safety was more important for the union than the strikes and industrial action which get coverage in the press.) Such a union would be well-equipped to resist a sudden, union-busting drive on the part of the employer. Labour historians whose interests are too heavily or exclusively polit-

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ical will ignore such forms of union activity, when the bulk of union activity is different in character from that studied by historians. In turn, the modes of engagement with such actors will be broader than the political. It will also be acknowledged that there is more than one way of measuring progress in the labour movement, that union members conduct themselves in ways other than being the vehicles of some inevitable historical process. To take a further example, the leadership of my own union was frankly Stalinist but its mode of internal organization was such that it strengthened the union, irrespective of whether or not it served the political outlook of the leadership.

As to the social engagement of historians, we need a relationship that falls between two poles: historians in an ivory tower, a part of a community but isolated from it, and a relationship which presents the historian as an expert aiming to convert the community to the historian's political ideals. Joy Parr's plea for the historians' "engagement in policy" will only work if they do not confine themselves to engagement with the actual and potentially converted.

If they do so confine themselves, there will be more conflict than constructive debate. Historians inform their work with differing moral and political values and they differ among themselves over the interpretation of historical events. Their historical opinions also change. Those historians who acknowledge these facts will also acknowledge that the society of the engagement is similarly diverse. When this is done, engagement is more likely to be fruitful and the resulting change progressive. Further, those unions which attempt to organize the grass roots are also those which stress the relationship with the local community outside the workplace.

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The writing of union histories can present a whole new dimension of public engagement: authors do not always enjoy the freedom of expression that they have when writing other forms of non-fiction. The reason is that there are two types of union history, one where the author takes on a project "cold" and the other on contract with the union concerned. In the former case, the author is unlikely to get the full cooperation of the union, with access to documents and personnel and interviews with union members. In the latter case, this usually happens. The limitation is that the union leadership (quite properly) will often set

the terms of the writing, the profile of the union that it wants to present, the issues that it wants covered and the extent to which it wants to expose conflicts and differences of opinion within the union.

A review of a union history that I wrote will illuminate the point in a small way. The union concerned was having trouble with the environmental movement and claimed that environmentalism was merely a middle-class fad, which was echoed uncritically by the author of the history. In the review, I pointed out that this was ridiculous: environmentalism is far more than a middle-class fad. But since the union in question was affiliated to a central labour body for which I worked, I wrote the review under a pseudonym. In point of fact, pressures from the environmental movement forced the employers of the union members to raise their product standards, which expanded their export market and so benefitted the union in the longer run.

My own experience in writing the 50-year history of a federal public-sector union was entirely fortunate. The union leaders only told me what sort of book they were expecting. I consulted extensively with the officers and staff of the union in writing the book and had the benefit of a large number of interviews with the union rank and file. The consciousness of contemporary union history among these members was high and acute. The final draft was accepted by the union with only minor changes and the correction of factual mistakes.

In historical writing I have always tried to have the actors, as far as possible, speak for themselves. This is a scholastic value in its own right. In the case of the union history I wrote, it had an important and incidental effect: the controversies, dissent and disagreements within the union could be presented as the views of union members and not something that occurred to an outside critic. It was to the credit of the union leadership that it accepted this discussion of dissent without reservation, even though it was sometimes expressed by union members who were the political enemies of the current leadership.

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