

# Renewing Interest in Labour and Working-Class History in Canada

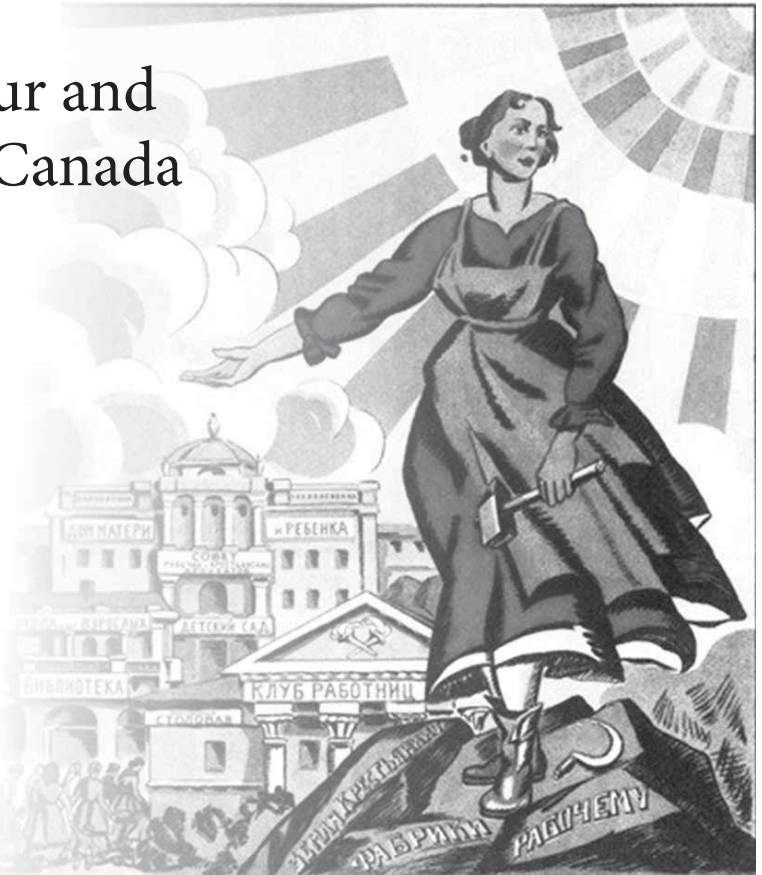
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In 2016, *Labour/Le Travail*, the journal of Canadian labour studies, celebrates its 40th anniversary. The origins of the journal lie in the 1973 Learned's (now Congress). At the Canadian Committee on Labour History (CCLH) business meeting that year, a working group was created to explore the possibilities of establishing a journal of labour and working-class history in Canada. In 1976, reinforced by a grant from the federal Department of Labour, thanks to the advocacy of Senator Eugene Forsey, *Labour/Le Travail* launched its first annual. Since then, the journal and the CCLH have supported the historical study of workers, labour, and class relations. A new partnership with the Canadian Association for Work and Labour Studies (CAWLS) bodes well for the future of the journal and speaks to the vibrant community of interdisciplinary researchers interested in issues related to work and working people in Canada.

Among historians, however, in recent years there has been a marked decline in the number of scholars studying labour and working-class history. At the 2015 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, for example, only a handful of papers and panels made mention of labour, workers, class, and capitalism in their titles. At the same time, few historians participated in the annual meeting of CAWLS, held just after the CHA meeting. While these observations do not necessarily mean historians are no longer studying labour and working-class history, they raise questions about why fewer historians explicitly place work, class, and capitalism at the centre of their work.

A number of factors have contributed to the change. In the 1980s, labour and working-class history was an upstart field of study, shaped by Marxist theory and an explicit interest in class relations and social justice. In the 1990s, however, many historians moved away from Marxism and the study of workers, class, and capitalism. The end of the Cold War, the rise of neoliberalism, the proliferation of post-modern theory, and the widespread abandonment of belief in the working class as the major agent of historical transformation played a role in this shift. The result was that, by the 2000s, fewer historians in Canada were studying the history of workers, class relations, and capitalism. Though some historians have recently called for the study of capitalism specifically, there continues to be a limited number of historians studying the history of workers and class relations in Canada.

The decline in the number of scholars studying Canadian labour and working-class history is troubling. First, there has perhaps



(above) A Soviet poster in 1920 reminds female workers and peasants what the October Revolution already has given them: daycare, workers' clubs, cafeterias, libraries, and adult education.

been no time since the Great Depression in which capitalist mantras are as widely held, all while workers are adrift in a sea of lower social spending, declining union density, high youth unemployment, and stagnant wages. Labour and working-class history, with its focus on class relations, is always vital, but in times of capitalist crisis, it becomes all the more so.

Second, the study of labour and working-class history can help us understand the changing nature of capitalist social relations. Globalization, automation, and privatization require in-depth historical analysis, as do the increase in precarity, the implications of the so-called "sharing economy," and the rise of unpaid internships. These issues shape working-class culture and economic life, and despite claims that these factors are novel to our time, they have deep historical roots. By participating in interdisciplinary conversations about work and capitalism, historians can provide a crucial historical perspective on these and other related issues.

Labour and working-class history also offers a prime opportunity to link the struggles of workers and their organizations with those of women, racialized peoples, GLBTQ individuals, and the disabled, to name just a few. The drive for an intersectional approach to labour history has been an ongoing if imperfect one, but it is imperative that labour history continue to be integrated into other sub-disciplines so as to avoid a return to old models

where the dominance of institutional and biographical studies left little room for those not represented in the labour aristocracy. Likewise, other sub-fields would benefit from a connection to labour and working-class history; understanding the struggles and motivations of historical actors requires a keen focus on the structures of class and property relations in a capitalist system. The history being written in Canada today, whether about Indigenous struggles, the environment, gender, race, or sexuality, asks important questions, and analyses of these issues could be enriched by considering how they relate to work, class, and capitalism. The reshaping of the environment has been a labour to benefit capitalism. White and male supremacy is inextricably connected with the prerogatives of capital accumulation and competition for jobs. The transformation of Canada into a neo-liberal, securitized, petro-state has much to do with changing global labour markets and the restructuring of capital. Canadian historians from all fields would benefit from considering how work and capitalism intersect with their areas of inquiry, the possibilities for synthesis, and new opportunities for writing and teaching engaged, critical history.

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In the lead-up to Congress 2016 and the 40th anniversary of *Labour/Le Travail*, we encourage CHA members to consider how they can help renew interest in the study of labour and working-class history in Canada. First and foremost, they can reflect on how their own work relates to the historical study of workers, class relations, and capitalism. Historians are producing innovative scholarship on these issues; however, for a variety of reasons they may not identify as labour and working-class historians. We encourage all Canadian historians to consider how their work might contribute to the field of labour and working-class history, and if it does, to make connections with other scholars studying these issues.

Historians can also incorporate labour and working-class history into their teaching. Many prominent scholars of the field have retired or will be doing so soon, and fewer graduate students are choosing to study the history of working people. Fewer people teaching labour history means fewer opportunities for students to learn about this fundamental part of the past. Moreover, issues of work, class, and capitalism have arguably never

been more pressing for students; many juggle multiple part-time jobs alongside their studies to help cover the skyrocketing costs of post-secondary education, and they have limited prospects for secure, well-paying employment after they graduate. Giving students the tools to analyze these issues historically can help them make sense of their lives and at the same time foster the development of the next generation of labour and working-class historians.

Historians can also build relationships with the many labour and community groups doing exciting work that combines labour and working-class history and public history. The Labour Heritage Centre in BC and the Workers’ History Museum in Ottawa are just two examples. Both institutions have produced a number of great resources, including films, walking tours, portable exhibits, and curricula for use in secondary schools, all while operating as “museums without walls.” There is much to be gained from closer collaboration between historians and community groups who produce and promote the history of working people.

Finally, we encourage historians to get involved with the Canadian Committee on Labour History. The CCLH has a number of events planned for the next meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, which will take place in June 2016 in Calgary. In addition to its business meeting, which all are welcome to attend, the CCLH will be sponsoring panels and holding its annual labour history workshop. The workshop is a wonderful opportunity to learn about the history of the host city and to interact with other labour scholars and members of local labour and community groups.

So, next year, as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of *Labour/Le Travail* and meet to discuss and debate current topics, issues, and trends in Canadian history, we hope that CHA members will attend some of the CCLH events at the 2016 meeting. In the meantime, we encourage historians to consider how they can foster renewed interest in labour and working-class history in Canada.

