

GETTING GRAPHIC WITH THE PAST



COMICS AND RADICAL HISTORY

By Sean Carleton and Julia Smith

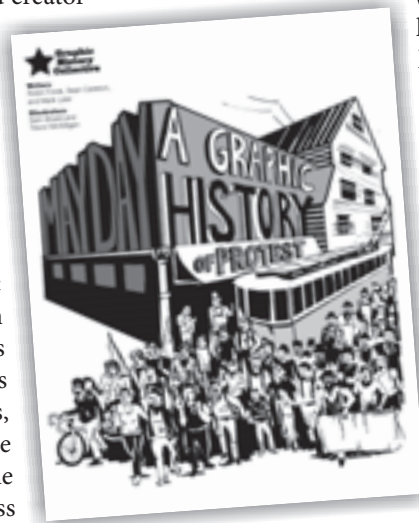
Increasingly, people are using comics, or “graphic novels,” as valuable resources for teaching and learning about the past. Comics such as *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1986 & 1991), *Persepolis* (2003), *Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography* (2003), and *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book* (2010) are fast becoming classroom staples. Comics are certainly not perfect pedagogical tools; the incomplete nature of the comics medium requires a high level of reader engagement and awareness to make sense of the limited text and sequential images. However, despite the limitations of comics, noted American historian and creator of many historical comics Paul Buhle argues that scholars should still take comics seriously. He suggests that in terms of capturing student interest and generating historical engagement, comics can be useful additions to an already diverse historical toolkit.

Similarly, in *A Comics Studies Reader*, scholars Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester make the case for academic involvement in comics. They argue that “the notion that comics are unworthy of serious investigation” is shifting to “a widening curiosity about comics as artefacts, commodities, codes, devices, mirrors, polemics, puzzles, and pedagogical tools. Comics are no longer a byword for banality; they have captured the interest of growing numbers of scholars working across the humanities and historically oriented social sciences” (2009, xi).

As part of academia’s widening curiosity about comics, and inspired by political works such as *Louis Riel, Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (2005), and *A Dangerous Woman: A Graphic Biography of Emma Goldman* (2008), in 2008, a number of artists, students, and professors associated with Simon Fraser University in British Columbia formed the Graphic History Collective (GHC) to further explore the possibilities of comics and radical history. Since its founding, the goal of the GHC has been to create comics to promote peoples’ critically informed engagement with the past.

In 2009, the GHC self-published a comic book on the history of

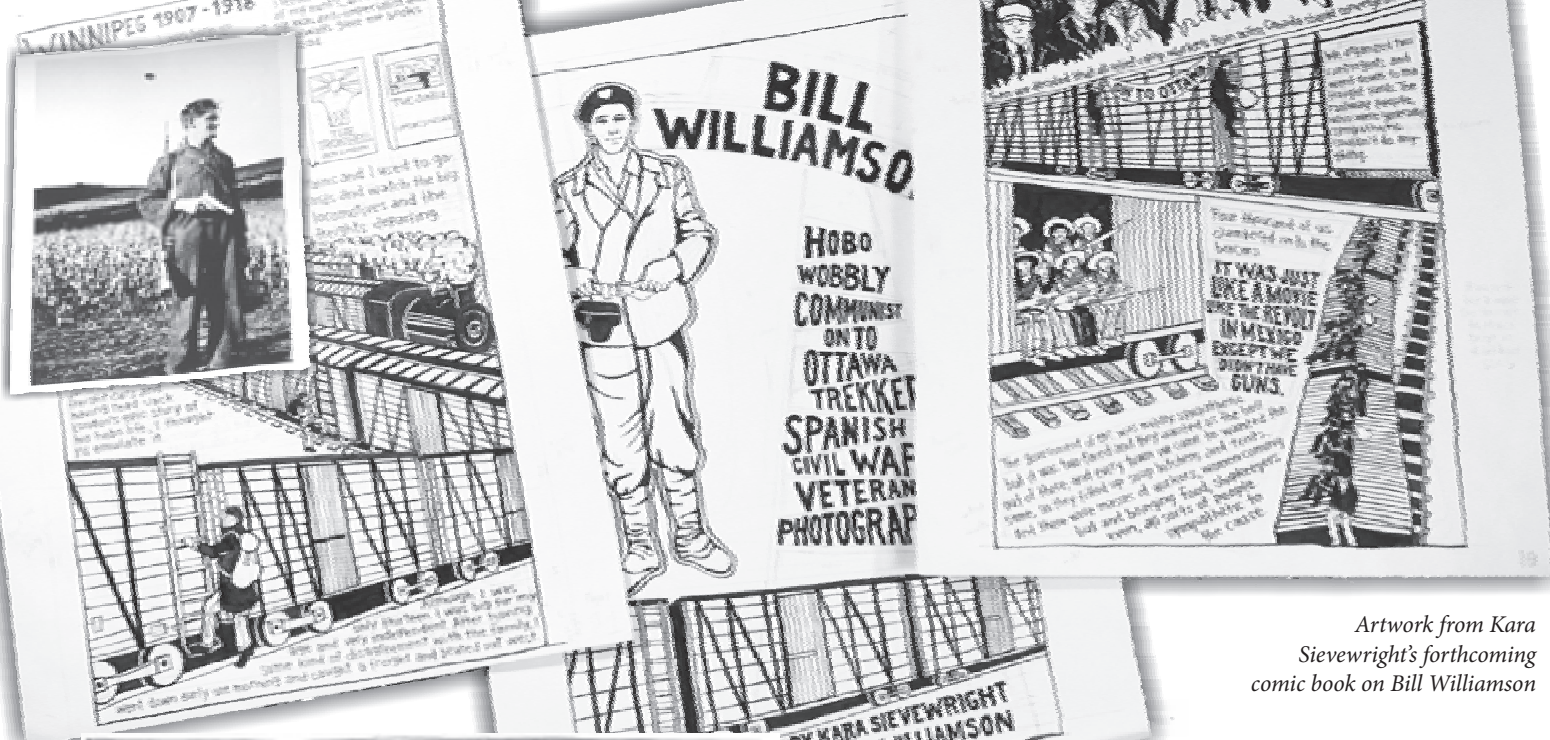
May Day – International Workers’ Day, or May 1st – in Canada entitled *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest*. This comic book was subsequently revised and re-published by Between the Lines Press in 2012. Though far from perfect, the May Day comic book has helped raise awareness about the meanings of May Day; close to 5,000 copies have been sold to unions, teachers, academic conferences, and individual activists and history enthusiasts. Most recently, renowned linguist, philosopher, and activist Noam Chomsky commented that “The May Day graphic history is a wonderful introduction to a major event in labor history and its significance, far too little known in North America.”



Cover of *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012)

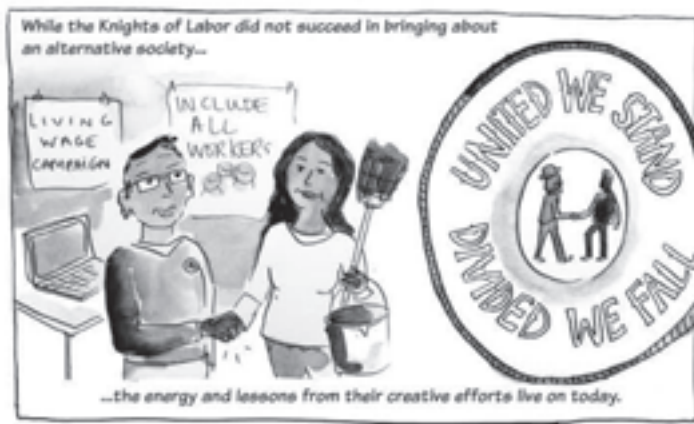
Building on the experience of producing the *May Day* comic book, in the fall of 2012, the GHC made a call for proposals for a new project called *The Graphic History Project*. Our vision was to collect and help people produce a number of short (approximately 10 pages) graphic histories that highlight the various ways people from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences have fought for economic and social justice around the world. These new comics would be made available for free on the GHC website and, depending on the final submissions, collected, edited, and published with a progressive press.

As a result of the call for proposals, the GHC is now working with Paul Buhle and a number of activists, artists, academics, and designers to produce new politically relevant historical comics. The first comic book of the project, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada 1880–1900*, was released in October 2013 and is available now for [free on the GHC website](#). Based on Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer’s work on early union organizing in Canada, *Dreaming of What Might Be* examines the contentious but significant history of the labour organization known as the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor and includes an introduction by Palmer and Kealey. The comic book shows how the Knights took root in



Artwork from Kara Sievewright's forthcoming comic book on Bill Williamson

By forging their own distinct culture and by organizing large numbers of workers across divisions of skill, sex, and race, the Knights differed from many of the conservative labour organizations of the 1800s.



Page 2 from *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada, 1880-1900* (<http://graphichistorycollective.com/graphic-history-project/comic-1-dreaming-of-what-might-be-knights-of-labor>)

Canada and “encouraged people to ‘dream of what might be’ and take action on the job rather than give into the poor conditions and lack of control others said were natural and unchangeable.” *Dreaming of What Might Be* does not shy away from some of the Knights’ discriminatory practices; however, in the end, the comic book suggests: “Though not without its faults, the Knights of Labor can still be drawn upon for inspiration. Today, as we work to develop new cultures and movements of opposition, the Knights’ call to ‘dream of what might be’ reminds us that an alternative society is always possible.”

Since January, several new comics have been posted on the GHC website as part of the Graphic History Project, including *Portland's Black Panthers*, *Suzanne Volquin: A Solitary Path*, and *The Battle of Ballantyne Pier*. New comics will be posted every few weeks on the GHC website in the coming months. Forthcoming comics will examine such disparate topics as slavery in Atlantic Canada, the experiences of Filipina women in Canada’s Live-in Care Giver Program, the Ontario Days of Action protests of the 1990s, socialist-feminist union organizing in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s, and the experiences of Indigenous longshore workers on the Vancouver waterfront in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In addition, other comics will explore the lives of such figures as Bill Williamson – On-to-Ottawa Trekker, photographer, and Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion veteran.

The GHC’s commitment to presenting history from a progressive political perspective will not be shared by all scholars. Moreover, people may disagree with the GHC’s belief that comics can be used to tell important stories about history in ways that can inspire new struggles and spark much-needed conversations about how to learn from the past to change the future. Nevertheless, we hope that initiatives like the Graphic History Project will contribute to the dialogue about the merits of comics as history and the value of using comics in the classroom.

Sean Carleton and Julia Smith are members of the *Graphic History Collective* (www.graphichistorycollective.com)