

# *Labour, Records, and Archives: The Struggle for a Heritage*

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Few persons will challenge Irving Abella's censure of the general level of knowledge among Canadians about their labour history or his indictment of scholars and union leaders for their failure to impart an appreciation of this element of the national experience to the public:

Canadians are appallingly ignorant of their labour past. They probably know less about their trade-union movement than any other people in the Western world, and likely know more about the labour history of the United States and Great Britain than they do of their own. . . . Quite clearly, Canadian academics and labour leaders have done a miserable job of educating their audience.<sup>1</sup>

But what about Canadian archivists? As the custodians of the documentary heritage from which such labour history must be drawn, have they performed any better than the academics and labour leaders singled out by Professor Abella? More important, regardless of what was or was not done in years gone by, how effective are archivists in the labour field today? An examination of these questions may stimulate both interest and activity in this particular field as well as contribute to the advancement of Canadian archival knowledge and practice in general.

## I

Archival activity in the labour field is a recent development in Canada; only in the last twenty years or so have academics, archivists and labour leaders manifested much concern for the survival and preservation of historical records of the labour movement. An important factor underlying this late progress had been the lack of scholarly interest in studying Canadian social development in general, let alone such specific expressions of the working class as labour unions. In contrast to the experience in the United States, no university early developed a programme of specialized labour studies which might have prompted its library to collect

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-1949* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1974), p. xi.

labour records. By comparison with many of today's establishments, archives then were small institutions struggling even to survive. Their horizons were limited by the historiography of the period, and they were inclined to respond to the demand for political and military documentation by creating extensive nominal indexes and elaborate calendars. Enmeshed by these time-consuming preoccupations, archives could hardly be expected to have been more outward-looking or socially conscious. With no encouragement or assistance from the historical community, and with grossly inadequate resources to meet even their principal objectives, Canadian labour leaders paid little attention to the fate of their records.

In the 1960s, this situation began to change. The impetus behind the inauguration of labour archives programmes derived from three sources: a growing number of historians interested in studying the labour movement started frequenting archives and union offices across the country; the labour movement entered a period of greater stability allowing more attention to be given to non-essential matters such as education and public relations, while at the same time some of the larger organizations were feeling the pressure of the expense and effort required to maintain extensive dormant files; and Canadian archives began to experience a period of unprecedented growth of both a physical and intellectual nature deriving in part from better facilities, more staff, and a broadening sense of archival purpose and responsibility. The ideal of working to preserve an image representative of the total society started to dislodge the traditional conception of the passive role of archives.

Before tracing the results of this conjunction of factors, the early efforts of one organization to preserve labour records should be mentioned. The federal Department of Labour Library in Ottawa, stimulated perhaps by the industrial relations philosophy of its first Deputy Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, which emphasized the collection and publication of information as a first step in conciliation, began to preserve historical documentation concerning the labour movement. In correspondence during 1922 and 1923 with leaders of the Toronto Typographical Union, the Librarian, Margaret Mackintosh, explained that "the Department is anxious to have in its Library complete and authentic information regarding labour organization in Canada from the earliest date down to the present time" and acknowledged "the difficulties in trying to obtain at this date authentic records of the early trade unions in Canada."<sup>2</sup> Even a set of proceedings of the national labour federation could not be located; the Trades and Labor Congress itself did not have the pre-1900 accounts. To some extent the Library's efforts were rewarded. For example, P.J. Ryan

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2 Margaret Mackintosh to George Murray, Secretary of International Typographical Union Local 91, 15 November 1922; Margaret Mackintosh to J.S. Williams, 11 January 1923; Canada, Department of Labour, Library, Vertical Files.

of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Moving Picture Operators contributed his copy of the Congress proceedings from 1883 to 1897.<sup>3</sup> John Moffat, a former leader of the Provincial Workmen's Association, deposited minutes and other documents dating from 1879 to 1917 of this early union of Nova Scotia coal miners.<sup>4</sup> Some nineteenth-century labour newspapers were preserved which became the nucleus of the largest Canadian collection of this important type of documentation. The Library also managed to save some early Departmental records of prime historical significance. Maintained in subject files, this material touches upon many aspects of labour and social history including specific strikes, western radicalism, the Communist Party, working conditions, unemployment, child labour, working women, and false representation to immigrants. Had this material not been appropriated by the Library, it would probably have been destroyed along with most other early Departmental records during the 1940s.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the efforts of the Department of Labour Library and some isolated examples of collecting in the labour field,<sup>6</sup> the first systematic activity with significant archival implications emerged indirectly from a Canadian Labour Congress Confederation centennial project. In the mid-1960s, the national labour federation commissioned its research director, Eugene A. Forsey, to prepare a history of the labour movement for publication. Not content to rely upon the few secondary sources available and the customarily-used primary publications, Forsey set out to locate minutes and other records of Canadian labour organizations. A team of graduate students was formed to canvass offices of provincial labour federations, municipal labour councils, and old union locals in search of material. Some early records were located, most notably in the Maritimes and the Prairies. Arrangements were made to place these papers in the most suitable nearby repositories.

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3 Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, *Canadian Congress Journal* 4, no. 10 (October 1925): 31.

4 Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette* 56, no. 12 (December 1946): 1681. As the Provincial Workmen's Association was founded in 1879 and amalgamated in 1917 with the United Mine Workers of America, Moffat's donation which was made in 1926 included a complete set of the minutes of the Union. The Departmental Library recently microfilmed this unique documentation so that copies may be borrowed on inter-library loan or purchased.

5 Canada, Department of Labour, Library, Vertical Files. The Library is in the process of microfiching this collection.

6 For example, early in the 1920s the Public Archives of Canada acquired a small collection of letterbooks, pamphlets and clippings of the prominent Toronto labour leader and social reformer, A. W. Wright. Unfortunately, the letterbooks cover only the last years of his top-level involvement with the Knights of Labor and leave the researcher thirsting for the earlier volumes.

The results of some of the searching were gratifying. After examining records of the Regina labour council which dated from its charter in 1907, W.J.C. Cherwinski reported to Forsey that he "was rather surprised with four files of correspondence which I got from the Regina Trades and Labor Council. On initial perusal I thought that it contained mainly per capita reports and attempts to broadcast the use of the union label but I was surprised to find a very complete coverage of the attitude of the Council toward such matters as the war, conscription, the OBU and the Winnipeg General Strike."<sup>7</sup> However, Forsey's assistants also knew heartbreaking disappointments as well as triumphs. Maritime sleuth Richard Rice was appalled to learn that the St. John labour council records, which had been salvaged from a fire in the local Carpenters' Hall only a few months earlier, were destroyed just before he arrived in town and that the Moncton council records, set out for his examination, suffered the same fate at the hands of a diligent janitor.

The efforts of Dr. Forsey resulted in the preservation of some labour records not only in local and provincial archives, but also in the national institution. Documents which had been stored in the small library of the Canadian Labour Congress were placed in the public domain at the Public Archives of Canada (PAC). For example, minutes of the Toronto labour council for the period 1871-1921, an early twentieth-century letterbook of the Toronto local of the Plumbers Union, and some nineteenth-century Toronto labour newspapers were transferred to the national archives. In addition, with the assistance of Forsey, the nineteenth-century minutes of the Toronto Typographical Union were microfilmed by the PAC and made available for research.

The Public Archives of Canada began to collect actively in the labour field during the late 1960s, as part of its new Systematic National Acquisitions Programme. In keeping with its general jurisdictional policy, the PAC began soliciting records of national union offices and leaders of Canadian labour organizations. An archivist was assigned to coordinate activity in this field, as was done in other non-political acquisition areas such as business, arts and sports. The voluminous collection of the Canadian Labour Congress was deposited at the PAC in 1970, appropriately becoming the first major acquisition of the national archives. Three years later, the national office of the Canadian Food and Allied Workers placed its dormant files in the archives. This collection includes material dating from 1941, when the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee

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7 W.J.C. Cherwinski to Eugene Forsey, 10 May 1965, Canadian Labour Congress Papers, Public Archives of Canada, MG 28 I 103, vol. 254, file entitled "W.J.C. Cherwinski." Senator Forsey's files of correspondence and research notes in the Canadian Labour Congress Papers are a valuable source of both historical and archival information on early labour history.

of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) became active in Canada, until 1968 when the United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers Union merged with its American Federation of Labour (AFL) counterpart. In the meantime, the national office of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America permitted the PAC to make a second copy of the microfilm which the office had prepared in 1956 of its records. In 1974, the PAC received the head office records of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers, the national union of non-operating railway employees which was founded in the Maritimes in 1908. This unique and highly successful Canadian union was the backbone of the nationalist labour forces until the emergence of public service unionism in the 1960s. Another railway workers' union with its national office in Ottawa, the United Transportation Union (UTU), also placed its dormant records in the PAC. The UTU was formed in 1969 by the merger of four operating railway workers' unions, two of which—the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen, and the Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen—have had substantial memberships among Canadian workers for nearly one hundred years. The most recent significant deposit is the collection of the national office of the International Association of Machinists, one of the most successful of the old AFL craft unions. At the present time, the national offices of several other unions, including the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Textile Workers Union of America, are in the process of transferring their historical records to the PAC.

Although in general, national labour leaders do not seem to have accumulated large private collections, the PAC has acquired some important material from individuals. The most significant example is the collection of left-wing militants Madeleine Parent and R. Kent Rowley covering mainly the period from the early 1940s to 1952 when they led the United Textile Workers of America in this country. Labour lawyers would seem to be another potential source of significant documentation in this field judging by the papers of J.L. Cohen which were donated to the PAC in 1972. Cohen acted for many unions and left-wing political groups in Central Canada during the 1930s and 1940s, and his case files are extremely rich in information.

To supplement its holdings, the PAC has begun to purchase microfilm copies of original labour records held in the United States, but which are essential for Canadian studies. For example, while in many respects the Knights of Labor was the most important union in Ontario and Quebec in the nineteenth century, very few of the Canadian records have survived. A copy of the Knights of Labor records held at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., which consist of the correspondence of the order's stalwarts, T.V. Powderly and John W. Haynes, the proceedings of the General Assembly and various subordinate bodies, the publications of

the union, membership records, and other types of documentation, has been acquired from the Microfilming Corporation of America. From this company, the archives has also purchased a copy of the set of proceedings and constitutions of ninety-one international unions which nearly fills a major gap in essential documentation for Canadian labour studies.

Although the holdings and acquisition policies of various other Canadian institutions with a labour orientation are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this journal, this brief survey of the state of labour archives in Canada would be incomplete without noticing some highlights of activity outside the national sphere. In the late 1960s, the Special Collections Division of the Library of the University of British Columbia emerged as a centre for labour studies with a West Coast emphasis. Supported by faculty members and students engaged in left-wing political and labour history, the Division has acquired numerous significant labour collections. An early acquisition which helped establish the strong labour emphasis in the Division was the complete set of minutes of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council from its establishment in 1889 to 1956. The Library houses material from outside the Vancouver metropolitan area such as some minutes and correspondence of the Prince Rupert Council, as well as particularly rare types of labour material, including the minute books of the Directors of the labour newspaper, the *British Columbia Federationist*, and of the Vancouver Labour Temple Company. A critical step in the development of the Special Collections Division as a labour-oriented repository was taken with the 1967 decision of the Canadian section of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill), to place its records in that repository. Records from Mine-Mill offices across the country were shipped to the Division to form the collection. The Vancouver and New Westminster Divisions of the Amalgamated Transit Union, an important craft union active during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have also deposited records in the Division.

A third Canadian repository which has declared a more than general interest in and commitment to labour records is the Vancouver City Archives. As was the case at the Public Archives of Canada, the move of the City Archives into the field resulted from a new approach to collecting which emphasizes the responsibility of the archivist to identify material which ought to be preserved because of its overall importance in understanding the structure and evolution of Canadian society. Since 1970, several important collections have been obtained, notably the records of local longshoremen, painters, and sheet metal workers employed mainly in shipbuilding. The City Archives has also acquired the very important collection of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union, a Canadian union with headquarters in Vancouver and most of its membership concentrated on the west coast. This example of jurisdictional overlapping in labour holdings, among others illustrated above, is an issue which will be discussed below in more detail.

The newest labour archives programme in Canada, and one which demonstrates another approach to the collecting process, stems from a project developed by persons within the labour movement interested in promoting a multi-faceted centre of labour education. The McMaster Labour Studies Programme, directed by a former national officer of the United Steelworkers of America, Harry J. Waisglass, seeks to provide continuing education for members of the labour movement from the initiate to the experienced union administrator. A wide variety of subjects, and course structures ranging from evening lectures and weekend seminars to university degrees, is envisaged. Labour history is to be one of the important fields developed, and linked to this part of the programme is the creation of a labour archives within the Special Collections Branch of the University Library. Some important Hamilton labour material has already been deposited, including records of the municipal labour council and the Steelworkers local at the Steel Company of Canada plant.

In Quebec, a significantly different approach to historical labour records may be discerned. Historians interested in organized labour, and the working class in general, have themselves begun to locate and to encourage protection of relevant material through an organization known as the Regroupement de chercheurs en histoire des travailleurs québécois. Within a fairly systematic framework, local groups are surveying labour records in their communities and publicizing their findings in the Regroupement's newsletter. When needed and requested by the custodian of the material, the documents may be arranged and inventoried by the historians and their students. The ultimate disposition of the records has been of secondary concern to this point, though the Archives nationales du Québec has indicated an interest in a long-term microfilming project. The two principal labour federations in Quebec, the independent Confédération des syndicats nationaux and the Fédération des travailleurs du Québec (which is affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress), maintain their dormant files under the supervision of records managers who are highly conscious of the historical significance of the material. The collections are open to researchers, and the records managers participate in the activities of the Regroupement.

This sketch of archives with a special emphasis on preserving labour material and the glance at a few of their holdings suggest some of the impressive advances which have been made in a rather short period of time and some of the variety of techniques being employed. Four institutions have established active acquisition programmes in labour which have resulted in the transfer of numerous important collections to their custody, while in Quebec a programme of identification and enumeration of labour material is well underway. Other Canadian repositories, while unable or unwilling to put a sustained effort into the field, have nonetheless acquired some significant labour records in the course of their general archival

programme.<sup>8</sup> Archivists and unionists alike are now much more attuned to the historical value of this documentation, and research use of the material is gratifyingly high. The fields of labour, working class, and social history are attracting both established scholars and dedicated students. Perhaps even more satisfying to the labour archivist is the growing use of the records by members of the labour movement itself. Twenty years ago the commissioned history of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers, *It Was Never Easy*,<sup>9</sup> stood virtually alone; today, many labour organizations are sponsoring historical projects, which naturally involve archival research, leading to a variety of publications. Moreover, some unions have begun to use archival records of other organizations, including government, in the preparation of briefs on subjects such as occupational health hazards, where an historical perspective is an invaluable part of defining and illustrating the issues. Visual records, such as photographs, film, posters, cartoons, and charters, as well as tape recordings, are increasingly being used in slide presentations and film dealing with labour and working class history. Armed with a growing knowledge and understanding of Canada's labour past, unionists and academics are revising school textbooks and curricula to reflect more justly the contribution of workers and their organizations in Canadian history. Future generations will not be as uninformed of the nation's labour heritage as are their parents.

Yet, pride in the accomplishments to date must not distract us from confronting the problems which are emerging as the labour programmes mature. Any success at all in a long-neglected field is deceptive and may divert attention from the need to evaluate results and to revise procedures of an ongoing programme. Perhaps the most telling comment on the state of the historical records of the labour movement in Canada is that in many instances now, we can even talk of maturing rather than simply embryonic programmes.

## II

Canadian labour holdings are now sufficiently numerous and representative to permit an appraisal of the state and direction of the labour archives

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- 8 For example, the Public Archives of Manitoba has acquired a number of collections relating to the Winnipeg General Strike, the One Big Union, and the local labour movement in general, including the papers of Victor Midgely, records amassed by R.B. Russell, and exhibits used in the trials of the General Strike leaders. Researchers and archivists will find Russell G. Hann *et al.*, *Primary Sources in Canadian Working Class History, 1860-1930* (Kitchener: Dumont Press Graphix, 1973) a useful bibliography of archival and library sources for labour and working class history. The *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories* is also helpful although somewhat tedious to use because the titles of labour papers are inadequately indexed.
  - 9 W.E. Greening and M.M. MacLean, *It Was Never Easy, 1908-1958: A History of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway, Transport and General Workers* (Ottawa: Mutual Press, 1961).



field. Respectable samples of records from national and local union offices, and from the head office and municipal councils of the major national labour federation have been acquired. Some individual leaders and provincial federations have also been approached. So far as economic coverage is concerned, Canadian holdings include records of unions involved in fishing, mining, food processing, printing, and transportation, as well as the manufacturing of machinery, electrical products, textiles, and clothing. The selection includes both craft and industrial unions. The international union movement and the nationalist forces are covered to some degree as are other ideological positions. Archivists and historians are also becoming more cognizant of what has not survived, a critical factor in developing and evaluating acquisition programmes.

The most striking characteristic of Canadian labour records is the absence of material pre-dating World War II. Although workers have been organizing collectively in almost all regions of the country for about one hundred years, it is obvious that the archival holdings will never properly represent the period prior to the last thirty-five or forty years. *Archivistique* simply entered the labour field too late to ensure the preservation of the documentary basis of the early working class heritage. While this situation can be explained partly by factors common to almost any other area of archival interest, the Canadian labour movement itself has possessed certain characteristics which have contributed to the gravity of the situation.

For various reasons, the Canadian labour movement was structurally weak until the 1940s. Membership was small, in both absolute and relative terms, and was concentrated among skilled workers organized in numerous craft unions. Power resided with the individual unions rather than with the central labour federations. Labour associations were chronically embattled and insecure in the days before legislation compelled employers to recognize workers' organizations, provided for dues check-off, and prohibited suspension of workers for union activity. Furthermore, membership—the source of all funds and the energy for survival—fluctuated with economic conditions and management strategies. Under such precarious circumstances, it is hardly surprising that unions gave little thought to the survival of their dormant records.

The fact that most unions in Canada were part of American organizations, usually referred to as "international" unions, made the situation even worse.<sup>10</sup> Canada was generally designated as one district in

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10 The following analysis of the archival effect of the integration of the Canadian labour movement with that of the United States in the craft union period results from a preliminary investigation of various secondary sources and some primary material. Needless to say, the dearth of early union records in Canada makes primary research very difficult. To appreciate the organizational status of the Canadian district in the international unions, it should be remembered that there were usually a total of eight or ten districts in a union and as many vice-presidents.

the international union structure and as such was entitled to a vice-president and a few more or less full-time organizers. These men were the highest officials of the union in Canada. Although many of the unions maintained substantial headquarters in the United States, accommodation at the district level was meagre. Many of Canada's top union leaders worked out of their own homes; the more fortunate few had small rented offices and very limited secretarial assistance. Office arrangements were altered with changes in leadership, often entailing a move from one city to another. Below the district level were regional and provincial bodies which had even fewer physical facilities. Most were run from the homes or local union offices of the current executive. At the level of the local, conditions were somewhat better. The local usually ranked second in importance to headquarters in the international union structure, and could generate additional money by organizing a fund-raising event or by imposing a special levy on its membership. Larger locals employed business agents to administer their affairs, and some could afford rented accommodation. However, such arrangements were usually unstable at best, as the short-lived era of the labour temple clearly demonstrates.<sup>11</sup>

The most complete set of records of any organization, be it a business, political party, voluntary association or a labour union, is usually maintained by the principal officers at headquarters. In some instances, these officers are vested with formal responsibility for ensuring the preservation of important documentation by a constitution or directive; in other cases, they simply assume this function. As well as the records being conveniently located for the top administrators, the head office invariably has the best facilities for records storage, and can provide reference service for subordinate branches. This general bureaucratic procedure clearly operated in the international unions. A Canadian vice-president or local officer of an international union probably did not bother to ensure the survival of the records in his possession on the assumption that the head office of the union had copies of the most important communications or reports which summarized major developments. It would not occur to him that because his head office was located in the United States, no documentation of the union's activities in Canada would be preserved in this country.

The 1940s marked a watershed for the Canadian labour movement. The surge of industrial unionism in the mass production manufacturing sector, the achievement of compulsory collective bargaining legislation, and the

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11 Labour temples were buildings cooperatively constructed, purchased or rented by local unions in an urban centre for use as offices, meeting halls and recreational centres. Most were established during the first decade of this century but had to be abandoned during World War I which severely disrupted the labour movement. See Canada, Department of Labour, *Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada, 1913-1920* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1914-1921).

breakthrough in the area of union security profoundly altered the complexion of the movement. Membership and bargaining power increased dramatically, enabling unions to win substantial improvements in working conditions. In archival terms, the important result was the introduction of an element of bureaucracy into Canadian labour organization. The new industrial unions, which soon dominated the labour scene by virtue of their size and central place in the economic structure, functioned with much greater autonomy from their American headquarters than had the craft unions. The CIO organizations established national and regional offices, and employed larger staffs. To a limited extent the old craft unions also participated in the benefits of the new climate of industrial relations and consequently fleshed-out their operations in Canada. As their affiliates established themselves on better footings, so did the national, provincial and local labour federations whose revenues and authority derived from the unions. Such relatively stable and bureaucratic conditions resulted not only in the creation of more paper records but also facilitated retention when files became inactive. Office rental costs and the occasional need to relocate remained important or even over-riding factors, but on the whole, a considerable amount of documentation seems to have been preserved.

Most of the pre-World War II labour holdings in Canadian archives consist of incomplete runs of minutes of certain union locals and municipal labour councils. Not surprisingly, considering the education and daily experience of their creators, the minutes usually noted only decisions, with little explanation of what prompted them or the manner in which they were reached. Frequently, the locals whose early records have been preserved are not the most significant in historical terms and often their surviving records do not coincide with the more important events or periods in their development. Only the typographical union is represented to a degree commensurate with its importance, the minutes of five locals having survived. Records of the craft locals engaged in industry (such as the iron moulders) and the building trades, both of which were very important in the emerging urban centres of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are extremely rare. The various miners' unions so critical to early Western, Maritime and Northern Ontario labour history, the railway shopcraft and running trades organizations which accounted for so large a percentage of union membership until the recent decline of rail transportation, and the unions which disappeared in the wake of industrialization such as the coopers and the Knights of St. Crispin (shoemakers) have left very few traces. Only four reasonably complete sets of minutes of municipal labour councils have survived, those of Toronto, Vancouver, Regina and Ottawa. For the last two named, some early correspondence, committee minutes and financial records have also been preserved. To appreciate the dimensions of what has been lost forever from the Canadian past, it should be remembered that in the early years of this century, almost every

community larger than a hamlet had a labour council which was usually a very active social and political body.

Higher echelons of Canadian labour organization are even more poorly represented than the local levels for the period before the Second World War. Virtually no records of the provincial or regional bodies, the organizers, or union vice-presidents have survived. The same must be said for early papers from the various national and provincial labour federations. Canadians who organized for the American Federation of Labor in this country, notably John Flett of Hamilton, have left no records. This absence of documentation from intermediate and top levels of the early labour movement may help to explain the current predominance of local labour history in Canada. During the early years, unions were most visible in their immediate community and the historian can supplement the extant labour records with other local sources, especially daily newspapers. Non-labour sources at the regional and national levels do not provide comparable information about workers or the labour movement.

The possibility of substantially improving archival holdings of early Canadian labour records is remote at best. From time to time an isolated document may turn up, such as the late nineteenth-century minutebook of the Toronto printing pressmen which was rescued from a garbage can recently, and donated to the PAC. These small items are intrinsically very valuable, but will fill only the odd nook and cranny of early Canadian labour history. More substantial caches may be unearthed, such as the Gainey Collection now at Trent University,<sup>12</sup> and copies of relevant records held in archives and union offices in the United States must be acquired.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, most of the history will still have to be drawn from sources other than the written record of workers. Researchers will have to continue relying upon and interpreting the documents of such persons as politicians, employers, journalists, and philanthropists who, for various reasons, often opposed labour organization. Knowledge and understanding of labour's development will ever suffer from this bias in the available documentation.

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12 The Collection, amassed by M.H. Gainey, who was an organizer for the Journeymen Barbers' International Union, consists of the records of ten Peterborough locals including iron moulders, carpenters, bricklayers, machinists and painters, as well as documentation of the Trades and Labor Council and the Building Trades Council. Although the material dates from 1882 to 1937, most of it falls within the first two decades of this century. The Collection, approximately twelve feet in length, was found in an old commercial building in downtown Peterborough in 1968. See Eugene Forsey, "Discovery of Union Records in Peterborough," *Le Travailleur Canadien/Canadian Labour* 1, (October 1968): 29-30.

13 There may also be some important records in the archives of the two British unions which had substantial memberships in Canada prior to World War I, namely the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners.

## III

The post-1940 labour records scene presents certain new challenges to archivists, although a number of the problems inherent in collecting from the earlier period linger. Canadian union offices are still small and cramped for the most part, but now the national and regional headquarters are generally larger and better equipped than the local facilities. Most unions still rent accommodations, often in expensive downtown cores for reasons of accessibility, which makes the expense of storing dormant records more evident as well as decreases the likelihood of material surviving when moves are required. Whereas businesses and churches frequently own buildings where even at worst corners can usually be found at little or no additional cost to store accumulations of records, this is rarely the case with labour organizations. This form of transience has obvious implications for the survival of labour records.

An even more pronounced difference, with archival ramifications, between businesses and labour associations is that the former derive tax benefits from the expenses incurred in keeping records. Labour organizations make no profits, and therefore do not pay taxes and can not receive tax credits. Money put into records keeping brings no direct or indirect tax deductions, but only reduces the funds generated to pursue the purpose for which unions exist, which is, after all, the improvement of the condition of their members and non-organized workers. Again, unlike the situation in business, although there is a small body of documentation which unions usually keep for a period of time at least for their own administrative purposes, such as certification papers, contracts, financial records, workmen's compensation files, and seniority records, Canadian labour organizations are under little statutory compulsion to keep certain types of records. Moreover, in addition to the legal variance, there also seems to be a more natural administrative concern with records keeping in business, perhaps because there is a clearer link between the daily activities of the present with those of the past in terms of reaching essential and fundamental objectives. In any event, records keeping is accorded less importance in labour than in business and unions divert very little of their budgets into records at any stage: creation, maintenance or disposal. The result is quite predictable: with few exceptions, union records are poorly organized and serviced; records management practices are virtually unknown; filing is simplistic, uncontrolled, and unsystematic; distinctions between operational and other records are at best vague; disposal is haphazard. In many national offices wholesale destruction of files is still the answer to space problems, and often accompanies changes in staff or re-location of the office. This situation is probably even more prevalent at the regional and district levels.

As a result of the condition of most labour records, archival selection, arrangement and description are lengthy processes, usually demanding

specialized professional knowledge for most of the work. When the archivist can usefully observe the doctrine of original order, greater care than usual must be devoted to the analysis and description of the files. This is essential to the quality of the reference and retrieval services that the repository must provide for the creating organization as well as for researchers. The standard of this service will be a key factor in the donor's attitude toward the repository and to archival programmes in general. The lack of records management in labour also requires the regular transfer of material at relatively short intervals, perhaps every five years, to ensure that files are not destroyed as they accumulate in the offices. Even if this can be accomplished, it may be necessary to maintain more frequent contacts than usual with staff members at various levels in order to keep abreast of changes in the organization which may affect its records and demand unforeseen action by the repository. Of course, an acquisition programme in any contemporary field should encourage and provide for regular deposits of material from ongoing organizations, but in view of the precarious situation of labour records in union offices, archives must be particularly vigilant in this area. Furthermore, the repository must be able to process these additional accessions expeditiously to provide accurate and rapid reference services for the creating organization.

Obviously the adoption of records management procedures would materially benefit labour organizations as well as archival institutions working with labour records. Whether they like it or not, unions now operate in a highly regulated system of industrial relations in which retrieval and manipulation of information is extremely important. Modern records management will assist them to better perform their traditional role in this new bureaucratic environment. In addition to being of administrative value, a properly devised scheme of records management will also serve the archival interest. Unfortunately, Canadian labour administrators are generally unaware even of the proven systems and available expertise for handling records, partly because they are outside the lucrative commercial market to which the private records management firms address themselves. Since this situation shows no sign of changing, archives should accept some responsibility for assisting labour associations toward implementing records management programmes. This might take the form of offering advice, both general and technical in nature, of conducting records surveys, and of preparing disposal schedules. Such a natural extension of the archival role would both ensure the preservation of historically significant labour documentation as well as render archival processing and servicing of this material more efficient, hence less costly. Clearly it would be as beneficial in the private field as it is now in the sphere of government records. By providing an additional service of direct and immediate benefit to labour unions, this repository involvement would

elevate the status of the archival stage of records keeping in the eyes of labour leaders. Considering that the state provides no encouragement, through either direct or indirect subsidies, to offset the cost of sound records keeping to non-profit organizations, the limited assistance suggested above would seem to be appropriate, justified, and cost-effective in terms of preserving this element of our national heritage.

The development and progress of labour archives programmes indicate the need for modifying traditional practices in another area, that of jurisdictional relationships among repositories. As suggested earlier in this paper, institutions which have made a special effort to collect from the labour field generally have operated within their traditional jurisdictions, with some exceptions for various reasons. The Public Archives of Canada has concentrated upon records of national offices; provincial repositories have collected from their labour counterparts; and local institutions have worked within their immediate areas. Most labour records acquired by universities have derived from the local community. Superficially, this would seem to represent an ideal division of labour, a convenient meshing of the pyramidal structure of the labour movement with that of the Canadian archival system. Certainly, each level of labour organization, local, provincial or regional, and national, has a specific role and therefore a particular type of historically-important documentation. For example, the records of a local will be the most revealing about specific working conditions and attitudes of the rank and file, while provincial documentation will cover more fully the legal processes of labour associations, such as certification and conciliation. Furthermore, the interaction of the different labour organizations within one level of the structure and within a geographic area, such as union locals in a city, has a particular character that can only be captured by an acquisition programme attuned to the actual situation. In other words, collecting *horizontally* across the union structure is extremely important and perhaps best typifies the present situation in Canada, although it must be pointed out that the geographic distribution of archives actively seeking labour records is so poor that the picture is dreadfully distorted. Nevertheless, the existing archival system takes even less account of the fact that the individual union has been the primary structural unit of the Canadian labour movement, which suggests that vertical links may have been more important than the horizontal relationships. In any case, ideas and processes move up and down the pyramidal structure continually, and to follow their courses requires access to documentation from all levels. At the present time, the manner in which jurisdictional responsibilities of archives are perceived and acted upon does not give sufficient recognition to the significance of the vertical link in Canadian labour organization.

Lack of coordination or even consultation between repositories collecting labour records in different spheres of archival jurisdiction has

resulted in a haphazard, confusing and inefficient situation which is undermining the traditional Canadian approach, at least in the labour field. Each institution operates in isolation within its own sphere for the most part, ignorant of the activities of other repositories in which it might participate for mutual benefit. For example, a municipal repository in the West might acquire the records of the local of a particular union; five years later, a provincial archives in Central Canada might approach the council of the same union in that province; the national archives may never acquire the head office records of that same union. Obviously, the preservation of the local's records is rendered less historically significant and useful if the records of the provincial council in the western province and those of the head office are not being saved. The permutations are numerous, but they all result in the same deplorable situation in which scarce archival resources are at best diluted, and at worst are even occasionally working at cross-purposes. Simply put, it would be better to select for preservation certain records from all levels of organization from a limited number of unions than to have a haphazard collection throughout Canada of the national files of some unions, the district records of others, and the papers of yet other locals, wherein it would be only by accident that the vertical connection would be reflected. This accident shows no sign of happening, and archives by accident is surely no substitute for systematic and cooperative collecting. In addition to saving a lesser image, current practices do not impress labour people, which in turn diminishes acquisition opportunities. Appreciating the significance and interdependence of each level of their organizations, union leaders often exert pressure on repositories to collect material beyond traditionally accepted archival jurisdictions. The attempt by Mine-Mill to concentrate all its Canadian records at the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia is but the most successful and important example of this tendency, which derives, it must be said, not from archival practice or theory, but from a reality to which archives must adapt. At the present time, archivists mindful of traditional jurisdictions are unable to recommend a complete or satisfactory archival programme to a labour organization, let alone to preserve a reasonably accurate picture for posterity.

One answer to such problems might be a form of repository specialization whereby an individual union designates a particular archives as its official repository with jurisdiction over all its records from the head office to the local level. An institution may concentrate exclusively on one or more labour organizations, and labour may be its only sphere of interest or one of several. In the United States, where this approach predominates, most specialized labour archives are attached to universities with labour studies programmes. This American system has had several effects in Canada, principally because of the existence of the international unions, but also because of the close ties between the archival communities of the



two countries. The most concrete result is typified by the deposit in the late 1960s and early 1970s of a substantial collection of Canadian records of the United Automobile Workers in the Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs which was designated by the Union as the official repository at its 1962 international convention. Some nineteenth-century Canadian records of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen have also been sent to the United States for retention in the archives selected by the International Union. Provided that labour archival activity in Canada continues to advance, which may not be a secure assumption at this time, it seems unlikely that many more of our union records will be alienated to foreign institutions. Nevertheless, the American practice has injected another tension into the Canadian archival and research scene.

The labour archives programmes in the United States seem to be highly successful. By virtue of specialization, the institutions can respond to the particular needs and interests of their labour constituency. They are able to provide a total archival package to the union including systematic vertical collecting, oral history, publications oriented to union members as well as to archivists and researchers, audio-visual presentations, and educational programmes. In turn, the labour organizations participate in the archival programmes by helping to locate documentation, by persuading members to deposit and open their papers, and even by financing some of the operations. Canadian members of international unions which have successful archival programmes in the United States, such as the United Steelworkers of America, naturally look for similar activity in Canadian institutions.

In general, union people in Canada tend to undervalue the importance of the traditional archival function of ensuring the preservation of documentation for advanced research, probably because they have yet to encounter much historical writing rooted in an understanding of workers and their organizations. They place greater emphasis on the interest and ability of the archives to provide some cultural services for their members and workers in general, partly to compensate for the failure of other cultural institutions in this respect. Specialized American repositories have been able to cater to both needs. In Canada, the McMaster Labour Studies Programme, which was conceived and is run by people in the labour movement, seems oriented in this direction.

Specialized repositories occupy the middle of the spectrum between general archives and the so-called institutional archives. The prospect of labour organizations developing and maintaining their own archives, as some large corporations and various churches are doing, is very unlikely because of their lack of resources and physical facilities. Even in the United States, where labour unions are much larger and wealthier, the

option of institutional archives has not really taken hold. The establishment of records management systems, including the maintenance of dormant records centres, is probably as much as can be expected from Canadian labour organizations for some time. Even so, this development alone would be a major step in the archival process. On the other hand, widespread implementation of repository specialization seems as unlikely as the development of institutional archives. Few of the established university archives have shown much interest in the labour field, and the possibility of a new repository entering this sphere seems slight. The Canadian labour movement probably could not contribute a significant amount of money even to this type of system. A small number of repositories might develop specializations in the records of particular unions, encompassing documentation from all organizational levels and geographical areas much as the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia has done in the case of Mine-Mill. Nevertheless, given the highly fragmented structure of the labour movement which has resulted in a plethora of individual unions, the chance of this approach leading to the preservation of an adequate sample of Canadian labour records is very remote.

Consequently, the most promising scheme for labour records in Canada would seem to lie within the established system of general repositories. Working in the separate institutions, in the regional and national professional associations, in federal-provincial meetings of archivists, and through informal channels, this system can be made to be more responsive to the labour archives situation. Interested archivists should meet regularly to develop and to monitor a Canadian labour acquisitions strategy based upon the designation of particular unions and their sub-offices as prime archival targets. Representatives from institutions interested in some records of a particular union should jointly approach the organization to discuss records management and archival retention for all offices of the association. Repositories which have not been particularly active in this field, especially those situated in areas where labour organization is strong, should be encouraged and aided if necessary. Finally, archives must develop a greater awareness of the different clientele to be reached when planning displays, publications and other means of involving the community in the archival process. Organized labour is one of the constituencies which merits greater attention. Unions should be asked to cooperate in such projects in order to involve them more in archives, but the most important responsibility and valuable contribution which labour can make to the field is the proper care of its documentation through records management. Stimulated and assisted by the archival profession, Canadian labour organizations must move in this direction not just to satisfy archivists, but to provide better and more efficient administration and to develop their membership's awareness of the heritage of the

working class and the labour movement. The common job to be done is large—a fact underlined by the gross omission from the chapter on archives of any direct reference to labour and its records in the Symon's commission report *To Know Ourselves*.<sup>14</sup>

- 14 In view of the emphasis placed on business records throughout the chapter, the lack of specific attention to labour documentation is deplorable. On one occasion labour records are noted as a source for business history! The only other mention of labour material is a subsidiary reference in connection with the problem of the export of records of international organizations. Concerned here primarily with documentation of international business corporations, the Commission suggests that consideration be given to the imposition of export controls on such material, and perhaps also on international union records. Unfortunately, it demonstrates little understanding of the historical dimension and current dynamic of the situation, either in labour or in business. T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, vols. 1 and 2 (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975). See chapter entitled "Archives and Canadian Studies," vol. 2, pp. 69-85.

## Résumé

Après avoir brossé un tableau succinct de l'histoire des archives des syndicats du travail en décrivant un certain nombre d'initiatives prises par quelques individus et institutions, l'auteur évalue la richesse du matériel disponible. Bien que la situation des archives antérieures à la Seconde Guerre Mondiale soit peu encourageante, on peut se montrer plus optimiste pour la période plus récente tout en souhaitant qu'une meilleure gestion des documents soit mise à contribution. L'auteur suggère, en terminant, que l'on modifie les juridictions archivistiques actuelles afin de permettre la mise en vigueur de politiques d'acquisitions intégrales basées beaucoup plus sur des entités syndicales complètes que sur les paliers d'activités des divers organismes. Un tel système serait basé sur la désignation de dépôts officiels et requerrait une grande concertation entre archivistes intéressés.