

From the Guest Editors

Documenting Labour: An Introduction

With this issue, *Archivaria* returns to the theme which served as the focus of its first special issue. It goes without saying that much has changed in the archives community generally, and more particularly in the field of labour archives, since Nancy Stunden, Philip P. Mason, and their fellow contributors addressed themselves to the theme of "The Working Class Record" in the Summer 1977 issue of *Archivaria*. However, while many of the changes evident during the past decade or so have been of a positive nature, other developments, especially recent ones, are cause for concern to archivists, donors, and researchers alike, a realization that we endeavoured to keep in mind as we selected the articles and studies which constitute this issue devoted to the theme of "Documenting Labour."

As Peter DeLottinville's survey of English Canadian labour archives and André LeBlanc's article on the Quebec milieu clearly indicate, labour archivists, like labour historians, no longer have to legitimize their activities. The need to document labour has become a generally-accepted responsibility within the nation's archival network. However, the uneven development of labour archives programmes within that network remains a serious problem; witness, for instance, the paucity of labour-related archival activity in the Maritime region, with the exception of Dalhousie University and the Beaton Institute. Furthermore, as DeLottinville and LeBlanc ably demonstrate, the relative success of established programmes has led, in certain instances, to custodial problems that were not fully anticipated in 1977.

Like many other archivists, those responsible for labour records are now obliged to rethink their acquisition strategies in light of decreasing storage space and limited resources. A decade ago, when many of us rushed to inaugurate programmes documenting labour, appraisal and selection were not the watchwords that they have become today. This is not to say, however, that the selection process merely entails the acquisition of fewer and better records of the sort we have always collected.

As independent curator Rosemary Donegan cautions, even in a period of more sharply defined selection criteria, we must be conscious of deficiencies in the docu-

mentary record that we help to shape. Future acquisition strategies will have to be constantly and collectively revised in order to redress areas of neglect like the iconography of labour. We must also display a similar willingness to adjust our perceptions of much of the material that we already hold, as Joan Rabins and others are making us more aware of a new and difficult responsibility: redescription. Clearly, an archival function that once seemed finite is now more properly regarded as a dynamic, ongoing process, as the past is continually reinterpreted by contemporary observers.

Just as labour archivists must be prepared to redescribe existing holdings and to accept non-traditional material like iconographic records and, of course, increasing amounts of machine-readable records, so must archivists in other fields become more aware of the labour sources in their custody. As John Rumm and John Smart reveal, business and government records are being recognized as important sources for the writing and rewriting of labour history. This same point is made by Paulette Dozois in a study focussing on the International Labour Organization, a tripartite organization that cannot be fully understood without a three-pronged archival approach.

Obviously, the observations of Dozois and other contributors, such as Elizabeth Beaton who reports on the Beaton Institute's efforts to document the steel industry on Cape Breton Island, argue for more effective integration and standardization of finding aids in all forms, not only within institutions but also within the archival community as a whole. It's not enough to document labour in both public and private records in all media; we should also be able to describe and retrieve such multi-faceted documents in a more holistic fashion.

All these concerns and challenges constitute a formidable agenda for change in the labour archives field. Naturally, this agenda is not equally relevant to all archives; moreover, no single institution could possibly implement every item on the agenda. Nevertheless, labour archivists and their colleagues will, we hope, find this issue helpful in defining their priorities. Rod Young's "Labour Archives: An Annotated Bibliography" should serve as an invaluable reference tool, whose purpose, like that of this issue, is not only to measure our progress and accomplishments, but also to indicate some of the key issues that will confront us in the near future.

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