

## Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



### *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914*, by Bryan D. Palmer, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979, 331 pp.

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minimiser les inconvénients causés à la population. Parmi ces moyens qui évidemment ne feront pas l'affaire des syndicalistes, soulignons différentes actions qui pourraient être employées par l'employeur dans l'éventualité d'une grève ("contingency planning") comme des méthodes alternatives pour assurer le service, incluant le sous-contrat; la désignation d'employés essentiels; la restriction des clauses de sécurité syndicale à la simple formule Rand, de façon à pouvoir utiliser des travailleurs de l'unité de négociation qui ne supporteraient pas la grève (ce qui serait évidemment illégal au Québec actuellement); une plus grande automatisation du service. L'auteur souligne aussi la possibilité pour l'employeur de recourir à des mises à pied comme dans le secteur privé ainsi qu'à des lock outs. Enfin, elle recommande que l'employeur public n'hésite pas à se lancer dans une campagne de relations publiques pour démontrer à la population le coût exorbitant de certaines demandes syndicales, ce qui aurait pour effet de rendre la population plus tolérante devant l'interruption de tel ou tel service et de permettre à l'employeur de mieux résister à ces demandes en supportant un plus long conflit.

Malgré cette panoplie de suggestions, Sandra Christensen admet que la plupart de ces mesures sont faibles et qu'elles contribueraient sans doute très peu à réduire la vulnérabilité d'un employeur pour qui il sera habituellement plus facile d'accéder aux demandes syndicales que d'encourir les risques politiques à résister. C'est pourquoi, étant donné les caractéristiques particulières de l'emploi dans le secteur public, notamment l'absence de contraintes imposées par le marché du travail aux demandes d'augmentation de salaires des employés et croyant fermement en la validité du principe de la comparaison des salaires entre le secteur privé et le secteur public, l'auteur en arrive à proposer son système que d'aucuns qualifieront de révolutionnaire.

Selon l'auteur, si on laisse les salaires du secteur public être déterminés par le jeu de la négociation collective, cela revient tout simplement à admettre que les travailleurs membres des syndicats les plus puissants auront les

meilleures conditions de travail sans égard à la situation prévalant dans le secteur privé. En faisant déterminer la rémunération par un tribunal composé de gens extérieurs aux parties syndicales et gouvernementales et jouissant d'une immunité comparable à celle des juges de la Cour suprême, on s'assure que les salaires des employés du secteur public seront alignés sur ceux du secteur privé et, selon l'auteur, on évite même que les salariés fassent les frais des politiques d'austérité des gouvernements comme ce fut le cas lors de l'imposition des contrôles anti-inflationnistes. Par ailleurs, la négociation collective, avec droit de grève, se ferait sur tous les autres éléments de la convention collective.

Le moins que l'on puisse dire de ce livre, c'est que ses conclusions ne manqueront pas de faire sursauter le lecteur. On peut peut-être lui reprocher de puiser un peu trop abondamment chez des auteurs reconnus pour la sévérité de leur jugement sur la négociation collective dans le secteur public (Wellington et Winter, par exemple), de même que déplorer certaines recommandations visant à faciliter l'utilisation de briseurs de grève. Cependant, on peut difficilement contester son parti pris en faveur de l'intérêt public; et la démonstration des vicissitudes du système de négociation collective actuel transforme graduellement la réaction négative initiale que l'on éprouve vis-à-vis sa proposition en sympathie plus ou moins consciemment avouée.

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**A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914**, by Bryan D. Palmer, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979, 331 pp.

Bryan Palmer is one of the ablest and most productive of the young Canadian historians currently writing the 'new' labour history pioneered by E.P. Thomson in Britain and Herbert Gutman in the United States. In brief, this approach rejects the older institutional approach to trade union history,

which dates back to John R. Commons and his associates at the turn of the century, in favour of an examination of the history of the working class as such. Unions thus became merely one aspect, although still an important one, of working class history. The framework is essentially a marxist one (and the reader should be warned at the outset that this reviewer does not consider himself a marxist). For Palmer, as for Thomson, it is impossible for any social class to exist except as the consequence of an historical process: the struggle of people for power or against exploitation over a period of time, within a society structured in a pre-determined way (usually around the relationship to production), which brings a class or classes into existence. Conflict is thus a necessary and essential aspect of an evolving, industrializing society, and trade unions are just one weapon of the emerging working class.

In *A Culture in Conflict*, Palmer has chosen to centre his attention upon the working people of Hamilton, Ontario, between 1860 and 1914. During these years, Hamilton evolved from a quasi-rural town into a major manufacturing centre. One might expect, if the Thomson model is an accurate guide, to find the appearance in Hamilton of a fully self-conscious working class by the time of the First World War.

The basic problem here, of course, is the familiar one: it is difficult to discern, in either the past or the present, a distinctive North American 'working class' which fits the marxist model, and there is little reason to expect Hamilton to be exceptional in this respect. Palmer clearly recognizes this difficulty. He is, he states in his preface, attempting a "three tiered task":

First, to establish the importance of the skilled workingman as an historical presence, and to outline the essential context within which the craftsman assumed this importance, that of industrial capitalist development. Second,... to explore the culture of the skilled worker, as manifested in various forms of associational life, traditional forms of enforcing community standards and mo-

ality, patterns of shop floor control, and strains of working class thought. Third, an attempt is made to chronicle the emerging patterns of class conflict, revealed in the nine hour struggle of 1872, the upsurge of the Knights of Labor in the 1880's, and the "new unionism" of pre-World War I years. (p. xi)

Only the third 'tier', it will be seen, deals with class conflict directly as such. Instead, Palmer has given priority to another theme, that of the problems of the skilled worker under industrial capitalism. Here, we are in the world of David Montgomery, Harry Braverman, and others who have focussed on 'workers' control' — the conflict over work rules and factory discipline. This is the struggle, in other words, of the skilled worker against an evolving factory system which would strip him of his autonomy and eliminate the need for his skills. Palmer charts the declining influence and importance of skilled workers in Hamilton industry. As early as the 1850's, Hamilton's master craftsmen were losing control of their own little shops, and becoming wage earners in larger establishments. In 1851, 24% of the city's work force was employed in firms employing ten or more people. By 1871, this has risen to 83%. Between 1860 and 1914, says Palmer, Hamilton's skilled workers consistently used the strike to ease the pinch of work discipline in these emerging factories.

What is equally important, however, and what gives unity to Palmer's book, is that these skilled workers were able to maintain this level of protest because they could draw upon all the resources of a distinctive working class culture which was "rich and complex, mediating the impact of capitalist discipline and development." The main body of this book thus consists of a wide-ranging, and often fascinating, discussion of Hamilton working class life and protest in which the skilled worker plays the starring role.

The book is topically and chronologically organized under two main headings, 'culture' and 'conflict'. Under culture, Palmer discusses first the associational life of Hamilton working people, which included

both formal institutions such as friendly societies, the Mechanics' Institute, fire companies and baseball clubs, as well as "an informal network" of associations and traditions such as workingmen's clubs, charivaris and whitecapping. Palmer is surely correct in emphasizing the importance of these aspects of working class culture. Trade unions were an integral part of this associational structure, and their success in the nineteenth century can only be understood if put in this context. One might quarrel, however, with Palmer's contention that baseball games, the social activities of friendly societies, and so on, acted almost entirely in the direction of increasing working class solidarity. Other social classes engaged in these activities too, and one might also argue that they provided potential bridges across social gaps.

Under the heading "The Culture of Control", Palmer examines the resistance of skilled workers to industrial capitalist work discipline. This is a convincing chapter. Palmer demonstrates that the real bastion of workers' control was the craft union, as it was used to defend the rules and regulations of the trade. In practical terms, this meant the stubborn, day-to-day defence of commonplace practices and workplace customs by groups of workers and by shop committees. This reviewer is a former factory worker, and much of what Palmer says here rings true. It also seems to this reviewer, however, that the culture of the workplace is considerably more than just a "culture of control", as Palmer suggests. This culture also involves a network of traditions, folklore (often trivial in itself), and relationships between workers while on the job, which is perhaps more important as a unifying force than the playing field or the workingman's club.

The next chapter, on working class thought before 1900, is less convincing, probably because of difficulty in determining what the average worker thought. Palmer devotes much of his attention to prominent reformers such as businessmen Isaac Buchanan and journalist Phillips Thompson.

Under his second main heading, 'conflict', Palmer comes closer to traditional forms of labour history, examining the nine-hour movement, the Knights of Labor, and the "new unionism" at the turn of the century. He does, however, provide new insights, and new answers to old questions.

One of the most serious problems of the early industrialists, as E.P. Thomson has shown, was transforming pre-industrial workers into disciplined, time-conscious factory hands. In the nine-hour movement of the 1870's, Canadian workers fought back rising the employers' weapons: they had been taught, by factory managers, to put a value on their time. The movement failed, Palmer suggests, because of a lack of solidarity owing to the immaturity of the political and class consciousness of workingmen, although he does admit that the depression of the mid-seventies was an important factor.

As for the Knights of Labor, Palmer and others working in the history of this organization are performing an important service by rescuing the Knights from the charge, levelled most vigorously by Gerald Grob, that the Knights were merely reactionary romantics, paddling obtusely against the AF of L current. It has now become clear, thanks to Palmer and others, that the K of L was, at the grass roots level, a movement for genuine reform, educating a whole generation of trade unionists in ideology, tactics and organization.

The period of the new unionism, from the late nineties to 1914, represents for Palmer a new phase in the history of Hamilton's working class. This was a period of deep conflict, characterized by an intensified struggle for workplace autonomy against employers who were armed with two new weapons against unions and workers' control — scientific management and the open shop. The new unionism was more than just new militancy, Palmer demonstrates, since it involved the organizing of previously unorganized unskilled workers as well as workers in new industries such as chemicals, electrical goods and street railways. It was on the street

railways, in fact, that some of the most important and bitter strikes were fought during this period. As 'practical' men, Hamilton employers preferred the open shop to scientific management, believing that the simplest way to increase output was to eliminate the restrictive work practices protected by union agreements. But by its very nature, confrontation may have been the least effective way of undermining union strength. Palmer's evidence suggests that the failure of the open shop drive before World War One derived from the effectiveness of the strike as a weapon.

What emerges from the concluding chapter in the book (although this is suggested somewhat obliquely) is that Hamilton worker had achieved a real measure of class consciousness by 1914: they had not broken ranks to any extent; there was "more than a hint of an autonomous working class culture", relatively uncontaminated by the "emerging bourgeois order"; no 'labour aristocracy' had developed to undermine labour militancy. Palmer, in other words, stops just short of suggesting that Hamilton possessed a true 'working class' by 1914.

This book fully merits the serious attention of anyone interested in Canadian labour history. It is thoroughly researched, well-written if sometimes overdetailed, and is placed within a framework which enables the author to range over much unfamiliar terrain. Palmer himself admits certain "gaps" in the discussion: labour politics, the family, and religion. Of these, religion is probably the most serious omission, as Palmer himself acknowledges, since religion may have played a central role either in breeding acquiescence and accommodation, or giving impetus to radical reform. Yet, gaps and all, this is a very good book. Moreover, one can skip the theory and still learn a great deal, although the theoretical discussion is in some ways the book's most important and interesting constituent.

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**Multinational Collective Bargaining Attempts**, by Herbert R. Northrup and Richard L. Rowan, *Multinational Industrial Relations Series no. 6*, Industrial Research Unit, Philadelphia, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 1979, 580 pp.

Ce volume est le résultat d'une série de recherches entreprises depuis 1971 et qui ont donné lieu à la publication antérieure de seize monographies par ces deux mêmes auteurs ainsi que par quelques autres collaborateurs. Le centre de recherche du Wharton School de l'Université de Pennsylvanie se spécialise dans l'étude des activités internationales des syndicats et plus spécifiquement, dans la négociation collective multinationale.

L'étude est principalement basée sur plusieurs centaines d'entrevues réalisées avec des représentants des milieux gouvernemental, patronal et syndical concernés par ces activités multinationales dans les principaux pays d'Europe, d'Asie, d'Australie et des Amériques.

Comme on peut s'y attendre, c'est la grande corporation multinationale qui est touchée par cette recherche et la question fondamentale que se posaient les deux auteurs était de savoir si le développement accéléré de ce type d'entreprises ayant des succursales dans plusieurs pays avait entraîné des activités correspondantes de négociation collective multinationale.

Les conclusions de l'étude sont à l'effet que de telles activités ont été très rares pour ne pas dire inexistantes jusqu'à date, mais que les conditions pour qu'une telle forme de négociation collective se développe dans les prochaines années existent de plus en plus.

Le livre revêt l'allure d'une juxtaposition d'études de cas, car après avoir consacré un chapitre aux caractéristiques des principaux figurants à savoir les entreprises multinationales et les associations syndicales concernées, tout le reste du volume, sauf le dernier chapitre, porte sur la description des pratiques de négociations collectives de ces géants du système capitaliste qui peuvent être aussi