

To The Dartmouth Station A Worker's Eye View of Labour History

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TO THE DARTMOUTH STATION:

A Worker's Eye View of Labour History

Edited by John H. O'Rourke and Michael S. Cross

EDITOR'S NOTE: What follows is an edited transcript of a two-hour conversation recorded at the Jib and Topsail Tavern, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, on the evening of December 17, 1975. Gerald S. _____, a Halifax dockworker (identified in the transcript as G.S.), and John M. _____, a construction worker from Dartmouth (identified as J.M.), were recorded by a hidden microphone installed in a pub table as part of the fieldwork for a psychological study, "The Frequency of Certain Biological and Excremental Usages in the Scatological Conversation Forms of Working Class Nova Scotians: Towards a Typology of the Evolution of Colloquialisms". At this point, the editor would like to thank the American Philosophical Society, The Canada Council, and the Vito Genovese Foundation for their funding of the project.

The conversation was very revealing about the language patterns of labourers. Quite incidentally, it also recorded the views of two workers on recent writings in labour history. Their evident familiarity with the literature and the seriousness with which they discuss it, indicates how labour history's influence has spread from the academic community to the workaday world, deeply affecting how workers see themselves and how they define appropriate goals for their class. Once the importance of this aspect of the tapes became clear, the principal investigator consulted a historian, Michael S. Cross of Dalhousie University, and obtained his aid in preparing the transcript for publication.

My only regret is that the editors of this journal felt it necessary to expunge most of the more interesting scatological references. They have either been translated euphemistically or omitted, such omissions indicated by the usual ellipses.

John H. O'Rourke, Jr.

* * * * *

G.S.: Hey, Johnny-boy, been around to the bookmobile lately? Eh? They got some nice collection of labour history books.

J.M.: Yeah. I been reading them all as they come in, got the old lady there to order a bunch. This is the first time I been to the pub in weeks—too busy readin' up on the labour history most of the time. My old woman says I got my nose in a book so much I don't have time to **** or even ***** her *****.

G.S.: Hah, I know you, Johnny, you always got time for it. I bet you revolve the lower portion of her anatomy until it disengages.¹ But you're right about the labour history. Five years since you coulda' read the whole lot over a couple of beers. Now those guys in the universities are pourin' it out so fast there'll soon be more books and articles than there are workers. I figure it's because some working class kids got into the university and they're interested in writing about their own history, their own families' history. They don't figure to be in parliament, not a lot of their relatives were in parliament, so that don't mean as much to them as what went on in the factories. All that New Left trouble at the university helped start it too, when they found out the kids in Poli Sci 202 weren't all there was to the proletariat. And, then, some of them are just tryin' to live with the fact they're fat and prosperous now. You get them university radicals to a meeting, they stand out like a sore thumb: they're the ones dressed like lumberjacks when the rest of us has got shirts and ties on. Looks to me like equal parts of lefty politics, nostalgia, and guilt.

J.M.: Yeah. And learning about what's happening in foreign countries, too. That old English commie, Thompson², has got more followers down here and up in Canada than he's got amongst the Limeys. Your basic Canadian labour history has got all foreign. Used to be real Canadian, just like the rest of Canadian history, it was all about leaders and institutions and politics, about trade union centres and all the backstabbing that went on in them. Now they keep talkin' about social history and somethin' they call "working class culture". I always get this picture of Joe Morris prancin' about in a short skirt. Guess that isn't what they mean, but it's a nice thought.

¹ This is a translation of a more basic vulgarism. It demonstrates an interesting and frequent tendency to employ mechanistic metaphors in discussing sexual relations. It suggests the deep alienation in regard to sex which persists among North Americans of whatever social station. See: James Q. Delancey, *Machine in the Bedroom: Industrial Revolution and Sexual Revolution*. (London 1971).

² The reference is to the influential British historian, E.P. Thompson. See his *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London 1963).

Used to be, when you heard your professors talkin' about culture, you knew right off what they meant—books by dead people, operas in some foreign language, pictures that looked like they was painted by some bloody drunk monkey. But this new culture the labour history guys are on about, that's a whole new ball of ****. They got that idea from some old anthropologists. Come to think, though, it is like the old culture; them anthropologists are probably as dead as them literary classics, and it sure sounds like a foreign language they're writing. Anyway, it sure is confusin'. They keep shifting the god damn meaning on me. Sometimes, culture's just all the stuff you do in your life; sometimes it's what makes you aware of your place in society, the old class consciousness sneakin' in the back way. Mostly, though, it's whatever they can find that made the workers pissed off at the bosses for takin' away. I don't know, Gerry. Are we expressin' our working class culture by just sitting here rotting our livers? Or do we have to go over an' punch them professors in the gob for violatin' our turf to express it? Them labour historians make you self-conscious every time you take a piss, wonderin', "What does all this mean? Am I doin' it right?"

G.S.: The problem is they're not getting together. It's really a new field but the stupid buggers already don't talk to each other. The ones doing "labour history" are off in one corner writing about the institutions, the ones doing "working class history" are off in a different corner talking about culture. It's like what happened to the old history, only there it was the economic historians and the political ones. It all started off real good in the dirty thirties, then they went off on their own ways, not gettin' much but your basic vulgarizations of each others' ideas. I sure wouldn't want a bunch of professors building my house; they'd make the frame so it wouldn't fit on the foundation.

J.M.: True, but there's some pretty good stuff coming out anyways. Take the internationals unions. Please. That's a joke, Gerry, like them comedians on the box, they always say "Take my wife. Please." Hah. Anyways, this Upper Canadian, Abella, and this guy from the Boston States, Babcock, they've almost got me convinced there's something to all this nationalist crap.³ The Yankees came up, took over, and stopped Canadian unions developing in their own way, stopped them getting political. One thing I like about Abella is he's the first one to give the Reds their due. Most of the old stuff treated the Commies like they had

³ The reference is to: Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour*, (Toronto 1973); and Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada*, (Toronto 1974).

bad breath, got all upset about "alien ideologies penetrating the Canadian labour movement". As if anybody gave a shit what their politics was, as long as they delivered. You remember the good organizing they did down here and how the political fights with the CCFers screwed that up. It's a piss-off that the union bigwigs in Canada took their marchin' orders from the Americans and kicked out the Commies. But I guess it started before that. The Communists and the CCFers got so tied up fighting each other they forgot what the union movement was all about.

Anyway, Yankee control goes way back. Babcock's convinced me that it really was a conspiracy, back in nineteen ought two. Old Sam Gompers made a lot of noise about international brotherhood, but he was really into what somebody called "defensive expansionism", expand so the companies can't sneak up to a cheap labour Canada and drive U.S. wages down through competition. It makes you appreciate Canada, to see the same things happening there that always happen down here; you never have control, you get certain kinds of industrial development and certain kinds of labour developments, cause of needs and quarrels somewhere else.

G.S.: You're right about Abella. It's the best damned book on labour history yet. It would be even better, though, if it had some social history in it. You don't get much idea of how all the politics affected the real workers. All you hear is what the fornicating⁴ union bosses said to each other. But, hell, let's not kick a gift horse in the nuts—it's a real good book. And Abella's got another good one out, that collection of articles, *On Strike*.⁵ Writing about strikes is slippery, 'cause you tend to forget that 99 percent of the time workers ain't out on strike or thinkin' about strikes, and you forget that it ain't always the dramatic strikes that show you what workers are really into. But Abella chose good strikes, strikes that tell you a lot, and he got the writers to put them into a context that makes sense of them. I especially likes old Irv himself on the Oshawa dust up with Mitch Hepburn, that slimey bastard, and Morton's thing on the Stratford chicken pluckers. Reminded me of my old man talkin' bout when they sent the fornicating army into Cape Breton in the twenties. And I do mean the *fornicating* army. Yeah, old Irv's a good man.

⁴ This is a translation of the vulgarity which arises most frequently in the conversation. In the entire dialogue, the two workers employed the word a total of 236 times. Frequency counts have become an important device in analyzing the vernacular. See: W. Stillwater, "Frequency of Occurrence of **** and ***** in the Everyday Speech of Wisconsin Chicken Pluckers", *Journal of Linguistic Typology*, XXXIV, no. 3, (1969).

⁵ Irving Abella, ed., *On Strike*. (Toronto 1974).

I don't know about Babcock, though. It's a funny book. You want to like it because you know you've been screwed by the so-called "internationals". And you know old Gompers was a horse's ass. And most of the stuff on international unions—Crispo and that crowd⁶—is academic apology from guys who believed in the market economy and all those other bloody stupid superstitions. But Babcock doesn't make it easy for you. For starters, there's the way he sampled the Gompers and Morrison papers. Guess it made sense for a thesis, with so many letters to get through, but you can't help but wonder what he missed by doin' it that way. Then there's his overall viewpoint about the way a national labour movement ought to have developed. From New York, it may make sense to talk about Canada as a "country wracked if not yet wrecked by regionalism"⁷, but from Nova Scotia it looks like regionalism is what this ***** country is all about. And, Johnny, before you buy Babcock, you should look a little closer at his stuff on the Berlin convention of 1902, where they turfed out the unions that weren't affiliated to the A.F. of L. I mean, what fornicating⁸ evidence does he have that there is any bloody big American conspiracy? The fornicating report from two fornicating guys from fornicating Winnipeg to their fornicating Trades Council! And he makes a bloody big deal out of the vote against the dual unionists. Let me show you; I carry the fornicating book in my lunchpail to read in the john. I don't know about some of the guys down on my dock. The jerk who uses the cubicle next to me at breaks reads Spinoza, for Christ sake! Silly bugger—I keep sayin' to him, "What the fornication do you want to read Spinoza for? What fornicating bloody good is Spinoza goin' to do you on the docks? Read labour history, for Christ sake. Or, if you insist on the bloody philosophy, at least read Kant, something fornicating useful!" Anyways, I hope Spinoza gives the stupid ***** diarrhea.

Look here, Johnny. He says the vote went through because of the members of locals of internationals who "threw their support to the international cause" and the Trades Council reps who "stood solidly behind the revision...".⁹ You know I like to play around with numbers, so I did some figuring. The overall vote was 73.1 percent in favour of the ouster. Members of internationals' locals voted 76.1 percent in favour, Trades Council reps 70 percent, and others 68.2 percent. I mean forni-

⁶ John H.G. Crispo, *International Unionism*, (Toronto 1967).

⁷ Babcock, *Gompers in Canada*, p. 216.

⁸ Again, we have translated this common vulgarism. Its usage once again suggests a continuing alienation from sexual freedom, despite recent highly publicized changes in mores. It is invariably used in a pejorative sense, rather than indicating pleasure.

⁹ Babcock, *Gompers in Canada*, p. 89.

cate, that ain't a big enough difference to amount to much.¹⁰

'Nother round.

J.M.: Thanks, Gerry. This stuff really tastes like horse urine, don't it? You know, it's funny the split there is between the stuff written about the 1900's and the stuff written about the 1800's. Maybe it's because when you're looking at the start of the labour movement it's less complicated, and you can get out of the political bag, you can look at the social history of workers. Or maybe the further you go back, the more it resembles what it was like in England, and so you're more influenced by E.P. Thompson and the English crowd. Or maybe when you go back before Confederation, or just after it, you get less hung up on big national things, trade union centres and all that crock. Whatever, the labour history of the 19th century gets a lot closer to social history.

Have you read Steve Langdon's piece on the emergence of the working class movement?¹¹ Now that's the best combination of labour history and social history I seen yet. He takes old Thompson and his idea of class and jams her right through Canadian history in the middle of the 19th century, and out the other side comes your basic class consciousness. Now I never lived in the 1870's, even my old lady ain't *that* old. But Langdon's stuff feels right. Babcock may not convince you, but Langdon's got to.

Look at that god damn fag over there—hair down to his ass, ring in his ear, beads, patch on the crotch of his jeans—must be a professor.

Where was I? Yeah. You feel in your gut that Langdon's right, that that's how it happens. The bosses squeeze, you have to protect your job from competition, they're bringin' in bloody big machines that make your job a fornicating drag. That's when you start to feel like you belong to a working class. I remember seeing a poster from when they had a strike down at Harvard. It said: "Strike because the cops clubbed your roommate. Strike because there's no poetry in your classes. Strike because they want to control your lives. Strike because you hate cops." That was smart, playing on those things, on feeling oppressed, on feeling somebody is screwing around with your life, on feelings of us and them. Christ, it even made those asshole college kids think they were a class,

¹⁰ The unexpurgated version actually suggested that the statistical variation was as significant as a small quantity of the excrement of a raccoon. The raccoon is a small American nocturnal carnivore, which has become proverbial because it combines innocence of appearance with larcenous behaviour. See: Clarence C. Meadows, *Drunk as a Skunk: North American Fauna in Vernacular Speech*, (New York 1968), Vol. III, pp 386-413. Meadows is also highly interesting on the titmouse: *ibid.*, Vol. V, pp. 106-367.

¹¹ Steven Langdon, *The Emergence of the Canadian Working Class Movement*, New Hogtown Press, (Toronto 1975).

for a while. And that's the way it is with workers. When the boss is being paternalistic and psyching you up to compete with your buddies, and things are pretty good, you think you're middle class, like everybody else in this bloody country. It's only when you can see yourself sliding, see you don't have control, that you know you're working class and you better bloody well hang in there with other workers, or you'll get screwed for sure. Old Sam Gompers and his "more", though, made it pretty hard to remember there's classes:

G.S.: Langdon's pretty good, alright. He must be a cocky little bastard, it's such an ambitious piece. But it coulda' been a hell of a lot better. He gets all preachy about unionism and socialism now, and how what happened in the 1870's set the patterns. The fact he admits there's been a hundred years of history in between doesn't cover the fact that he's reaching from history to what we used to call polemic at the Workers' Education League. Pretty fair polemic, but still not history.

J.M.: Hell, I don't mind that polemic. Historians are usually too bloody gutless to let you know what they really think. It's kind of refreshing when he calls a spade a spade.

G.S.: Problem is, he's calling a shovel a spade, leapin' over a hundred years between cause and effect. But I'm not as convinced of the class consciousness bit as you are, anyway. Is it legit to use comments by a few union leaders and paper editors to show class consciousness? Just by being in the positions they were, they were forced to put it together in a way other workers wouldn't. And is he really giving us the full poop on what they thought? Who'd they mean when they talked about the "workingman" and his rights? Remember that old emission of anal wind¹² John Locke? He used to talk about the "people" all the time, and how they oughta run things back in England. Only he meant just land-owners, they were the only real "people" for him. I'd say the Canadian craft union leaders worked the same way. Their "workingman" was really some craftsman, just like them. They weren't into some vague working class that would include the great unwashed. Crap, they spent a lot of their time trying to convince the bosses they were safe and respectable. Ain't that like you were sayin', about everybody wantin' to be middle class? Then and now, if we're real good, we'll all go to our reward in that great suburb in the sky.

¹² A translation. This vulgarity, referring to a socially unacceptable bodily function, has high frequency. Its usage represented 4.8 percent of total vulgarisms employed by a control group of 64 Nova Scotia labourers.

J.M.: Jeez, Gerry, you're always so god damn critical. If old J.C. himself told you about the crucifixion, you'd say "Yeah? Let's see the nail holes." I can't say you're wrong, but you gotta remember there are different rules in this kind of history. You can't prove nothing about something as hard to pin down as class consciousness. You want the poor bastard to nail jelly to the wall. Does it feel right, does it convince your gut, not your head? That's the only way you can tell if somebody's right or wrong on this stuff.

G.S.: The old lefty cop-out, Johnny me boy. Holyo shat¹³, no wonder the mainstream historians put down this stuff, when you can always claim, "This is different, don't ask me for the usual standard of proof."

J.M.: Your problem is you've got a scunner against university people. You're always raving about books by real working people; you don't apply the "usual standards" to them. Take that oral reminiscence, *A Very Ordinary Life*, by Phyllis Knight.¹⁴ You loved that. You kept saying how it was the first real look at working class life, not condescending like those sociological studies by Lorimer and that academic crowd.¹⁵ But how fornicating ordinary was her life? How many people you know had German revolutionaries in the family, how many people you know used to dance around the German woods with the *Wandervoegel*? When she does get down to the ordinary life in Canada, the book is just plain boring. Her son, in his smartass introduction, says her life proves we working stiffs ain't "reactionary, stupid, racist, culturally and intellectually illiterate".¹⁶ I don't think she proves anythin'. First off, she ain't ordinary, with all that German socialist and intellectual background. Second, she ends up as apolitical as anybody. Christ, what does she remember that was good about the old days in Canada? "... open spaces and the free and easy way of things, the fact that there were pretty few regulations . . ."¹⁷ How reactionary can you get? There weren't no regulations, so the bosses could rip you off, so you could have a god damn depression where my old man had to grow

¹³ The origin of this phrase is hotly debated. Some, such as Paul Fleckens-coopie ("Living Archaisms in East Hackensack", *Bulletin of the Emmy Schwartz Museum*, [1973]), believe it is an Elizabethan corruption which has survived. Others, notably Ralph Rackball, Jr., ("Shit, Shat, Shot: Evolution of Excremental Descriptive Forms", in *Writing About the Body: Essays Presented to Sister Muriel Augustine*, [Cleveland 1974]), contend it is more recent.

¹⁴ *A Very Ordinary Life, As told to Rolf Knight*, (Vancouver 1974).

¹⁵ James Lorimer, *Working People*, (Toronto 1971).

¹⁶ *A Very Ordinary Life*, p. iv.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

potatoes in the backyard or starve, while fornicating Eaton's made a fortune. All this bloody nostalgia about the depression and the war gives me the pips. People just want to think they were involved in somethin' important, no matter how fornicating rotten that somethin' was. You watch. Twenty years from now Americans are goin' to be writing nostalgia about the Vietnam War.

G.S.: Now hold on. Lookin' at it again, I agree that book ain't as shit hot as I thought at first. But even a poor book by a worker's got more real to it than a good book by a bloody professor. There ain't nothin' wrong with a little nostalgia. Sure the depression was rotten. But, Christ, it was worth goin' through. People did work together the way they don't usually, it was different, you were involved in something important. Just fornicating well surviving proved you had guts. You're the one has bought the bosses line that prosperity is all that counts, that the way you get along with other people ain't important. We got along better with people then, that made it worthwhile. No . . . let me finish.

Look at other books by workers. You can't deny the best thing on the depression is Ronald Liversedge's memoir about the On to Ottawa Trek.¹⁸ So you can say it's romantic, it only shows the unemployed side and it's unfair to the government, and it lays down a straight Commie line. But you're the one who said that the important thing is whether it feels right, and, god damn, that account feels right. And why? It don't pretend the depression was a great old time; it does say the depression, rotten as it was, got working people together, got them to try to take over control of their own bloody lives. Even if they failed, that made the whole mess worthwhile.

And take the Winnipeg General Strike. If there's one fornicating event we've heard more about than we want to, that's it. But there are some pretty good things on it. I'll admit that Bercuson's book¹⁹ is solid. He does a real good job of tellin' about the background of the strike, the social and economic conditions in Winnipeg that set it up. I like that, it makes the Strike more understandable, less some irrational bloody eruption. But I'm not sure I buy the way he puts down the radical leadership, makes it seem as if the things just sort of got out of control and made it more radical than people wanted it to be. But you get a different picture if you look at stuff by the people involved. Norm Penner's edition of the strikers' own history shows how bloody radical they really were, that they really did want to change the whole fornicat-

¹⁸ Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar, (Toronto 1973).

¹⁹ David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, (Montreal 1974).

ing system.²⁰ Funny, the most interesting thing of all on that is a letter. Back a couple years ago, an N.D.P. member of parliament reviewed Penner in one of them artsy-fartsy Upper Canadian magazines. Old W.A. Pritchard, the last of the Winnipeg Seven still alive, fired back a real good letter.²¹ He said Orlikow's middle o' the road, 'weren't-the-strikers-all-real-respectable' line, was a lot of crap. Those guys on trial were pushing the revolutionary ideas of the Socialist Party of Canada, they were, accordin' to Pritchard, "the fighting section of the trade union movement."²²

J.M.: You're a bloody romantic. You'll buy any old container of excrement²³ if it's tarted up with workers' unity and the old class struggle.

G.S.: Talk about fornicating romantic! Your friend Langdon and his crowd make fornicating Harlequin Romances look realistic. Take a hard look at the introduction to that bibliography of primary sources in working class history that Hann and the Kealey's and Warriar wrote. Or Kealey's introduction to the edited version of the 1889 royal commission and his article on the shoemakers' union. Or, worst of all, his pamphlet on working class Toronto at the turn of the century.²⁴ Now, I'll give you

²⁰ Norman Penner, ed., *Winnipeg 1919: The Strikers' Own History*, rev. ed. (Toronto 1975).

²¹ The Orlikow review of Penner appeared in the *Canadian Forum*, November-December, 1973, and W.A. Pritchard's letter in the July, 1974 issue of the same magazine. The *Forum* describes itself as "An Independent Journal of the Opinion and the Arts", not as an "artsy-fartsy Upper Canadian Magazine". A law suit launched by the previous editor of *Forum* against Mr. Gerald S. _____ for his comment has been dropped. Legal advice held that any Nova Scotian court was more likely to agree with Gerald S. _____'s description.

²² Pritchard letter, *Canadian Forum*, (July 1974), p. 31.

²³ A translation. On the theme of excrement containers in abusive language, see: Ondine Horsey, "Toilet Training and Popular Speech: How Holding the Bowels Loosens the Tongue", *Linguistics*, CVI, no. 1. (1947).

²⁴ The references are to: Russell G. Hann, Gregory S. Kealey, Linda Kealey and Peter Warriar, *Primary Sources in Canadian Working Class History, 1860-1930*. (Kitchener 1973); Greg Kealey, ed. *Canada Investigates Industrialism*, (Toronto 1973); Gregory S. Kealey, "Artisans Respond to Industrialism: Shoemakes, Shoe Factories and the Knights of St. Crispin in Toronto", *Historical Papers*, (1973); and Greg Kealey, *Working Class Toronto at the Turn of the Century*. (Toronto 1973). A revised edition of the latter was published in 1974 under the title *Hogtown*. As a spin-off of the main project, the principal investigator has begun a study of the significance of the various forms of his name employed by Professor Kealey. The standard work on the general theme is: Terri Jon Smyth-Smith, "Changes in Personal Nomenclature: A Study in Abnormal Psychology", *Slippery Rock Review*, XI, no. 2. (1971).

that there's some interestin' stuff in those. Once you get over the fact that the title-page to the bibliography looks like the letterhead for a firm of shyster lawyers, that intro gets full marks for ambition. It's really the only thing I know that tries to fit working class history together, to set it in a, how you say, theoretical framework. But, man, it's romantic about the working class like only kid academics can be — all that crud about culture, all that dreamin' back about your "golden age" before industrialism when your artisans ran their own show. That's the stuff Kealey gets into real heavy in his article on the Knights of St. Crispin. It's like some melodramer, the evil boss comes in with his wicked sewing machine, twirling his handlebar moustache, threatening the virginal artisans what'll happen if they don't come across. Only, this time, the villain wins.

J.M.: Comeon, you miserable bugger, give the kid a break. Okay, some of it does go a bit overboard on the artisan thing. That's the old moving finger of E.P. Thompson; it'll move on. Take Kealey's pamphlet on working class Toronto. It's not too smooth, it's like a college essay, all lumpy with quotes. And, alright, it's a might gung-ho about the workers. The conclusion, with all its stuff about restoring the role of workers in history²⁵ is sorta romantic. But it sure as hell ain't as bad as the preface to that other book, that scissors and paste job by Cross.²⁶ Now that one really gives me a pain in . . .²⁷

Anyway, whatever its problems, the Kealey pamphlet packs in a few pages the most useful picture of what it was like to be a worker that anyone's come up with yet. And in all their stuff, these kids have got a terrific idea of what the problems are, and how you oughta go about solving them. That puts them a leg up on anybody else around. You expect a finished bloody product to come rollin' off the line when we ain't even got the blueprints done yet.

G.S.: Christ, ain't you gettin' poetic! Maybe you're right, though. I guess it makes sense they're gonna take what models they can find. And old Thompson's pretty attractive. He may be full of crap, but it's kind of nice to see workers get the big buildup for a change. He writes working class history all complex and flowery like some 19th century political biography. Only trouble is, in Thompson and even more in these kids,

²⁵ Kealey (Greg). *Working Class Toronto*, p. 23.

²⁶ Michael S. Cross, ed., *The Workingman in the Nineteenth Century*, (Toronto 1974), p. v.

²⁷ The long diversion here was considered extraneous and has been excised.

they get so into their jargon and buzz words there ain't one worker in a hundred'd understand what the hell they're trying to say. Give the workers back their history, they tell us; give us back our bloody language, first.

J.M.: Speaking of Thompson, you musta liked the job that guy Atherton did on the other Thompson, old Phillips.²⁸

G.S.: Well, I don't think a whole lot of Atherton's piece; it's pretty flat, a pretty uninterestin' account of Thompson's life. But it does do the one thing. It chops him down to size. Part of that romantic trip's been to make Phillips Thompson into some kind of Canadian Karl Marx. Atherton's right that Thompson was a minor thinker and that he didn't have a whole lot of influence on anybody. Still, you gotta admit that, with so little socialist thought in this country, it's worthwhile having Thompson's stuff reprinted. And the songs are pretty neat. That's one thing we lost from the old days. You never hear workers singin' anymore, less it's "The North Atlantic Squadron" or stuff like that. 'Cept for the coloureds, of course.

J.M.: Speakin' of coloureds, you been keeping up on the stuff coming out of Quebec?

G.S.: Not a whole lot. Hell, how do they expect you to understand if they write it all in French? Like I always say, if English was good enough for Jesus Christ, it's good enough for the French Canadians.

J.M.: You're a hard man, Gerry. Anybody can play hockey like them frogs²⁹ can't be all bad. I keep up with it somewhat 'cause of my kid, Norman. Little bugger's always sneaking up to the john with one of them French books. Locks himself in for bloody hours. I try to tell him it's unhealthy: watch TV, I say, or at least, if you're gonna lock yourself in the john, do somethin' normal, like self-abuse. But, oh no, he keeps reading them books, chatterin' away at the dinner table about "une véritable conscience de class" and "particularités socio-culturelle" and like that. I mean, Jesus, if he's gotta get into foreign languages why don't he learn something useful like Mandarin Chinese, like me and the old lady. There just ain't no communication with kids these days.

²⁸ T. Phillips Thompson, *The Politics of Labor*, introduction by Jay Atherton, (Toronto 1975).

²⁹ On this most common of racial epithets in Canada, see: Julian Poindexter, "Froggy Would a Wooing Go: Sex and Dual Canadianism", *Beaverlore Quarterly*, (Spring-Winter 1968).

But I do get some idea of what's going on in Quebec. Maybe because of what's going on in France, they seem even more hung up on sweeping generalizations and all that sociological crap than the kids in Canada. Norman tells me that one of the biggies recently was a collection edited by a guy named Bélanger.³⁰ Now, Norman says that though it's very general and so pretty sketchy at times, especially the part that tries an overview on your "monde ouvrier" between 1850 and 1896 in less than 50 pages,³¹ it's a pretty fair book. But it starts off with a real heavy sociology trip by Fernand Harvey—wonder if he's any relations to old Doug Harvey—really liked the way that bugger threw the body—naw, couldn't be—old Doug wasn't no Frenchie. Anyways, you'd hate it. It's supposed to be really into tight definitions and it's even more the preindustrial-industrial shift than Kealey and all those. It's really a Quebec version of Langdon, only more rigid, Norman says more professional. You don't like that, but I figure you need some rigid analysis at this stage, to set up something to shoot at.

Norman says that's what's missing in some of the other stuff. Fernand Harvey's edited another bunch of essays called *Aspects Historiques du mouvement ouvrier au Québec*. Norman came out of the john one day with a real red face. "Hooboy," I says to myself, "he's normal. I know what he's been doin' in there." But turns out he was just reading this book, and it got him frustrated. Seems it's all gussied up with charts and tables, and it has some real serious essays, like a long piece by Harvey on the Knights of Labor in Quebec. But it also has a lightweight number, first published in the mid-1950's, by Alfred Charpentier and one of your polemics by that old white nigger, Pierre Vallières.³² Poor Norman had another attack of red face over a survey of Quebec labour history by Richard Desrosiers and Denis Heroux.³³ Norman says a survey of Quebec labour history after 1867 is a good idea, but this one zips through the period up to 1891, then summarizes the stuff after that so fast you have to hang on tight or you'll fall off. Wham, bam, thank you ma'am. But one day he came out looking so blissful he nearly fooled me again 'till I realized he was, what he says, gettin' off on

³⁰ Noel Belanger et al., *Les Travailleurs Québécois, 1851-1896*. (Montreal 1973).

³¹ Jacques Rouillard and Judith Burt, "Le Monde Ouvrier", in *ibid.*, pp. 61-111.

³² Alfred Charpentier, "Le mouvement politique ouvrier de Montréal (1883-1929)", in Fernand Harvey, ed., *Aspects Historiques du mouvement ouvrier au Québec*, (Montreal 1973); Pierre Vallières, "Les grèves perdues", in *ibid.*

³³ Richard Desrosiers and Denis Heroux, *Le travailleur Québécois et le syndicalisme*, (Montreal 1973).

Jacques Rouillard's book about the cotton workers.³⁴ Norman says it's the best thing yet on a group of workers, it sets all the troubles in Quebec cotton between 1900 and 1915 in, Norman says, a full context of industrial development and social relations. He especially liked how it showed the workers trying to take control of their lives, despite the bosses, the Church and even their own leaders. But you might be worried about the "culture" stuff and the old mystic rise of class consciousness.

G.S.: I guess that's all pretty interesting, if you're interested in foreign stuff. Told you to get that boy out to work; he's 15, time enough. Leave them in school and they go all foreign, like those longhaired professor fags who hang around here tryin' to absorb, what they say, the working class ambience. I'd like to shove some ambience up their posteriors.

J.M.: You're a mean drunk, Gerry. I'm not sure I can discuss things intelligently with you when you're like this. It's real disappointing. Especially in front of all these students and professors. Don't you have no pride? You want to live up to all their prejudices?

G.S.: I'm sorry, Johnny. The, how you call 'em, vicissitudes of working class life just kind of get to you every now and then and make you jumpier than a bull bitch in springtime.³⁵

Screw them professors, back to something worthwhile. I was reading some books about Quebec, only they was in English. You seen the translation of Trudeau's book on the Asbestos strike?³⁶ Even 20 years after it first appeared in French, it's pretty interesting and pretty important. All the essays, especially Dumont on the unions and Beausoleil on the course of the strike, are solid; and they all show why that there strike was a turning point in Quebec, kind of a waking up after a hundred years of wet dreams. The big charge, though, is old Trudeau as the white knight, the Man from Glad of the labour reformers. Hard to recognize him, now he's got his imitation of Maurice Duplessis down pat. Back then he gave the workers a hand, now he gives us all the old philosopher's sting.

The other one's about earlier stuff. This feller Copp³⁷ was writing

³⁴ Jacques Rouillard, *Les travailleurs du coton au Québec, 1900-1915*, (Montreal 1974).

³⁵ An interesting and now somewhat archaic vulgarism. Such distorted animal imageries are usually seen to have deep sexual significance. See: Moishe McLuhan, *Godiva Wasn't a Lady: Equines, Bovines and Psychosexuality*, (London 1974).

³⁶ Pierre Elliott Trudeau, ed., *The Asbestos Strike*, (Toronto 1974).

³⁷ Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty*, (Toronto 1974).

about how shitty things were in Montreal between 1897 and 1929. The workers were gettin' screwed, their kids was dying like flies, they had rotten schools or no schools, their city government wasn't worth a great deal.³⁸ Sort of like Cape Breton in a good year.

J.M.: Yeah, I read that. It puts stuff on the working class together in a real clear way, with the cost of living figures and all. But he never really explains *why* things were so bad. Getting into the market economy and the winter don't help; everywhere in Canada had them, so why was Montreal worse?

G.S.: Yeah. Seems to me he backs off the things that had to be part of it—the fornicated-up development of the Frenchies' society, and the old Whore of Babylon herself. Speakin' of the Whore of Babylon, catch the mazoomas on that one

J.M.: Gerry, you better read *Women at Work*.³⁹ You need a lot of work on the old chauvinism.

G.S.: I read it. A pretty fair start on women workers. I don't know why they brought in this guy Leo Johnson to write the first essay, though. His overview strikes me as pretty confused, with all his waffling around about a "bureaucratic class" and a "aristocratic class" and a "servant class". I don't know what the hell class means when you start getting one for every bloody occupation. The whole book is up and down like a toilet seat, some solid stuff like the piece on the dressmakers' strike and the one on the "problem of the working girl",⁴⁰ but it has some others that just weren't ready to be published.

J.M.: Sure, it has soft spots you could sink into up to your crotch. What I like about it, though, is that a bunch of women who weren't professional historians did it, and did it as well as the pros would have. You don't have to find excuses, use different standards, for this sort of stuff.

G.S.: It is kind of encouraging. All bitchin' aside, this labour history crap is important. I mean, how the fornicate are we goin' to get our excrement together unless we understand how we got here, and how

³⁸ See footnote 10, above.

³⁹ *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, Women's Press (Toronto 1974).

⁴⁰ Catherine Macleod, "Women in Production: The Toronto Dressmakers' Strike of 1931". and, Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, "Besieged Innocence: The 'Problem' and Problems of Working Women—Toronto, 1896-1914". in *ibid.*

workers in the past handled the fornicators who were screwing them over. That's what I keep tellin' them down on the docks when they're wastin' their time with old Spinoza or conjugatin' Latin verbs or shootin' slingshots at Dartmouth cross the bay, all that crap they waste their time on.

J.M.: Yeah, the way the workers allow the bosses to bugger up their heads is some piss-off. Makes you wanna. . . .

EDITOR'S NOTE: At this point, a third party entered the discussion. William S_____ is a professor of labour history at a Canadian university.

W.S.: Excuse me, guys. I couldn't help but overhear your most interesting conversation. My name is Bill S_____, and as it happens I teach labour history. Now, I think your comments about the field, culturally speaking, add some fascinating perspectives. But, if I may, I would suggest that you missed some of the nuances.

J.M.: You know this stiff, Gerry?

G.S.: Naw. Look, fella, why don't you just put your leather jacket back on and go play with your beads?

W.S.: Now just a moment. You obviously are mistaking me for some ivory tower academic out slumming. Why, some of my best friends . . . uh . . . what I mean is, . . . uh . . . , well, my *parents* were workers! Good lord, I belonged to a union at one summer job. I just wanted to point out that you have failed to appreciate

J.M.: What say, Gerry? Do we deal with this Cape Breton style?

G.S.: I'm with you. If defendin' your right to a peaceful drink without bein' lectured at ain't working class culture, I don't know what is.

W.S.: But, guys. I've got all Pete Seeger's recordings of union songs. I even know most of the words. There's no need for. . . .⁴¹

⁴¹ The microphone ceased functioning when the table was turned over. A spin-off study of the subsequent events has been published recently. See: John H. O'Rourke, Jr., "Boots and Broken Beer Bottles: Class Differences in Tactics of Personal Combat, A Nova Scotian Case Study", *Police Officer/Le Flic*, (March 1976), pp. 8-10, 37, 21, 58.