

'In Search Of The Unbound Prometheia': A Comparative View Of Women's Activism in Two Quebec Industries, 1869-1908

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Article abstract

One of the most salient features of women's earlier contribution to the labour movement in Quebec, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is the prominent and often militant role of female cotton workers. Long before they formed an industrial labour organization, the cotton "girls" rose persistently, in most mills, against various attempts to further appropriate absolute and relative surplus-value. After having formally joined forces with fellow male unionists, they carried with this activism a more acute challenge to managerial prerogatives and patriarchal standards of criminality in a major assault on child and gender-related abuses.

The following essay explores, in a comparative mode and from the perspective of the workplace, why female cotton workers were more assertive and have left far greater evidence of their proneness to strike than other women operatives in the boot and shoe industry. It also focuses on two important episodes of female militancy at the Hochelaga and Ste. Anne mills in order to provide a socio-economic context to their activism and to witness how solidarity could evolve rapidly into estrangement over sensitive gender-related issues.

ARTICLES

'In Search Of The Unbound Prometheia':

A Comparative View Of Women's Activism in Two Quebec Industries, 1869-1908

Jacques Ferland

J'aimais j'aimais le peuple habile des machines
Le luxe et la beauté ne sont que son écume
Cette femme était si belle
Qu'elle me faisait peur.
(Apollinaire, "1909," *Alcools*)

LABOUR HISTORY IN CANADA has been releasing plenty of old ballast in recent years. Beyond a simple tribute to life and labour, it has surfaced with real actors aggressively pursuing their destiny, shaping their own culture, and displaying dreams, forethought and tenacity. Indeed, it has moved far afield from the historiographical legacy of workers depicted as mere economic agents and responding like automatons to market signals. And in the process, labour historians have also been remaking Canadian history with a view of challenging what had become the "definite character" of its historiography.¹

A noticeable shortcoming in some academic circles has been the creation of social and occupational monoliths with few, if any, intra-class adjuncts. For instance, when it comes to social relationships of production and activism among workers, one cannot always escape the discomfiting impression that, in the absence of discordant music, the inclination has been to compose a symphonic poem with brilliant solo parts. Clearly this is to be avoided in the realm of industrial

¹Viv Nelles, "Rewriting History," *Saturday Night* (Feb. 1981), 11-16.

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activities combining a male and female workforce.²

Driving its deeply-penetrating wedge into this monolithic vision, the issue of gender has offered an oratorio in an entirely different key.³ Concerning the industrial workplace, however, the task ahead remains problematic for historians. While a strong case is made for a distinct feminine work culture, it has proven difficult to document its manifestations in an industrial setting given that "the factory system itself was another highly effective means of muting the voices of such women."⁴ Arguably, the key element to this gender approach is centering on a persistent process of interaction between patriarchy and capitalism with a much greater emphasis on the role of men — ordinary men, men as men, men as workers — in maintaining women's inferiority in the labour market.⁵ The position advocated by scholars of this feminist school of thought can be contrasted to both the "old" and "new" ways of doing labour history with a parallel between neoclassical and marxist economists. The former tends "to exonerate the capitalist system, attributing job segregation to exogenous ideological factors, like sexist attitudes." The latter would rather blame the capitalists but still ignore "the part played by male workers and the effect of centuries of patriarchal social relations."⁶ Thus, whether written from a conventional or an innovative methodology, from an institutional or a cultural perspective, from the left or from the right, labour history has all too often neglected such wedding of capitalist oppression and patriarchal domination.

Many different factors have been shown to intersect with gender relations in the working class and accentuate or further impede women's proneness to join or lead militant activities.⁷ However brief their experience, women industrial workers

²To be sure, there are instances of mutual support and "chivalry," particularly during a "movement culture" such as with the Knights of Labor in Ontario. But can these isolated manifestations convey the fundamental nature of gender relations in the workplace without falling into abusive 'instancing'? Can workers' militancy in Quebec cotton mills and shoe factories be projected as a collective experience on the sole basis of the recurrence of strikes and the social trauma of lock-outs?

³An excellent recent review of this literature is provided by Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," *Labour/LeTravail*, 19 (Spring 1987), 23-43.

⁴Susan Trofimenkoff, "One Hundred and Two Muffled Voices: Canada's Industrial Women in the 1880's," in M.S. Cross and G.S. Kealey, eds., *Canada's Age of Industry* (Toronto 1982), 220.

⁵Heidi Hartmann, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," in Z. Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York 1979), 208. For a recent assessment of this pathbreaking article see: Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work. The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Chicago 1987), 6-7.

⁶Hartmann, 208-9.

⁷For instance, Wayne Roberts has criticized "reliance on pliable clichés and 'mummified' abstractions about 'feminine psychology'" to draw more attention to the "demographic and occupational influences placed on the possibilities for concerted action." Comparing two very relevant working-class communities, Lynn and Fall River, Mass., John T. Cumbler also stressed the importance of ecological factors in explaining how ethnicity and gender could be channelled into a broad-based labour movement. Gail Cuthbert Brandt, Joan Sangster, Michelle Lapointe, and Joy Parr, among others, have since unearthed fascinating local evidence for a social and spatio-temporal construct of activism among working-class women, though not always with the labour process in mind. Wayne Roberts, "Honest Womanhood:

are not immune from the nature of work, the way jobs flow into one another, and what is perceived, realistically or not, to be their physical limits in conjunction with the labour process. Such perceived differences between male and female workers evolving in the same industrial environment deserve our attention insofar as there is no reason to assume that the material conditions of gender in the workplace were always permanent, drawn irrevocably between men and women. Neither is there any justification to present female militancy as being *invariably* inhibited because of the shorter time spent in the industrial workforce. Plenty of troubled water flows under the bridge of social and affective relationships when spending three, five, or ten years of one's life working in a factory between sixty and sixty-five hours a week!

I contend that a focus on the workplace and its labour process is appropriate here because of empirical considerations. Previous studies and narrative accounts of labour conflicts in Quebec cotton and boot and shoe industries have signaled a striking contrast in female involvement and activism during a period of at least 40 years.⁸ According to existing evidence, this behavioural contrast between 'active' female cotton workers and apparently 'placid' or 'passive' female shoe workers is so pervasive, spatially and chronologically, that studying a particular community would still leave uncovered some of the *basic* technological and physical preconditions for women's militancy.⁹ The extent to which technology, job segregation

Feminism, Femininity and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women, 1893-1914," in R. Douglas Frances and Donald B. Smith, eds., *Readings in Canadian History Post-Confederation* (Toronto 1986), 241; John T. Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Westport 1979); Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 109-30; Michelle Lapointe, "Le syndicat catholique des allumetières de Hull, 1919-1924," *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 32 (1979), 603-28; Gail Cuthbert Brandt, "'Weaving It Together': Life Cycle and the Industrial Experience of Female Cotton Workers in Quebec, 1910-1950," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7(1981), 113-26; G. Cuthbert Brandt, "The Transformation of Women's Work in the Quebec Cotton Industry, 1920-1950," in Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1986), 115-37; Joy Parr, "Rethinking Work and Kinship in a Canadian Hosiery Town, 1910-1950," *Feminist Studies*, 13 (Spring 1987), 137-62.

⁸These include, in chronological order: Jean Hamelin, Paul Laroque and Jacques Rouillard, *Répertoire des grèves dans la province de Québec au XIXe siècle* (Montreal 1970); Jacques Rouillard, *Les travailleurs du coton au Québec 1900-1915* (Montreal 1974); J. Rouillard, *Les syndicats nationaux au Québec, 1900-1930* (Quebec 1979); J. Rouillard, "Implantation et expansion de l'union internationale des travailleurs en chaussures au Québec de 1900 à 1940," *RHAF*, 36 (1982), 75-105; Jean-Claude Dupont and Jacques Mathieu, eds., *Les métiers du cuir* (Quebec 1981); Jacques Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire' et syndicalisme 'collectif': Une interprétation socio-technique des conflits ouvriers dans deux industries québécoises, 1880-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987), 49-88; J. Ferland, "Les Chevaliers de Saint-Crépin au Québec: aspects sociaux et culturels d'un mouvement ouvrier ex-communié," unpublished paper presented at the Regroupement des Chercheurs et Chercheuses en Histoire des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Québec, Montreal, April 1988.

⁹Moreover, the history of women's activism in the industrial workforce poses methodological problems of its own, especially when one reaches beyond the bounds of oral history. Historical standards based on "hard" local data often disqualify women and other unskilled workers partly because they were neglected by their record-keeping and data-producing contemporaries. In addition, women's culture of

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by gender, the division of labour, and the corresponding or noncorresponding grass-roots organizations contributed to mould work groups and their collective behaviour cannot be discounted, if only because of the historiographical implications. And while extremes such as technological determinisms and "autonomy in structure"¹⁰ ought to be avoided, this comparative mode is ideally suited for the study of factory women. It seeks to bridge persistent empirical gaps and to provide a relevant framework of analysis for the constellation of existing empirical fragments.

* * * * *

LACKING KNOWLEDGE of, or interest in the workplace, historians tend to rely upon "innate" or broadly constructed differences between male and female workers to explain the latter's alleged tolerance, or project a male-orchestrated view of the labour movement.¹¹ For the cotton and shoe industries of Quebec where women over sixteen years of age represented respectively 36.5 per cent and 32 per cent of the workforce in 1901,¹² such monolithic distinctions are not particularly useful. Nor is the focus that some "new" labour historians have placed on a strong sense of working-class culture identified as a certain "culture of control."¹³ How do we explain militancy among those who would not share a similar impulse because of their culture of estrangement? And, if there is no convincing evidence of women's activism, what can the material culture of the workplace add to our knowledge of their perceptions and of the specific modalities of patriarchal oppression?

silence as evidenced in their suspicious introversion during government inquiries and greater likelihood of being heard through a male informant has played a role in enhancing such methodological dilemma. Given such constraints and the corresponding thirst for any evidence, however fragmentary, relating to factory women's perceptions, let alone militancy, the temptation to extrapolate from a few isolated instances can be overwhelming. And thus, historical methodology, sanctioned by its solid empiricism and raised to expectations fostered by the history of men, can have the effect of breeding Venus fly-catchers, flowered with exceptional testimonies, unexpected diaries, and other similar unusual documents. Meanwhile, the task of defining the contours of, and laying the ground work for, a better understanding of gender and interpersonal relations in the workplace is seldom achieved through "hard" local data.

¹⁰Sociologist Fred E. Katz summarized in the following manner what is often implicit in historical studies encompassing the workplace. "Workers have considerable autonomy within the confines of the [work] organization. Even when their work is prescribed in exact detail, the work roles tend to be defined narrowly. This leaves a considerable portion of the worker's life within the work organization *undefined*. Workers tend to use this autonomy to bring their working-class culture into the organization, even though this is alien to the bureaucratic ethos of the higher echelons of the organization." Fred E. Katz, "Explaining Informal Work Groups in Complex Organizations: The Case for Autonomy in Structure," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 10 (Fall 1965), 204.

¹¹This is most apparent in the work of Jacques Rouillard quoted above.

¹²*Census of Canada*, 1901, vol. 3, (Ottawa 1905), 32-3. Unfortunately, it is not possible to provide similar comparative statistics for the previous decades due to the inclusion of small workshops in the data for the boot and shoe industry.

¹³For a classic treatment of this "culture of control," see: Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal 1979).

I

Women in the boot and shoe industry of Quebec

AFTER NEARLY TWO DECADES of research, evidence of women's activism in the boot and shoe industry of Quebec has yet to emerge. Strikes are numerous but women's involvement in most of them remains a mystery. Starting in 1869, Quebec shoe workers were raising a storm of protest over the socio-economic and cultural impact of the transition to the factory system. According to their most vocal members in Montreal, they were team workers whose primary objective was to put an end to subcontracting work for jobbers within several of the leading factories.¹⁴ While female employees were hired directly by manufacturers, along with other operatives and skilled hands, this large group of journeymen—men and boys who allegedly represented the major body of the Knights of St. Crispin—were being targeted by Monsignor Bourget. The ultramontane bishop managed to crown this crusade against unionism with threats of excommunication, justifying his dramatic gesture, among other reasons, with the pathetic sight of “two thousand honest girls” thrown out onto the streets as a result of this “uprising.” Needless to say this action contributed to shorten the lifespan of the Crispin experience in Quebec.

In contrast to their apparent quiescence during the economic downturn of 1873-1879, boot and shoe workers were among the most militant Quebec wage-earners during the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁵ It is no less evident, however, that one needs to be cautious as to the scope and nature of these frequent confrontations. The most obvious common denominator among some 25 recorded work stoppages is the fragmented and localized nature of their dissidence.¹⁶ While atypical of the degree to which mechanization had transformed working conditions in the factories, male shoe lasters and leather cutters not only spearheaded the labour movement but monopolized its purposes as well. Their ‘craft’ unionism had emerged during the Knights of Labour era¹⁷ and is a reminder that the broad-based “movement culture” did not always entail mass participation in class conflicts. Women and most other shoe workers were excluded from the activities of these brotherhoods and no evidence is found to suggest that unionized workers modified their ‘craft’ aspirations entering into the monopolistic era.¹⁸

The early years of the twentieth century witnessed even greater turbulence as a result of the creation of a third brotherhood of shoe workers among shoe “machinists.”¹⁹ It also stemmed from the questionable recruiting techniques of the

¹⁴J. Ferland, “Les Chevaliers de Saint-Crépin,” 13-25.

¹⁵*Répertoire des grèves*, 73-156.

¹⁶J. Ferland, “Syndicalisme ‘parcellaire’,” 70-1.

¹⁷Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto 1982), 304, 312-4; Jacques Rouillard, *Les syndicats nationaux*, 22; Jean Claude Dupont and Jacques Mathieu, eds., *Les métiers*, 343-7.

¹⁸Jacques Ferland, “Syndicalisme ‘parcellaire’,” 66-67, 70-1.

¹⁹Jean-Claude Dupont and Jacques Mathieu, eds., *Les métiers*, 443-5; Jacques Rouillard, “Implantation et expansion,” 78.

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Boot and Shoe Workers Union (an American Federation of Labor affiliate),²⁰ and of the employers' mounting abrasiveness toward arbitration and unionism.²¹ But while work stoppages involved a broader base occupationally, none are known to have been explicitly instigated by or for women workers. Beyond the fact that they were not unionized, women's absence is clearly reflected in the movement's failure to address issues relevant to their sphere of interest. Most disputes revolved around union recognition and affiliation, the closed shop, minimum wage for leather cutters, and compliance with the union wage scale.²²

Given these male-orchestrated, male-led, and male-oriented labour conflicts, testimonies of women's perceptions in times of conflict are almost non-existent. The following one, allegedly written by female shoe "leaders" during a lock-out in Quebec City in 1903, indicates that while gender division could be a great source of inspiration, it was hardly conducive to assertiveness and militancy:

Messrs. Manufacturers,

It is an undeniable truth of the history of all nations that a woman's plea is forceful. With this innermost faith and with all one's energy in times of great despair, your female companions beg of you to put an end to the nearly fatal crisis which devastates our city.

They are not coming to discuss the object of contention; it is not to judge you that they make this public appearance, nor to dictate what action you should take: you are the mighty, they, the weak. They are not standing tall to order you, but falling on their knees to beg you.[...]

The voice you hear is not only the cry of supplication and despair of one thousand working women of Quebec City; it is the mother's tears, the husband's moans, the widow's sighs, the sorrowful look of the orphan, the infant's wail, the old man's quiet resignation: all these complaints emanating from every heart and the innermost recesses of our city to reach your hearts, as fathers, husbands and citizens. O manufacturers! answer our plea so that the poor will bow to your name; listen, so that the poverty-stricken home will bless you while breaking up the bread; listen, for goodness sake listen, and the gratefulness of our people will always be with your endeavors.

*Les chefs ouvrières*²³

Summarized in this unusually-lyrical testimony for unskilled workers are several symptoms of patriarchal domination and capitalist oppression: a moving "supplication" for man's compassion, an ardent desire to assert women's self-renunciation in times of labour conflict, and a reassuring attachment to moral and familial values. Perhaps this solemn statement could have been instigated through neighborhood influences, the 'guidance' of the Catholic Church, or even family cycles. Yet it is also a variation on a broader theme, the severance of male and female collective behaviour in such circumstances. This lack of a tangible inter-

²⁰Rouillard, "Implantation et expansion," 80; Jacques Ferland, "Évolution des rapports sociaux dans l'industrie canadienne du cuir au tournant du 20e siècle," Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, Montréal, 1985, 310-11. In a more general context, see also: Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada. A Study in American Continentalism before the First World War* (Toronto 1974).

²¹Ferland, "Évolution," 314-15.

²²Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire'," 86-7.

²³*Le Soleil*, 27 Nov. 1903. Translation of a testimony first quoted by Nicole Thivierge in Jean-Claude Dupont and Jacques Mathieu, eds., *Les métiers*, 386-7.

section between male activism and female assertiveness throughout the Quebec shoe industry is persistently reflected not only in union activities, but also in job segregation by sex, the material culture of the workplace and, above all, in a division of labour that did not even foster in-group awareness among women themselves.

The material culture of the workplace offers a valuable measure of the relative integration or fragmentation of the workforce on the basis of those physical and technological variables that played a potentially influential role in interpersonal relationships. Here we lack the type of hard local data referred to earlier (see footnote 9), if only because human beings are adaptive to their environment and, for that matter, are more or less aware of its specific limitations and constraints. But in an age when there was so little time for women to spend *en groupe* during working breaks, so few opportunities to interact in mass gatherings during holidays, and no invitation to attend male union meetings, this material culture of the workplace was not easily transcended by formal or informal associational networks.

Five such physical factors stand out in the case of women in the shoe industry: 1) the spatial location of gender; 2) the technological fixation of gender; 3) the compactness of work stations; 4) the functional limitations of the sewing machines, and; 5) the malleability of work stations in the "women's department." The first two factors explain in large part why gender division was so clearly and persistently delineated in this industry. The other three factors address in a more inferential manner why activism among unorganized female shoe workers could be further undermined by the divisiveness and minuteness of the organization of work in their own department.

It is customary to present gender division in both the textile and shoe industries as an intrinsic feature of their respective workforces. While this characterization is not entirely inescapable in the cotton mills, there is no obvious reason to think otherwise of the shoe factories. Evidence of a pervasive gender division among shoe workers is first found in a clearcut division between male and female work stations and departments. Descriptions or sketches of factory operations and testimonies before the commission of enquiry of 1887-1888 are almost limpid on the gender issue. They indicate that female work should be associated principally to sitting tasks on smaller machines, table work, and virtually all operations connected with binding the upper part of the footwear.²⁴ The erection of bigger

²⁴For pictorial evidence see: "Boot and Shoe Factory of Ames, Holden & Co.," *The Dominion Illustrated: Special Number Devoted to Montreal, the Commercial Metropolis of the Dominion* (Montreal 1891), 41; M.A. Bluteau, J.-P. Charland, M. Thivierge, N. Thivierge, *Les cordonniers, artisans du cuir* (Montréal: 1980), 132; "Ludger Duchaine Enr.," *Le Soleil*, 24 Nov. 1946; Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst, *The Woman Who Toils. Being the Experience of Two Gentlewomen as Factory Girls* (New York 1903), 172, 184 and 210; Cumbler, *Working-Class Community*, 39. For textual evidence see "Messrs. Fogarty & Bro.'s Boot and Shoe Establishment on St. Lawrence, St. Catherine and St. Dominique Streets," *Canadian Illustrated News*, 7 Oct. 1871, 231; *Royal Commission on the Relations Between Labor and Capital* (1889), vol. 4, 964-8, 982-6, 989-92; "Boot and Shoe Factory of Ames,

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factories further isolated the “women’s department” by reserving a whole floor to the upper-stitching room. Such spatial distribution of gender not only protected women workers from the “indiscretions” of their male counterparts,²⁵ it also enshrined a physical separation of their respective spheres of concern. Other than from hearsay, female workers could hardly visualize working conditions in the men’s departments, assess the requirements of male productive roles, and gauge sexual discrimination through managerial attitudes and segregated practices. This spatial distribution of gender is especially relevant in the present case considering that female shoe workers were further excluded from trade union proceedings where such matters could have been discussed openly. Already well established during the transition to the factory system, this material culture of the workplace offers no indication of receding throughout the following decades.²⁶

Interestingly, machinery design also played a part in consolidating such distinctions. Since the early days of the sewing machine, women shoe workers were primarily assigned to sitting tasks for which digital work was the predominant feature. Machines such as those specialized to rub seams, fasten buttons, and fold the edges of ankle parts hardly challenged this tradition of women confined to low and light mechanical structures, and left no doubt as to which model the designers had in mind when they were created (see figure 1). Most machines or devices designed for men’s tasks were usually higher mechanical structures for which height had little other functional purpose than to provide for pedals, or none whatsoever. While there might exist a valid physical justification for operating them in a standing position, such as traction, body weight or visual accuracy, the fact remains that these phallus-like machines were mainly found in the bottoming, lasting, and heeling departments, that is, in male-dominated rooms (see figure 2).

Perceived physical differences symbolized by men performing standing tasks and women mainly confined to sitting roles were standardized by machinery producers in a way that is indicative of the reciprocal influence of patriarchal “wisdom” and technologically-constructed gender divisions. Of course, the more unfortunate aspect of such “chivalry” is that the wage rates offered on these sitting positions were far less attractive to workers. Meanwhile, men who stood were also given a ‘solid’ argument why such a wage differential should persist. The idea of not assigning women to such productive roles was more than a simple matter of skill and strength for which there might have been lack of supporting evidence: it represented a long-standing practice embodied in a technological design which, in turn, perpetuated a certain conventional wisdom about the physical limits of women’s work. Through such technological fixation of gender, achieving equal pay for equal work simply could not be an issue of contention, even more so in a workforce already fragmented by ‘craft’ unions.

Holden & Co.,” 41; Blanche Evans Hazard, *The Organization of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Massachusetts Before 1875* (Cambridge 1921), 159-67.

²⁵Trofimenkoff, “One Hundred and Two,” 223-4.

²⁶*La Patrie*, 21 May 1910; M.A. Bluteau, et al., *Les cordonniers*, 123.

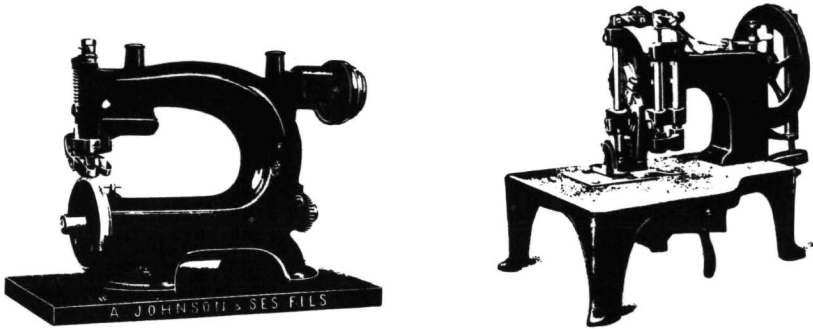
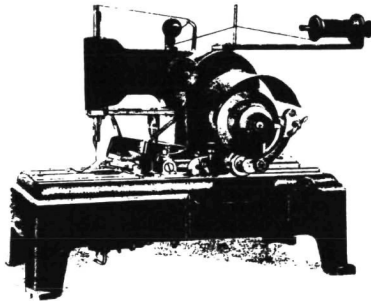


FIGURE 1

Several machines operated by women shoeworkers in the upper-stitching room were designed along the same lines and size as the more traditional sewing machine. Not only did they perpetuate the conventional practice of assigning women to sitting positions but also provided a technological point of reference to gender roles. The following samples are, in the usual order, a seam-rubbing machine, an edge-folding machine and an "automatic" button-fastening machine. A. Johnson & Sons, *Machines-outils et fournitures pour chaussures*, (Paris 1908), n.p.



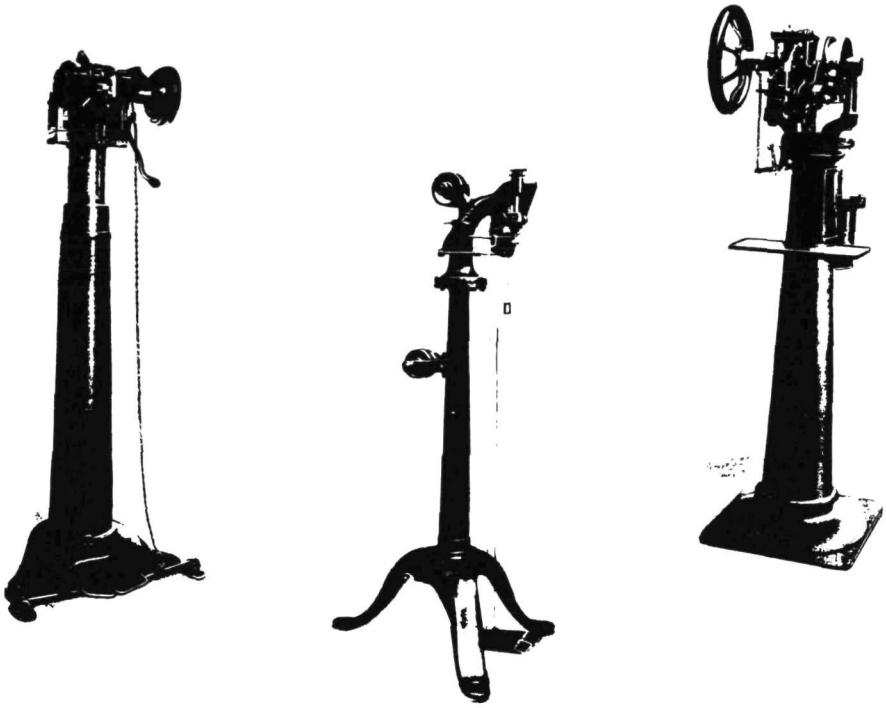


FIGURE 2

Typical machines used in the bottoming department by male shoeworkers. Even though their mechanical components remain quite light, these phallus-like structures, designed apparently for foot pressure and visual accuracy, remain in sharp contrast with those in "women's department," and provided management and male operatives with a physical argument for gender division and wage differential. Represented here are machines operated by male tackers in the lasting room, heel-seat makers and welt stitchers. A. Johnson & Sons, *Machines-outils et fournitures* (Paris 1908).

Beyond these factorywide parameters is the degree of cohesiveness within the "women's department." Directly related to this is the "resonance factor" whereby internal homogeneity in a work group is a significant precondition for concerted action by fostering "an environment of like-minded fellows."²⁷ While factors of cohesiveness such as kinship and ethnic ties have proven to be critical elsewhere, but remain equivocal with regard to working-class militancy,²⁸ others such as proximity and the division of labour can be offered as industrywide characteristics. One such physical factor—the compactness of individuals forming a work group—is of potential relevance to cohesiveness and "on-the-job socializing." Workers in shoe factories were normally assigned to fairly compact work stations. This was partly justified by the modest size of machinery and the functional requirements of a few hundred hands performing as many as one hundred operations.²⁹ Therefore, if cohesiveness is defined minimally as being a function of opportunities for interaction among members of a work group, the shoe factory offered greater potential than the cotton mills where distance, noise and dust hindered communications.

John T. Cumbler found much inspiration in this single spatial criterion. Referring specifically to the close proximity of female stitchers, and on the basis of oral testimonies collected in Lynn, Mass., he extrapolated:

Conversations about social events and work went on above the hum of the sewing machines. The conversations, ranging from child rearing, marriage expectations, and dating patterns to job conditions and wages, were shared in by immigrants from Europe and native-born workers from Massachusetts, and based on their common experiences, they built up class loyalty.³⁰

This spatial approach should not be looked upon contemptuously because it lacks historical depth. In any capitalist work setting, proximity remains an important precondition for the social construction of group standards and supportiveness, especially for workers deprived of a formal labour organization. But whereas

²⁷ Leonard R. Scales, *Behavior of Industrial Work Groups* (New York, 1963), 58-9.

²⁸ On the problematic relationships between women's history, ethnic studies and working-class history, see: Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," and Bruno Ramirez, "Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19(Spring 1987), 23-43 and 45-8. On an industrywide basis, kinship and ethnicity can both have the potential of either uniting or dividing a collective of workers confronted with a labour conflict. There exists a myriad of possible outcomes which, at this point, still escape even a tentative generalization as to their over-all impact on workers' militancy. While kinship ties are likely to magnify one's view about managerial practices, women's activism might eventually be curtailed, for instance, through paternalistic authority and managerial threats of family layoffs. Similarly, an ethnic subculture may offer greater reverberation in a work group unless it is divided by a generational gap, undermined by a "straw boss," or dissipated, through nativism or otherwise, at the first sign of dissidence. In short, even if nominal census material were not so blunt occupationally and silent about the exact source of employment, there would still be a gap to bridge with regard to the impact of such variables on female cohesiveness and militancy.

²⁹ *La Patrie*, 21 May 1910; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor in the Boot and Shoe Industry, 1907-1916*, no. 232(Washington 1918), 133-69.

³⁰ Cumbler, *Working-Class Community*, 39.

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sociology is criticized for failing to set its models in a historical perspective, history often neglects to spell out in detail the divisiveness and minuteness promoted by various work structures.³¹ In spite of this compactness of work stations in the stitching room and elsewhere, several female shoe workers had to intervene *interdependently* because the upper could not be assembled on a single sewing machine. In its factory setting the binding process called for a host of briefly-executed interventions effected not only by stitchers but also by punchers and perforators, cementers and folders, doublers, eyeletters, button fasteners, hookers, seam rubbers, crimpers, etc., interspersed at various points (see Appendix). While these organizational requirements might have given rise to a variety of local, or shop practices, their interdependence was no less dictated by the fact that the sewing machine was not, and could not be, the only tool of the 'trade'. And the likelihood of stitchers leaving their work temporarily to assume other productive roles is unsubstantiated and remains unrealistic at this stage of industrial capitalism.

Comparing independent and interdependent work tasks, one can hardly avoid a few basic sociological considerations. For one, 'soldiering' becomes forcibly a far more crucial, and potentially divisive issue as individuals depend on the pace of others to meet their projected weekly earnings and other material expectations. More importantly, perhaps, there is less enduring unity in such a collective of individuals as their mutual sphere of interest is vulnerable to promotional ladders within work crews and along the assembling process. Common goals within work crews remain conditional upon status perceptions based on the peculiarities of the fragmented tasks; unity between work crews is jeopardized by the self-enclosed nature of their interpersonal relations at work. Furthermore, the introduction of new teammates is always a more critical issue than with independent work tasks because of the required coordination. In short, what begins as an asset — proximity of work stations — could easily turn into a serious handicap once management moved beyond the simple expedient of achieving greater productivity through piece rates only.

Finally, this work setting was also highly malleable as a result of Canada's limited domestic market. With the important distinction of their sole leather and shoe machinery suppliers, shoe manufacturers thrived within a nonmonopolistic business environment. Instead of emulating the cotton companies' quest for concentration, consolidation, and interlocking directorship, small and medium-size shoe companies multiplied and sought to carve out their market by any path available.³² Additionally, this era witnessed the development of several shoemak-

³¹Even though he pays a marginal tribute to technological and spatial considerations, Cumbler's lack of interest in the division of labour in Lynn's shoe factories, not unlike many other historians elsewhere, amounts to an implicit statement in favour of the "autonomy in structure" thesis when it comes to the labour process.

³²J. Ferland, "'Not For Sale' - American Technology and Canadian Shoe Factories: The United Shoe Machinery Company of Canada, 1899-1912," *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, 18, 1 (Spring 1988), 59-82. For an ethnic interpretation see: Jean-Claude Dupont and Jacques Mathieu, eds., *Les métiers*, 313-9.

ing techniques. Boots and shoes could be sewed, cemented, or nailed; they could be assembled according to different patented alternatives.³³ They could be buttoned or laced, and, of course, further distinguished on the basis of gender, age groups, class, and different practical purposes. Therefore, nothing prevented factory managers from further subdividing the upper-stitching room into a multitude of fragmented tasks, and dispersing the operatives onto several assembly 'lines'. Very much like during the manufacturing stage of industrial development, these subdivisions offered a "refined and civilized method of exploitation" and consolidated to an even greater degree the "undisputed authority of the capitalist over [women]."³⁴ By the time the United States Bureau of Labor began its exhaustive reports on industrial wages in the early years of this century, such minuteness in the upper-stitching rooms had gained sufficient permanence to bring about a specialized typology among upper-stitchers themselves (see Appendix).

Notwithstanding other important variables relating to patriarchy, neighbourhood, kinship ties, and family (which are not as easily characterized on an industrywide basis and for a regional study of the labour movement), female shoe workers were confronted with *specific* obstacles. At the formal associational level, male shoe workers persisted in their 'craft' tradition at a time when mechanization and the growing division of labour made such representation anachronistic and discriminatory. At the sociotechnical level, several features conspired to draw permanent gender lines, such as those segregating men and women spatially, identifying women's work to sitting tasks, and consolidating such gender roles technologically. And at the organizational level of work, women had yet to face the minuteness of their own division of labour, the interdependence of their respective work roles, and the malleability and potential volatility of their sphere of work-related interests.

None of these are dominant features in the cotton mills of Quebec where women's activism was persistent and widespread in almost every community, including those that were but a few miles away from the main centres of shoe production. The spatial separation of gender was not as pervasive, especially in the carding and weaving rooms. The technological fixation of gender never developed to the same extent as in shoe factories because women had long been working in a standing position and some gender roles actually overlapped. And while the trend toward automation was clearly to the disadvantage of compact work stations, these often remained independent from each other as basic operations such as spinning and weaving were functionally far less divisible and malleable than binding the upper part of boots and shoes. More importantly, perhaps, the entire workforce of Quebec cotton mills remained formally unorganized until the mid-1900s, and a much smaller proportion of skilled operatives could aspire to the type of 'craft'

³³Harold R. Quimby, *Pacemakers of Progress: The Story of Shoes and the Shoe Industry* (Chicago 1946), 133, 255-300. Processes for sewed shoes included McKay sewed (originated in 1861), and the Goodyear Welt (in wide use by 1880's), followed by the Turn process and the Stitchdown.

³⁴K. Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York 1906), 400.

unionism that remained prevalent among male shoe workers. All of these suggest that part of the reason for such widespread activism among the cotton "girls" of Quebec could be attributed to static and less deeply-anchored perceptions of gender roles at work, to functionally more homogeneous work groups, and to a legacy of informally organized work stoppages in which women were not automatically disqualified because of associational barriers based on gender and skill.

II

Women in the cotton industry of Quebec during the competitive era

BECAUSE THE COTTON INDUSTRY was implanted in Canada largely through the incentives of rising protectionism and the National Policy, there could not be anything approaching the Knights of St. Crispin movement among its workers. While Quebec workers rapidly assumed a dominant position in this labour-intensive industry (particularly if one includes the large French-Canadian workforce of Cornwall, Ontario), their inexperience, relative instability between urban and rural life, and irresistible desire to move on to 'greener pastures' in New England were recurrent themes among company officials.³⁵ This relative scarcity of trained hands led employers to build dwellings to discourage a high turnover, to fence their property to prevent interference from outside "recruiters," to attract families from hinterland areas, and to seek strike breakers unsuccessfully in the United States.³⁶

A latecomer, the Montmorency Cotton Company, exemplifies how this floating workforce remained an issue even during the early years of the twentieth century. The following managerial testimony sheds further light into the local and transregional nature of the phenomenon:

Many operatives have returned from the United States during the year [...], but these were content to remain upon their [*sic*] farms throughout the summer months and refused to work in the mill. The people in our Parish are also most independent, owing to the great demand for labor in the immediate vicinity. The approach of winter is beginning to drive them in and we have imported families of green help who are now being rapidly turned in the different departments of the works.³⁷

Whereas the Montmorency cotton mills required about 1,200 workers to operate at full capacity, absenteeism, seasonality, and competition for trained factory workers or agricultural hands called for a reserve army of labour *within* the cotton mills. Some 1,400 hands were constantly employed at these mills,³⁸ and "spare hands" were also hired in the weaving and spinning rooms of Montreal and

³⁵See in particular: Barbara J. Austin, "Life Cycles and Strategy of a Canadian Company: Dominion Textile, 1873-1983," Ph.D. thesis, Concordia University, 1985.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 133, 184, 186, 211.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 212-13.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 213.

Valleyfield.³⁹ These individuals, sometimes designated as “smash hands,” patiently waited for a sign from the foreman for a job opening:

In all industrial establishments such as this one, you should realize that a team of workers comprises two classes: the regulars or permanent workers and the substitutes. The latter stand in a designated area and wait upon the foremen's good will to earn a few cents.⁴⁰

However depressing these demographic conditions turned out to be for factory women, “floating” clearly did not inhibit their desire to figure preeminently in the resistance against increasing absolute and relative surplus-value. While the prolongation of the working-day went hand in hand with increasing intensity of factory labour,⁴¹ there seems to have been more antagonism over the former during the earlier stages of the unorganized labour movement. To be sure, textile managers of the Montreal area worked openly to lengthen “the working day beyond all bounds set by human nature.”⁴² As we shall see below, this was not necessarily in response to heightened competition, but primarily an attempt to fill out orders rapidly “without any alteration in the amount of capital laid out on machinery and buildings.”⁴³

Yet another contentious issue was of immediate concern to the predominantly female weavers across the province and represents the most common denominator in earlier manifestations of women's activism. A popular practice among managers was to increase absolute surplus-value by “stretching-out” the cut of cloth on the looms by several yards. Since weavers were paid by the piece rather than by the yard, this alteration inevitably entailed a proportional increase in unpaid labour, and further compelled the operatives to accelerate the pace to maintain the looms in almost constant operation.⁴⁴

Thus, in contrast to female shoeworkers, the female weavers and spinners of the Hochelaga and Ste. Anne Mills (east of Montreal), and of Saint-Henri, Valleyfield, and Cornwall, Ontario, got involved massively and openly in labour conflicts between 1880 and 1891. Beyond their quest for decent wages and ‘reasonable’ hours of work, their militancy was not merely an impetuous and improvised dissidence; it was a courageous challenge to the otherwise boundless authority management enjoyed in establishing the modalities of a mostly unwritten labour contract. Considering that several of these episodes have been narrated else-

³⁹(PAC) Royal Commission Respecting Industrial Disputes in the Cotton Factories of the Province of Quebec, “Dominion Textile Co., Hochelaga and Ste. Anne Mills,” Exhibits of average daily wages for all occupations, Ottawa, 4 May 1908; *La Presse*, 16 July 1900.

⁴⁰*La Presse*, 16 July 1900, (my translation).

⁴¹Marx, *Capital*, 447.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 440.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 442-43.

⁴⁴Evidence of this widespread phenomenon is found in *Le Nouveau Monde*, 20 April 1880; *Le Progrès de Valleyfield*, 29 April 1880 and 3 June 1887; *La Patrie*, 6 June 1887; *The Montreal Daily Star*, 7 and 16 June 1887, 22 Feb. 1889; *The Freeholder* (Cornwall, Ontario), 22 Feb. 1888, 2 March 1888, and 1 Feb. 1889.

where,⁴⁵ and that it is preferable to highlight this phenomenon in a context not too distant from that of the boot and shoe industry, much of the evidence presented in this essay is drawn from women's activism in the suburb of Hochelaga.⁴⁶

A glimpse at female militancy: an 'unorganized' strike at the Hochelaga mill (1880)

W.J. WHITEHEAD FORESAW a brilliant future in 1879. After replacing Victor Hudon as general manager of the cotton mill, he had increased yardage by 30 percent and raised profits by 53 percent during his first year, allowing for a 10 percent dividend to the shareholders.⁴⁷ Then came the National Policy and an ambitious expansion programme at his factory in order to tap the newly-protected domestic market before other mills were erected elsewhere. Profits "rose dramatically" but it was decided not to expand further the productive capacity of the mill. Whitehead was given a ten thousand-dollar bonus; the workers were provided with a steamboat ride and a picnic at Ile Grosbois.⁴⁸

But Whitehead's ambitions were limitless as he sought to fill all orders with the existing facilities. Hence he required employees to work another hour on Mondays (until 7:15 pm) and to stay until nine o'clock on Wednesdays, in addition to their usual twelve-hour days and over eight hours on Saturdays.⁴⁹ Altogether, men, women, and children spent 71 hours a week in the mill, but were paid for 60 and only allowed a half hour a day for lunch.⁵⁰ Somehow, about five hours were left unpaid for. Moreover, Whitehead had seen to it that female weavers would not reap anything else than a backache from the overtime by adding four yards to the cut of cloth on their looms.⁵¹ But on Wednesday, 14 April 1880, women workers of Hochelaga were to set a precedent in Quebec's cotton industry by instigating the first work stoppage ever recorded.⁵²

Whitehead proved a very able manager with community leaders. The next morning, he had the mayor of Hochelaga come to the mill at the crack of dawn and harangue the strikers to return to work, all the more convincingly in their mother

⁴⁵ Hamelin, *et al.*, *Les travailleurs du coton*, 110-4; Jacques Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire'" 72-7.

⁴⁶ The village of Hochelaga was located on the east side of Montreal. Two cotton mills were erected there, in addition to a tobacco factory and a meat packing establishment. It was incorporated in 1883 with a population of over 4000 people and became the first industrial suburb annexed to the City of Montreal. Its population tripled during the two last decades of the nineteenth century and the Montreal tramways soon transformed it into an integral part of the urban landscape. Derived from Paul-André Linéau, *Maisonneuve: Comment des promoteurs fabriquent une ville* (Montreal 1981), 25-6.

⁴⁷ Austin, "Life Cycles," 130.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 131-2.

⁴⁹ *The Gazette*, 16 April 1880; *Montreal Daily Star*, 16 April 1880; *Le Nouveau Monde*, 15 April 1880.

⁵⁰ *The Gazette*, 16 April 1880; *Le Nouveau Monde*, 20 April 1880.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² In the woolen industry, another work stoppage instigated by female weavers did arise earlier at Sherbrooke in 1873. Jean-Pierre Kesteman, *Documents sur l'histoire des Cantons de l'Est (1871-1880)*, Department of History, Université de Sherbrooke, n.d..

tongue.⁵³ Undeterred, a delegation of young women sought legal advice in Montreal and returned triumphantly to meet Whitehead with their official request for a ten-hour day and a 15 per-cent raise. But the man had other plans in mind and refused to acknowledge their letter. Several female strikers then held a caucus and undertook to sign a document whereby they vowed not to return to work before both requests were fully met or they would be held individually accountable for a ten-dollar fine.⁵⁴

The following day, Whitehead moved toward a more repressive course of action. Several male supporters of the strike were arrested for assault and he found the parish priest receptive to his exhortations.⁵⁵ Reverend Huot lectured his audience on the reasonableness of the company's expectations, considering that time had to be made up in the evenings for what was lost during religious holidays (thus implying that this largely unpaid overtime was the only immediate recourse to compete successfully with the Protestant mills of Ontario). He reminded the unskilled workers that they could be replaced easily, and undertook with equal persuasion to dissuade them from ever migrating to New England.⁵⁶ But other operatives of unknown gender rose to the occasion and advised "their comrades, and especially the women, to remain firm."

Thus, following their previous episode of 'civic' disobedience, the cotton "girls" of Hochelaga had also resolved to look elsewhere than their parish priest for moral support. After several days of impasse and the departure of several fellow workers, they found such support from Joe Beef, the infamous Montreal tavern keeper.⁵⁷ More realistic than Rev. Huot, the man who had already had a few bouts with the "All-Mighty Dollar" encouraged them to seek justice in the United States, after having met their more pressing needs by delivering 600 loaves of bread "of the best quality."⁵⁸ Some 200 strikers followed his advice and thus complied with the promise not to return to the mill if all failed.⁵⁹ The remaining 250 employees reluctantly resumed work under existing conditions to Whitehead's great relief and financial benefit.⁶⁰

⁵³*The Gazette*, 16 April 1880; *Le Nouveau Monde*, 16 April 1880. Mayor Préfontaine spoke alarmingly of the irremediable damage that would result to the local industry if orders were lost to "Upper Canada" and the United States, but met with derision when he proposed to act as an arbitrator. A number of employees opted to go back to work and were hooted at by "girls" assembled on the sidewalk, as "men were not nearly so demonstrative as the women."

⁵⁴*The Gazette*, 17 April 1880; *Le Nouveau Monde*, 17 April 1880.

⁵⁵*The Montreal Daily Star*, 17 April 1880; *The Gazette*, 19 April 1880; *Le Nouveau Monde*, 19 and 20 April 1880.

⁵⁶He "found the States no better than Canada; money was not to be picked up there without working for it anymore than here," and thereby concluded that their best interest was to avoid intoxicating liquor and "go to work as soon as possible."

⁵⁷Peter DeLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working-Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869-1889," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (1981-1982), 9-40.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 2A; *Le Courrier de Montreal*, 27 April 1880.

⁵⁹*Le Nouveau Monde*, 24 April 1880.

⁶⁰*Le Nouveau Monde*, 29 April 1880; Austin, "Life Cycles," 130. Already earning a ten thousand dollar

Like many other instances among industrial workers, the significance of this episode is not to be sought in an outcome which, more often than not, remains anti-climatic without its sound track. The fact is that this was an extremely favourable conjuncture for the Hudon company and all the rhetoric about losing valuable time during religious holidays only makes sense from the shareholders' perspective of funneling huge windfall profits between the inauguration of the National Policy and the launching of the new mills across eastern Canada.⁶¹ That those who had been most determined to restrain this furious stampede to reap the immediate benefits of the National Policy formed a core of 100 tenacious and vocal cotton "girls" is a good indication that, rather than being the product of fortuitous circumstances among their own ranks, women's militancy was well-attuned to the varying appropriation of absolute surplus value. Life cycles have little relevance when issues such as the cut of cloth, a well-deserved rest during the evening, and the respect for religious holidays are combined and compressed on the short-term agenda of the capitalist class.

And while local circumstances were noticeably different elsewhere⁶² and on-the-job socializing would always be hindered by noise and distance between work stations, women weavers of the Montreal area, Valleyfield, and Cornwall shared at least one basic work-related experience. They were assigned to an *independent* work task and could only be distinguished or divided on the basis of four technical criteria, none of which had to do with a systematic division of labour. These were the number of looms they operated and the total cut they produced (their output), the pattern they wove and the number of threads put in per inch (quality of work).⁶³ While favouritism and discrimination could not be ruled out, they would not materialize on the ground of an elaborate promotional ladder and various productive tasks spread out along an assembly line. Therefore, in-group awareness was more likely to emerge in such a setting than in an intricate division

salary, Whitehead got another three thousand dollars for his "able management," in addition to a three-hundred dollar gift, in June, for a "seaside vacation at Rye Beach," "a greatly needed rest and medical treatment."

⁶¹ Austin, "Life Cycles," 136. The cotton boom and unprecedented profits of the Hudon Cotton Company actually continued through 1882 as newly erected mills still had to face the enduring problem of training inexperienced hands. Soon after the strike, company officials were struggling with the thorny issue of what to do with their soaring profits and opted for the allotment of \$866,000 in "stock bonuses" to the shareholders. "That is, the holder of three shares in 1881, would now hold 8 shares, the extra five coming as stock bonuses. This was in addition to the 10% dividend paid yearly." Indeed, this had been a fruitful period in the life of the English-speaking manager. In five years he had pocketed \$50,000 in salary and \$28,000 in bonuses, while being named to the company's hall of fame.

⁶² During the 1880s, weavers' strikes also occurred in Cornwall, Valleyfield, and Saint-Henri, in each case involving a large, if not dominant proportion of women operatives. On the situation in Cornwall, see Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 323, 334-35, 358-59. A brief account of the 1880 strike in Valleyfield is provided in Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire,'" 72. During a strike they had instigated over similar issues, female weavers in Saint-Henri decided not to take an active part in the demonstrations and negotiations. *La Presse*, 7 October 1891.

⁶³ J. Ferland, "Le rôle des déterminismes sociaux dans le développement des forces productives de l'industrie textile du Canada 1870 à 1910," (M.A. thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 1982), 106.

of labour, especially over an issue that concerned the operatives' conventional and *common* measure of output.

III

Women in the cotton industry of Quebec during the monopolistic era

FOLLOWING THE FIRST SIGNS of monopoly capital, the cotton industry moved rapidly beyond expansionism toward the intensification of labour and its quest for relative surplus-value. At least two of the three leading Canadian companies threw themselves "with all [their] might in the production of relative surplus-value," condensing labour, filling up the pores of the working day, and imposing on the worker "increased expenditure of labour in a given time."⁶⁴ Part of this increased productivity is attributable to imperceptible alterations of detail such as "the simple expedient of enlarging the circumference of the driving drum and reducing that of the loom pulley."⁶⁵ But, as the following table indicates, it was also a matter of an increased organic composition of capital, particularly at Valleyfield, Saint-Henri, and Montreal.

With such new components and machines as the high-speed gravity spindle and the automatic loom⁶⁶ — the latter having been introduced to Canadian manufacturers in 1898 through the agency of the Northrop Loom Company of Canada, Limited⁶⁷ — increased relative surplus-value was achieved as a result of higher speeds, and by giving operatives more machinery to tend.⁶⁸ The impact of such development of the means of production on women's activism was manifold. Condensation of labour is objectionable in itself when a greater drain of energy is exacted with no corresponding reduction of time in the working day. To harvest more profitably this higher productive potential, it can also entail shrinking piece rates, increasing units of [piece] measurement, and replacing less efficient hands. Meanwhile, spare hands can easily be relied upon to set a precedent for readjusting piece rates in accordance with the new productive standards. Moreover, the gradual introduction of improved machinery opens the way for ethnic favouritism and distinct behavioural characteristics among competing groups of operatives. And intensification of labour can also fuel a new crusade over the detrimental effect of factory conditions on children and young women.

The issue of gender roles is, perhaps, of even greater significance and is

⁶⁴Marx, *Capital*, 447-8.

⁶⁵*Canadian Journal of Fabrics*, 21, 1 (1904), 59.

⁶⁶John Ainsworth, "Mechanical Progress in the Textile Manufacturing Industry," *Canadian Textile Journal* (June 1933), 74; Thomas R. Navin, *The Whitin Machine Works since 1831* (Cambridge 1950), 513.

⁶⁷Ferland, "Le rôle," 183-204.

⁶⁸Marx, *Capital*, 450; The Draper Company, *Textile Texts for Cotton Manufacturers* (Hopedale 1901).

TABLE 1
Changing organic composition of capital in Quebec cotton mills, 1888-1908

Mills	Looms/all employees		Spindles/all employees	
	1888-90	1907-08	1888-90	1907-08
Hochelaga/Ste.				
Anne	1.10	1.53	56	71.3
Saint-Henri	1.17	2.00	45	88
Valleyfield	1.35	2.30	51	90.9
Magog*	0.99	1.38	61	53
Montmorency**	1.40	0.93	60	62.5
Average	1.20	1.63	54.6	73.1

* lower ratio obtained due to the presence of calico printing and the mechanical works of the Dominion Cotton Co., Ltd.

** declining ratio due to the establishment of a spinning mill for both cotton and woolen yarns.

Sources: Derived from the *Canadian Textile Directory*, 1888-9 and 1907; (PAC) Royal Commission Respecting Industrial Disputes in the Cotton Industry of the Province of Quebec, series #222, vol. 1 and 2, exhibits #1 and #13, 1909; *Census of Canada, 1891*, vol. 3, 120.

certainly not foreign to this intensification of labour. As the following table indicates, there was a significant increase in the proportion of adult male employees in the cotton mills during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. While mills in Ontario and Atlantic Canada witnessed this phenomenon mostly during the 1880s, and essentially as a substitute for child labour, it was not so in the province of Quebec. There it occurred during the following decade and was more a reflection of the fact that the mills were "a [relatively] declining industry for [adult] women," to qualify Edith Abbott's contemporary observation in the United States.⁶⁹ Of the several dimensions to this evolution, those of mixed and overlapping gender roles are of particular relevance.

According to Abbott, part of the answer to American women's declining opportunities in the cotton industry is found in the weave room:

But it is well known to those conversant with the industry that only a few years ago the weaving of cotton goods was regarded as peculiarly the work of women. The introduction of improved and fast looms has led more and more to the employment of men as weavers.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Edith Abbott, "History of the Employment of Women in the American Cotton Mills," *Journal of Political Economy*, 16 (1908), 608.

⁷⁰The author quoting the *Twelfth Census, Manufactures*, II, 33.

TABLE 2

Changing composition of the work force in Canada's cotton industry, 1870-1900

	Quebec %	Ontario %	Atlantic Canada %
Men:			
1870-1	24	21	23
1880-1	27	28	29
1890-1	33	42	37
1901	47	46	41
Women:			
1870-1	56	36	44
1880-1	47	35	43
1890-1	46	42	47
1901	36	42	48
Children:			
1870-1	20	43	33
1880-1	26	37	27
1890-1	21	16	16
1901	17	12	11

Sources: Derived from *Census of Canada*, 1870-1, vol. 3, 437; 1880-1, vol. 3, 485; 1890-1, vol. 3, 120-1; 1901, vol. 3, 20 and 37.

And while pointing to the existence of unjustified distinctions among weavers in other mills, Alfred Hawkesworth, general manager at Saint-Henri, confirmed this overlap of gender roles in 1896 when he asserted to his colleagues: "Some mills discriminate against men weavers, preferring girls on certain kinds of goods. I do not think we get either more or better goods per loom on this account. Good careful weavers are known by their work."⁷¹ Notwithstanding such "discrimination," statistical evidence in the Montreal area and reference to male weavers who were heads of large families in Valleyfield further corroborate this overlap of gender lines among Quebec weavers.⁷² It also points to similarities with the American experience where men and women weavers were employed in almost equal proportion.⁷³ To realize fully the importance of this mixed group of operatives, one should bear in mind that weaving alone comprised an estimated 25 per cent of the

⁷¹ Alfred Hawkesworth, "Looms and Loom Fixers: Weavers and Weaving Room," *Transactions of the New England Cotton Manufacturers' Association* (Waltham, 1896), 296.

⁷² Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving It Together," 124; *La Presse*, 30 Oct. 1900.

⁷³ Abbott, "History of the Employment," 614.

entire workforce and, according to one study, commanded no less than 44.9 per cent of all labour costs, inclusive of supervisory positions.⁷⁴ This mixed collective of operatives was by far the largest and most homogeneous occupation of its kind throughout the textile industries of Quebec.

Further, the increasing speed and growing use of automatic or semi-automatic devices led to a situation whereby a significant number of gender roles were being assigned more as a matter of wage policy than for specific sociotechnical considerations. With the exception of male tasks requiring some "mechanical ability," "long apprenticeship," or "a fairly strong man," cotton machinery was not always designed with gender in mind and several traditional female occupations would not have stood the test of gender distinctions according to the operative's standing or sitting position.⁷⁵ There followed marked local and regional variations in gender assignments and wage levels among several semiskilled and unskilled productive roles. While conditions in the United States were obviously different as a result of the massive influx of "new immigrants," the following data comparing wage differentials in three Montreal card rooms with the corresponding job descriptions from an exhaustive U.S. labour report illustrates this lack of conventional wisdom about gender assignments.

Even though competition from eastern European and Mediterranean immigrants is not known to have been a major factor in Quebec cotton mills, men in Saint-Henri totally secured occupations which, in the United States, offered substantial openings to women. Conversely, female carders monopolized or dominated productive roles in which American men predominated "slightly" or decisively. Substantial wage-differentials among some operatives in Montreal card rooms further suggest local variations in gender assignments, perhaps fostered through wage discrimination. Take for instance card stripping which was normally reserved for men for its being "one of the dirtiest and most disagreeable jobs in the mill."⁷⁶ A 30 per-cent difference in the average daily wage between the nearby Hochelaga and Ste. Anne mills, all other rates being almost equal, points to different gender roles for this particular assignment. On the other hand, the heavy work of tending slubbing frames in the drawing room was far less valued at the Ste. Anne mill and thus could be yet another sign of a managerially-constructed gender role with its concomitant wage discrepancy.

The implication of this relative fluidity in gender roles was not simply the lesser incidence of lasting spatial divisions between men and women; it was also, arguably, a more tangible opportunity for an emerging community of interest within the factory. Men and women could share a unique factory culture whereby it was not impossible for a young couple to work side by side in the weave room.

⁷⁴James G. Hill, "Various Systems of Computing the Costs of Manufacture," *Transactions of the New England Cotton Manufacturers' Association*, 67 (1896), 134.

⁷⁵U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Wages and Hours of Labor in Cotton Goods Manufacturing and Finishing, 1916* (Washington 1918), 141-258.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 151.

TABLE 3
 Gender assignments among Saint-Henri carders and average
 daily wages in Montreal card rooms, 4 May, 1908

Occupations:	Gender divisions		St. Henri Hochelaga St. Anne			Gender Assignment according to U.S. Labor Bureau
	Saint-Henri		Average	Daily	Wages	
	Men	Women				
Carding:	71	0				
Lapper tenders and "Lap men"			1.20	1.26	1.26	either men or women usually women
Strippers				0.90	1.26	occupation for men
Grinders				1.56	1.55	skilled men only
Drawing:						
Drawing tenders:	0	44	0.81	0.85	0.85	men predominate slightly
Slubber tenders	6	13	1.20	1.32	0.92	men as a rule because of heavier work
Speeder tenders:	0	89	0.94	1.10	1.07	women seem to predominate
Doffers:	7	34	0.49	0.47	0.63	boys and young men
Can Boys:	19	0	0.63	0.71	0.67	usually boys

Sources: (PAC) Royal Commission Respecting Industrial Disputes in Cotton Factories of the Province of Quebec, vol. 2, "Dominion Textile Co.," Merchants Branch, Hochelaga and Ste. Anne, 4 May 1908; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Wages and Hours of Labor in Cotton Goods Manufacturing and Finishing, 1916," no. 239, Wash. D.C., 1918.

And individuals coming from other factories, in Canada or the United States, would be more conscious of the arbitrariness of assigning gender roles in such places as the carding department, and more knowledgeable of the requirements involved. In several departments, men and women assigned to sexually-segregated jobs could still relate to each other over such matters as dust pollution, favouritism, excessive fines and managerial behaviour. In short, one finds during this period, hidden in the labour process, a number of potentially important organic ties between men and women workers in the cotton mills, which are almost irrelevant to shoe factories.

Partly as a result of industrywide changes such as these, the period which saw an increase in the appropriation of relative surplus-value also brought a broader range of conflicts and greater collective potentialities. As in the shoe industry, the turn of the twentieth century cotton industry witnessed labour conflicts that were more widespread occupationally but with the singular distinction that women assumed, once again, a visible if not leading role. Female frame-spinners of

Montreal and Saint-Henri were found "at the head of the movement" against managerial abuses over the child labour issue,⁷⁷ and the excessive speed of spindles.⁷⁸ And whereas the female spoolers of Valleyfield confronted angry citizens over the impact of spare hands on their weekly earnings,⁷⁹ those at Montmorency wrestled management successfully to have their output measured by weight rather than by thread numbers.⁸⁰

Yet, women's activism was also brandished in ways that reflect the absence of any clearcut spatial gender divisions and the existence of in-group awareness among male and female operatives. While weavers (of unknown gender) in Valleyfield were objecting to the replacement of "old hands"⁸¹ and resenting special favours to English-speaking operatives assigned to new looms,⁸² their male and female counterparts in Magog all rose to a 'man' to challenge traditional managerial prerogatives.⁸³ They argued "that owing to the introduction of new machinery and the fact that heavier grade of cotton was being used, they could not earn nearly as much as [...] a month ago, and [that] the scale of wages should be increased." They also took issue with giving only a quarter of the usual wage rates to individuals replacing other hands, and showed their determination by shutting off the water supply to the print works where skilled workers were unwilling to join them.

In August 1900, factory women were also the source of attention as victims of harassment and possible sexual abuses at the Montmorency mill during the trying events that led to one of the final battles of the Knights of Labor.⁸⁴ And if an organized labour movement finally emerged with some degree of success during the late spring and summer of 1906, it was partially thanks to the weavers and carders of Hochelaga,⁸⁵ the "cardeurs, cardeuses et fileuses" of Ste. Anne,⁸⁶ and the "girls of the ring-spinning and spooling-rooms" at Magog.⁸⁷ In their own different ways they had rejuvenated a breathless sprint by the male mule-spinners who sought to emulate with a 'craft' union the factory culture of their counterparts in the United States and of their 'brothers' in the shoe industry.⁸⁸ And in the process women carved the nascent union movement to their own liking.⁸⁹ Once again, Quebec cotton "girls" set a historical precedent in forming the first province-wide

⁷⁷ *La Presse*, 26 Sept. 1893; *Le Courrier du Canada*, 27 Sept. 1893.

⁷⁸ *Labour Gazette*, 3 (1903), 709.

⁷⁹ Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire'," 74.

⁸⁰ *La Gazette du Travail*, 8 (1907), 515.

⁸¹ *La Presse*, 16 July 1900.

⁸² *Montreal Daily Star*, 14 and 16 July 1900.

⁸³ *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, 27, 28 and 30 July 1900.

⁸⁴ *L'Événement*, 22 Aug. 1900.

⁸⁵ *Montreal Daily Star*, 1 May 1906.

⁸⁶ *La Presse*, 3 May 1906.

⁸⁷ *Sherbrooke Daily Record*, 27 June 1906.

⁸⁸ Rouillard, *Les travailleurs du coton*, 88-9; *Montreal Daily Star*, 1 May 1906.

⁸⁹ Cuthbert Brandt, "Weaving It Together," 121.

male and female labour union, the Federation of Textile Workers of Canada (FTWC).⁹⁰

Assessing with accuracy the extent of women's participation in collective endeavours between 1906 and 1908 proves to be more difficult because of overlapping and shifting gender roles and the male leadership of their organization. The short-lived FTWC, headed by such reform-minded officials as Wilfrid Paquette and L.A. Girard, has received much credit for organizing some 7,000, mostly unskilled, textile workers.⁹¹ Further praise for such enlightened leadership is ample evidence of a renewed crusade for legislative reform on the sensitive issue of women and child labour.⁹² But there is also another side to this story or, shall we say, another story than simply this great institutional and political narrative. It is a short episode in the life of 770 women working at the Hochelaga and Ste. Anne mills; merely a week during which they finally got to set their own pace, secure a dominant influence at mass meetings, flood the atmosphere with the mood of a college protest, capture the front page of two leading daily newspapers, inspire the writings of a prominent editorialist, and force their union leaders to come to grips with the precepts of law, and the realities of harassment and discrimination.

Glimmers of the 'Unbound Prometheus': an 'organized' strike at the Hochelaga and Ste. Anne mills (1908).

Women, as the guardians of some of the most basic moral and religious values, held a potentially active role in the factory setting. They would not merely strike over "bread and butter" issues if earning one's livelihood entailed serious breaches in the moral code they, more than anyone else, had been taught to abide by from cradle to death. Concurrently, they would have to face the challenge of asserting this role beyond the limited bounds of their home, in a patriarchal capitalist society that had given rise to legal standards fostered by tangible male-oriented values. In the private world of industrial corporations where reigned Social Darwinism and laissez-faire, women's plight in this respect was twofold. As victims or witnesses of abusive language, managerial improprieties, and covert physical mistreatment, women activists not only faced the prospect of contesting managerial prerogatives over investigative procedures, but also of challenging male criminal standards which practically and, in fact, legally disqualified most gender issues.⁹³ Thus, work

⁹⁰Mixed labour unions had been formed in Ontario during the Knights of Labor movement, as well as very briefly in Montmorency Falls, Quebec, in 1900. But, to our knowledge, no province-wide male and female labour union had arisen in Quebec prior to 1907. This Federation also included workers in the woolen factories of Saint-Hyacinthe, Sherbrooke, Coaticook, and Chambly Canton.

⁹¹Rouillard, *Les travailleurs*, 90-9.

⁹²*Sessional Paper*, 87 (1910), 8-9; *La Patrie*, 12 Feb. 1908; *La Presse*, 14 March 1908.

⁹³This is not to suggest that such offenses were not in themselves the source of indictments. Dozens of Montrealers were arrested each year for insulting people, blaspheming, indecent conduct, cruelty to animals, and threatening language. But, meanwhile, women workers were not granted any specific protection at the various judicial levels, and the noisy and cramped atmosphere of the cotton mill left

stoppages stemming from gender-related misdemeanours would almost invariably lead women strikers to probe the perimeters of solidarity and estrangement where could overlap class consciousness and conflicting gender positions. The cotton "girls" of Hochelaga and Ste. Anne were among Quebec's first working-class women to do so at the beginning of this century.

The confrontation flared up on 3 March 1908, over the obscene and vindictive conduct of an assistant-foreman, one Joseph Venne, after weeks of harassment endured patiently by unionized women in the weaving room.⁹⁴ At first, the strikers' resolve to tough it out as long as it would take to secure this man's expulsion took the executive council of the FTWC by surprise. The secretary-general, L.A. Girard, had been seeking greater tolerance among union members to achieve a few token reforms through legislative channels.⁹⁵ In this particular instance, however, women workers were not willing to behave unobtrusively for the sake of gaining more time to lick their wounds. They held "overwhelming evidence" against Venne and resolved to remain unwavering about his expulsion.⁹⁶

Even though accounts of this strike made the front page of daily newspapers, the exact nature of the problem must have been something of a frustration for the Montreal public. Never was there any specific description of this man's misdemeanour, presumably because of the legal implications.⁹⁷ The bottom line was presented as a series of vicious managerial practices against female unionized workers such as imposing heavy fines and laying off employees for alleged defective work.⁹⁸ This harassment would melt away the moment an individual decided to leave the union. Nonetheless, the following passage from the workers' chronicle in *La Presse* sheds an interesting light on what appears to have been specifically a child labour issue:

The question of our children's education is particularly critical in our cotton mills where, leaving their paternal home, thousands of children come to earn their daily bread and that of their families at the price of labouring too often beyond their strength. But these poor youngsters need not only struggle against indigence; the evil example, often sanctioned by authority itself, is there surrounding, taking hold of, and debasing the child whose mother took so much trouble to nurture carefully.

little illusion about moral and judicial protection. On woman's legal rights during this era see: Micheline Dumont-Johnson, "Histoire de la condition de la femme dans la province de Québec," *Tradition culturelle et histoire politique de la femme* (Study no. 8 of the Royal Commission of Enquiry on the Condition of Women in Canada, Ottawa: 1971), 43.

⁹⁴ *La Patrie* and *La Presse*, 3 March 1908.

⁹⁵ Correspondence of L.A. Girard to L.A. Taschereau, *Sessional Paper*, 87 (1910), 8-9. He had proposed amendments to the Industrial Establishment Act that would limit the maximum working-day to eleven hours, including a one hour pause "with liberty to go outside the factory." He further indicated that Saturday afternoon should be declared a legal holiday with all work ceasing at noon for women and children. The underlying rationale was that several grievances were probably due to fatigue and exhaustion, most of which would subside if children and women were not to toil beyond their physical strength.

⁹⁶ *La Patrie*, 7 March 1908; *La Presse*, 9 March 1908.

⁹⁷ *La Patrie*, 9 March 1908.

⁹⁸ *La Patrie*, 4 March 1908.

Heartless and indecent foremen have the poor innocents' ears ring with curses and blasphemy that send shivers down your spine.

Therefore, it is not wrong sometimes to rebel against the conduct of such heartless people and request their expulsion from the work shop.⁹⁹

The evidence concerning women's undaunted involvement in this work stoppage is both pictorial and textual. Napoléon Savard's vivid sketches provide a few glimpses of female strikers as they took physical control over the mass meeting and spent most of their time at the union hall rather than passively weathering the conflict at home. Proudly exhibiting their best attire, they displayed confidence in the moral justness of their cause and sought respect for their new role as unionized mothers and sisters (see figure 3). Sitting irreverently astride the back of their chair, playing cards, or knitting, they momentarily forgot about the inflexible working regime at the factory as some of their comrades sang and danced to a more leisurely rhythm (see figure 4). They had made an apparently simple request to maintain some basic moral standards in the workplace and had done so with the overwhelming support of all workers at Hochelaga and Ste. Anne. It was now up to their male leaders to carry out what appeared as a straightforward mandate.

Unfortunately, the problem might have been resolved more easily under the inquisitorial system of New France than in this modern industrial context. In the first place, the secretary-general's perennial optimism showed that he shared much affinity with Mackenzie King's philosophy of industrial relations when he asserted that justice would prevail once an enquiry disclosed this "overwhelming evidence" to the higher echelons of the company.¹⁰⁰ More experienced, president Wilfrid Paquette was critical of how higher management had immediately protected its managerial staff and resolved to fire the agitators once the conflict was over. On the other hand, none of these officials ever suggested that this matter could be prosecuted under law or resolved by any other means than a corporate enquiry.

Secondly, female strikers were justifiably concerned over procedure. If a man is innocent until proven guilty, they claimed that fair treatment was a two-way street and foresaw that this sacrosanct legal principle would backfire in the form of heightened sexual harassment unless safeguards were instituted. They requested that, in addition to its being conducted by the vice-president and the general manager of the company, the enquiry should take place in the presence of union representatives, a stenographer, and a lawyer. They would not return to work until completion of the investigation and showed no intention of giving in to the company's demand that they forward their accusations in writing.¹⁰¹ Feeling that management's historic prerogatives were at stake, company officials declined to comply with such guidelines and promised only to undertake an investigation on their own terms once the strikers had returned to work.¹⁰² Meanwhile, Italian

⁹⁹ *La Presse*, 7 March 1908, (my translation).

¹⁰⁰ *La Presse*, 3 March 1908.

¹⁰¹ *La Presse* and *La Patrie*, 7 March 1908.

¹⁰² *La Patrie*, 9 March 1908.



FIGURE 3

Jamming the front rows of the overcrowded assembly and spending most of their time at the union hall rather than passively weathering the conflict at home, women strikers proudly exhibited their best attire. They displayed confidence in the moral justness of their cause and sought respect in their new role as unionized mothers and sisters. *La Presse*, 4, 5 March 1908.



FIGURE 4

Sitting irreverently astride the back of their chair, playing cards or knitting, the cotton "girls" of Hochelaga momentarily forgot about the inflexible working regime at the factory as some of their comrades sang and danced to a more leisurely rhythm. But their attention could not always be diverted from the more pressing issues of the day. *La Presse*, 3, 5 March 1908.

strikebreakers were being hired in preparation for this eventual 'settlement'.

Finally, much of the women's resolve and of the workers' solidarity were seriously undermined by their male leadership. Wilfrid Paquette had indicated earlier that he would resign if the strikers did not persist in their decision to stop work until Venne was expelled or suspended.¹⁰³ Coming from the founder of the FTWC, this unusual threat is even more surprising considering that he, more than anyone else, brought an inconclusive end to the strike.

Following several days of stalemate, the workers of the Hochelaga and Ste. Anne mills remained unwavering in their determination, and on 9 March they voted overwhelmingly against returning to work.¹⁰⁴ Delegates from other mills were present and the cotton workers of Saint-Henri declared their willingness to join forces with the strikers. But Paquette, "who had not yet voiced his opinion," chose this moment to raise the questionable criminality of the accusations against Venne. His address, which began by suggesting that only the strikers (implying mainly women?) were to assume full responsibility for the outcome of the conflict, mystified the audience. He contradicted his earlier criticism of the general manager's lack of good faith, indicating that Mr. Mole was a man of honour and that his proposal for unilateral action "offered every desirable guarantee that justice would be rendered to those concerned." While he was of the opinion that "the accusations against Venne had been made in good faith," he was not assured that "they could be clarified and proven so easily as one would wish." The tide had turned for women activists as more and more people began to question the wisdom of having initiated such a strike before consulting the executive committee of the FTWC. When Paquette pledged that he would resign if compelling evidence did not lead to Venne's expulsion, most workers voted to return to work to the "great displeasure" of several *ouvrières*.

What followed clearly illustrates how women's forethought proved to be accurate. Five days later, on 14 March, Paquette resigned for "personal reasons."¹⁰⁵ Workers in Saint-Henri experienced an immediate escalation of aggression among their foremen and pleaded for the return of their beloved president.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, L.A. Girard was implicitly discrediting Paquette's presidency on the ground of his political affiliations and lack of control over union members at the very moment legislative reforms were underway. The secretary-general, true to his utopian philosophy of unionism, undertook to demonstrate how harmony could be restored by imposing strict executive control over the right to strike, but was unable to carry out his agenda within the FTWC.¹⁰⁷ Finally displaying his true colours, he went

¹⁰³ *La Patrie*, 5 March 1908.

¹⁰⁴ *La Patrie*, 9 March 1908.

¹⁰⁵ *La Presse*, 16 March 1908.

¹⁰⁶ *La Presse*, 19 March 1908. They addressed an "energetic vote of protests" to the Dominion Textile Company as to injustices being sanctioned by leading authorities at the Hochelaga mill.

¹⁰⁷ *La Presse*, 23 March, 2 and 7 April 1908. After two days of closed deliberations initially intended to nominate a new president, leading union officials reinstated Paquette as secretary-general of the executive committee and Girard was forced to resign.

on to form a company union at Hochelaga and had no qualm about including in its ranks the very men whose conduct had been so much despised by female cotton workers.¹⁰⁸ How indicative of a strengthened alliance between capitalism and patriarchy!

Still shaken by this unfortunate "clash of personality" over trade union practices exacerbated by gender-related issues, Montreal cotton workers would suffer another blow a few weeks later when they fell prey to a massive counter-offensive by their employers, involving blacklisting and followed by several weeks of lock-out.¹⁰⁹ To Quebec textile workers, this industry-wide conflict marked the end of a relatively successful, albeit all too brief period of organized 'collective' unionism. To the female operatives of Hochelaga and Ste. Anne, the exhilarating flirt with the "unbound Prometheus" was all over. And there would be even fewer opportunities for the following generations as cotton "girls" were gradually removed "from a central role in the manufacturing process."¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, these activists had renewed the long tradition of female-instigated dissidence hoping to bring to the workplace a sense of living in a civilized world. This time, however, they had aimed higher than a mere confrontation with capital, taking a "freedom ride" and testing new limits of tolerance among fellow workers and union leaders for the formal recognition of what they perceived as condemnable, if not criminal acts against women and children. That their hopes were wrecked on the reefs of both managerial prerogatives and male standards of justice suggests how volatile was the nature of working-class solidarity in such a mixed workforce and how class bonding could easily give way to emotional sundering over fundamental gender issues.

Paquette probably shared a commonly held opinion when he stated that "there is always some new trouble cropping up every day" in an organization which includes men, women and children.¹¹¹ In this case, however, the "trouble" did not arise from a lack of union experience among unskilled workers, or of forethought and discipline among female and juvenile members of the organization, as has been suggested elsewhere.¹¹² Displaying a constant image of class authenticity and of genuine militancy, women's only handicap was the subversive nature, to capitalism, of their role as female unionists and, to patriarchy, of their ambitions to adapt union practices to gender problems. In this final instance before the fall of the FTWC, they failed as forerunners of things to come several generations later, not as forces of inertia and elements of unruliness in this short-lived 'organized' labour movement.

¹⁰⁸ James Thwaites, "La Commission d'enquête sur l'industrie des cotonnades en 1909 et les relations de travail," *Histoire des travailleurs québécois: Bulletin R.C.H.T.Q.*, 52-3(1980), 64-7.

¹⁰⁹ Ferland, "Syndicalisme 'parcellaire'," 77-8; Rouillard, *Les travailleurs*, 99-102.

¹¹⁰ Cuthbert Brandt, "The Transformation of Women's Work," 134.

¹¹¹ (PAC) Royal Commission Respecting Industrial Disputes in the Cotton Factories of the Province of Quebec. *Minutes of Evidence*, 1908, 93, as quoted by Rouillard, *Les travailleurs*, 116.

¹¹² Rouillard, *Les travailleurs*, 79-80 and 116.

* * * * *

IN ONE RESPECT, WOMEN'S active involvement in industrial class conflicts is not unlike several other groups of unskilled and semiskilled workers: "it stands out for its uniqueness rather than its representativeness."¹¹³ Yet, there are also, among these less privileged workers, large, industry-wide pockets of acute and recurrent manifestations of social antagonism which, in the aggregate, are more noteworthy than mere exceptions to this rule. Looming up in the background of various local, cultural and economic circumstances are influential structural parameters and modalities of production that either foster or hinder militant behavior among people generally excluded from mainstream unionism. Hence, the cotton "girls" of Quebec stand out as much for their representativeness of female activism within the cotton industry than for the uniqueness of female militancy throughout Quebec working-class society.

With or without the assistance of their male counterparts and a labour union, their activism, centered in a half-dozen locations, contrasts sharply with the male-dominated labour relations of the boot and shoe industry. To be sure, Quebec women had no voice in the existing shoeworkers' associations as "brotherhoods" persistently overrode any impetus toward industrial unionism. But how does one explain the apparent lack of 'unorganized' dissidence in dozens of leather stitching rooms across Quebec's industrial heartland (that is, in a far larger pool of potentially turbulent circumstantial factors than in the cotton industry)? And while such remarkable confluence of local, socio-economic and cultural circumstances might have appeared at various intervals, neither will it clarify why this ought to be associated mainly with the cotton workers during a period of more than a quarter-century.

Funnelling such empirical considerations through the Marxist tradition of historical materialism, this comparative essay has targeted a number of basic structural preconditions to women's activism at a time when formal unionism was anything but vital to this working-class stratum. Gender divisions were not as spatially and technologically pervasive in the cotton mills; neither was the division of labour as much driven to an increasing minuteness and fragmentation of the productive activity. The labour process further left its imprint on the relative rigidity or volatility of work stations; and workers' associations were not always a faithful reflection of varying levels of mechanization and skill dilution. Altogether, parameters such as these entail different sociological implications concerning solidarity and estrangement, as well as the corresponding propensity for a "resonant" and supportive working-class struggle. At the first glimpse of female militancy, when the cotton "girls" of Hochelaga struck for the first time in 1880, they emerged as having a decisive edge over their sisters in the boot and shoe industry. However briefly and unsuccessfully, they had the opportunity to struggle for their share of

¹¹³Bradbury, "Women's History," 30.

justice and civilization, an opportunity seldom experienced in other manufacturing branches and sectors of the economy where rigid capitalist and patriarchal work standards prevailed.

On the other hand, one has to take a quantum leap in order to derive from such glimpses of female militancy manifestations of a class consciousness unfettered by gender divisions and patriarchal values. Despite a noticeable overlap of some gender roles in the labour process during the early monopolistic era, and the FTWC's massive recruitment of women between 1906 and 1908, our final episode of female-instigated class struggle ends on a false note for these activists. Displaying such forethought about managerial practices and male standards of criminality as to warrant a Promethean allusion, these few glimmers of emancipation from factory discrimination were rapidly extinguished when two male union leaders successfully undermined workers' determination and women's credibility. In a matter of a few minutes, the militant female unionists at the Hochelaga and Ste. Anne mills thus experienced a socio-emotional shock that could only be shared with other women: male workers' retreat from class solidarity to patriarchal estrangement.

44 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

Appendix 1: Fitting or Stitching Department

<i>Assembly lines</i>	<i>Occupations</i>	<i>Description</i>
Tips	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-punches-perforators-cementers-folders-doublers-seamers-crimpers-tip stitchers-seam rubbers-seam closers-seam stayers	Tip stitchers work on tips, vamps and foxings. The tip is a separate piece of leather stitched to the vamp by machine. But this requires several detailed interventions either to prepare the leather or to work on the seams.
Linings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-stencelers-closers-stitchers	Various pieces of linings are sewed to the upper. These pieces have to be cut and sewed together.
Tops	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-cementers-folders-doublers-eyelet row markers-hookers-backstay stitchers-closers-on-seam rubbers down-top stitchers-eyeletters-buttonhole markers-button row markers-button fasteners-buttoners-lacers-toe lining stitches	Top stitchers work on tops, button flys and linings. Backstay stitchers, eyelet row stitchers, closers-on, top stitchers, and eyeletters are the most important machine operators but several other tasks are also included.
Vamping	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-vampers-barrers-upper tiers-checkers	Vamping is the process of sewing together the lower and upper parts of the shoe. "Vamping is the most important and best paid operation in the fitting room."

Source: Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, No. 134, 154, 178, 232, 260, 278, 324 and 360, Washington 1912 to 1924.