

Communists, Gangsters, and Canadian Sailors

Craig Heron

Volume 24, 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt24re02>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Heron, C. (1989). Communists, Gangsters, and Canadian Sailors. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 24, 231–238.

Communists, Gangsters, and Canadian Sailors

Craig Heron

Jim Green, *Against the Tide: The Story of the Canadian Seamen's Union* (Toronto: Progress Books 1986).

William Kaplan, *Everything That Floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Canadian Seamen's Unions of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1987).

CANADIAN SEAMEN'S UNIONS are now running neck and neck with the Winnipeg General Strike for the lead as the most studied phenomenon in Canadian labour history. At least six books and a handful of unpublished theses have appeared over the past three decades dealing with the organization and difficulties of these unions from the 1930s to the 1960s. Four books appeared in 1986-7 alone, one of them based on a highly acclaimed, made-for-television docudrama. Controversies about these unions in the two decades after World War II make them ripe for such intense scrutiny. Before 1950, the bumptious Canadian Seamen's Union (CSU) symbolized the spirit of democratic, militant, Communist-inspired unionism that was sweeping through several Canadian industries. After 1950 the new Seafarers' International Union (SIU) became the most infamous embodiment of corruption in labour ranks that helped to sour public support for workers' organization.

Canada's Cold War-era labour movement deserves such renewed attention. The period from the late 1930s to the early 1950s marked a crucial turning point in the history of the Canadian working class which still lacks the careful analysis it deserves. Unfortunately, Canadian historians have not yet found a satisfactory way to write about it. For too long, writers have been locked in sterile, Cold War-categories, especially when it comes to interpreting left-wing influence in the labour movement. Communist-led trade unionism generally has either inspired writers, or made them extremely uncomfortable, and most often, they have felt obliged to chose sides. A fresh approach might try to assess as dispassionately as possible how the new unions were created, how they actually worked, and what forces of resistance they faced. But regrettably, these new books on the seamen's unions have not broken out of the cheering and booing phase of historical writing.

William Kaplan has written what unfortunately will be for some time to come the standard academic monograph on the subject. His book, *Everything That*

Floats, is primarily concerned with the era of corruption that began in 1950, and provides only a sketchy version of the CSU story to establish the reason for the SIU arrival in Canada. In this introductory section, however, he recaptures the red-baiting tone set more than 30 years ago by Pat Sullivan, the CSU's most prominent leader in the 1930s and 1940s, and author of *Red Sails on the Great Lakes*. Jim Green has written a much different book. *Against the Tide* is based on an oral history project among retired seamen, and was written for a more popular audience. Green is not an experienced writer, still less an academic, and his book is unblushingly partisan in defence of the radicals who once led the union. The differences extend beyond ideology to sources. Kaplan has mined the public archives but not the CSU records, and for the first quarter of his book, leans heavily on previous research. Green has relied almost exclusively on the memories of old-timers and the apparently extensive CSU papers, including huge files of clippings from the daily press. Of the two studies, Green's is more satisfying for its richer texture and sensitivity to the rough-and-tumble labour relations in the maritime industry and for its political honesty, in contrast to Kaplan's polemic against Communism dressed up in objective academic garb. But neither book quite captures the real dynamics of the story that emerge when their versions of events are compared.

The Canadian maritime industry always has been divided between the inland and coastal carriers and the ocean-going merchant marine. In the twentieth century, the deep-sea fleet has expanded only in wartime, and then shrunk into insignificance after hostilities ceased. On the busy Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River shipping routes, a few large companies established their dominance by the 1930s, most prominent among them Canada Steamship Lines. The ocean ports had a less-concentrated ownership structure, but from 1903 the owners co-operated in a strong employers' association known as the Shipping Federation of Canada. Workers in the industry thus faced powerful bosses.

There seldom was as much romance and adventure in the working lives of Canadian sailors as novelists or Hollywood film-makers might suggest. Their time on board ship traditionally was constrained by a ship's articles, which bound the crew to specified terms and conditions of employment and penalties for infractions of discipline, and by the Canada Shipping Act, which outlawed desertion and insubordination (including strikes) and buttressed a shipmaster's disciplinary powers with the right to throw a sailor into prison. Under such harsh, quasi-military management, sailors had little or no room to raise complaints about the generally-low wages, poor food, and often-wretched living and working conditions. Kaplan emphasizes this degradation of working seamen, but misses those countervailing qualities of this maritime work world which Green sketches and that help to explain the tough-minded unionism that eventually took root among these workers. The close co-operation demanded in sailors' work and their isolated shipboard social life bred unusually strong bonds among them. The deep-sea crews, in particular, were also typically young and high-spirited, often cocky and restless, certainly proud of their prowess on the high seas and in the taverns and brothels. Most of the

swaggering braggadocio had to be saved for shore leave, but, combined with shipboard comradeship, it was a reservoir of militancy and solidarity that the new union could tap.

Canadian shipowners never had countenanced any collective organization among their workers, except for the brief successes of the Knights of Labor on the Great Lakes in the 1880s. They preferred sweetheart deals with labour recruiters hiding behind a union-like name, the most infamous being the National Seamen's Association run by Captain H.N. McMaster, who collected fees from the companies as well as dues from the workers. In 1935, its members on the Great Lakes erupted into a general strike, without McMaster's support, and a year later created their own *bona fide* union, which promptly amalgamated with another Montreal-based, independent body to create the Canadian Seamen's Union, headed by a ship's-cook-turned-talented-union-leader, Pat Sullivan. This feisty little organization had no trouble signing up members on the inland vessels, and by 1938 had won signed contracts with their employers. During the next decade, the union drew in seamen on the Maritime and British Columbia coastal vessels and, more importantly, the huge new work force in the wartime merchant marine. By the late 1940s, virtually all sailors on Canadian ships were CSU members.

From the CSU's beginning in 1936, Communists were prominent among its leaders. Sullivan had been recruited to the Communist Party that year, and several others filled official posts. By no means were all of the CSU executive members and office holders card-carrying Communists, but the union had an undeniably close rapport with the Communist movement. Here is where the historiographical controversy starts to heat up. Kaplan and Green each seize upon one of the two distinct emphases which the Communists brought to their trade union activity and proceed to ignore the other. Green is quite rightly impressed with the democratic procedures that were solidly implanted in the CSU — much as they were in such other Communist-led unions of the period as the United Electrical Workers and the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers. Each crew met weekly, elected a ship's delegate and a ship's committee to handle grievances and other union business, generally ran a ship's library for members' education, and sometimes produced a ship's newspaper. The union newspaper, *Searchlight*, circulated to all vessels and solicited regular reports, articles, letters, and poems. In short, the union ran on an ideal of active, well-informed rank-and-file democracy. The evidence in Green's book suggests that in large measure, this policy was sincerely carried out and worked quite successfully.

Kaplan completely ignores this democratic flavour. In fact, he denies it without even examining the internal life of the organization: "The union was not in the hands of membership, nor had it ever been." (53) He emphasizes instead opportunistic manipulation by wily radical leaders who bent the union to the needs of the international Communism. Discussing the political goals of union leaders requires great caution. It is incontestable that Communists promoted their political priorities in their union organizations, as did Liberals and CCFers in the same period; hiring

political cronies, caucusing before meetings, and strategizing before conventions were not always democratic, but were hardly unique to the Communists. And it is latter-day Cold-War hysteria to see an international conspiracy behind each of these moves. Kaplan treats his readers to a regular string of far-fetched, unsubstantiated allegations: "The objective of the Communist Party of Canada in 1936 was the installation of a Soviet-style system of government" (19); in 1939-41, "although its activities became increasingly restricted, the Communist Party of Canada did what it could to undermine the war effort" (27); during these years, "a handful of strategically placed Communist sailors would enjoy incredible opportunities to commit espionage and sabotage" (33); "it is possible that the Communist party supported [the 1946 seamen's strike] for its own purposes: shipments of grain and other supplies urgently needed in Europe were delayed while European Communists consolidated their positions" (48); by 1948-49 "events of the past decade both at home and overseas left no doubt that Communism was directly antithetical to unionism: wherever Communists took power, they destroyed free trade unions" (58); "Canadian seamen were being used — in the interests of the Soviet Union" (65); "The 1949 deep-sea strike left little doubt about the havoc a Communist-controlled union could wreak in support of Soviet imperialism" (73) (as Green reminds us, the Communist Party of Canada actually urged the union not to launch this final confrontation). Kaplan even goes so far as to suggest that the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada (TLC), with which the CSU was affiliated, should have intervened to clean out the Communists and hold new elections (overlooking the fact that the union won any certification votes held in these years hands down). These loose judgments indicate a complete misunderstanding of why Canadian workers joined the Communist Party and, more importantly, why non-Communist unionists supported CP leadership. Members and non-members found relevant to their own hard-pressed lives the rhetoric, analysis, and uncompromising toughness of Communist militants. Most Communist sailors described in Green's book had made their political commitment on this basis, not as part of some dark plot to subvert capitalist society through espionage and secret intrigue. We do no justice to historical actors like the "reds" spread out in so many Canadian ships if we reduce them to mere pawns in Moscow's grand schemes. Their militant commitment to democratic trade unionism was so clear that the companies ultimately insisted on blacklisting all of them, not simply a cabal of radicals in the union office.

At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the practical difficulties that the Communist leadership of the CSU created for its members by the dizzying turns of direction that international Communism was demanding in those years. Notably, the union struck a suspicious stance against wartime mobilization before 1941 and then, as soon as German tanks rolled into the Soviet Union, abruptly swung about and signed no-strike pledges to support the war effort. Green ignores this problem, or tries to argue that the policy zig-zags made some kind of sense domestically. A proper assessment of the period has to take into account that the party of the Canadian Left that had fired up so many working-class imaginations was weaken-

ing the workers' struggles through its willingness to take direction from a distant leadership. That is not the same as claiming a conspiratorial influence by the Evil Empire, as Kaplan's approach suggests. The Canadian radicals made their own, ultimately misguided, choices.

While Kaplan wants us to believe that the Communists were the real cause of the CSU's demise in the late 1940s, the evidence in both books suggests otherwise. This ebullient union faced the same "holy trinity" that destroyed radical unionism after World War I: employers, international union officials, and the Canadian state. The shipowners never reconciled themselves to the unionization of their industry, and both in 1948 (on the Great Lakes) and in 1949 (in the ocean-going trade), openly flouted federal collective-bargaining legislation to drive out the union. Their stated grounds were Communist domination of the union, but their aim clearly was to eliminate the unprecedented spirit of defiance among the seamen. They turned immediately to a motley body organized by the renegade ex-Communist, Pat Sullivan, which soon merged into a gangster-ridden American union with virtually no representation in Canada, the Seafarers' International Union. The shipowners signed contracts with SIU officials, who rounded up scab sailors and well-armed goons and launched a bloody war on the waterfront. Heading up this assault was an SIU staffer with a criminal record, Hal Banks. The CSU responded with a world-wide strike on Canadian deep-sea vessels, organized a vigorous resistance to these attacks, and called on labour organizations at home and abroad to support their fight.

Initially the TLC executive, especially President Percy Bengough, fully supported the CSU and denounced the SIU raids. But the American Federation of Labor and the officers of its international affiliates exerted sufficient pressure to force the TLC to back down and ultimately to expel the CSU. Sympathy strikes by other waterfront workers were also curbed. Meanwhile, the Canadian state offered no support to the organization that its labour relations board had duly certified. Bad enough that the Liberal government had dismantled the merchant marine despite CSU objections, and that the government refused to compel employers to abide by the new collective-bargaining legislation; but now the Cabinet authorized the RCMP to assist shipowners and the SIU in wiping out the CSU. Publicly, Labour Minister Humphrey Mitchell, once a union leader himself, sat silent or threw barbs at the beleaguered union. Immigration officials winked at the movement of questionable SIU figures across the border. Police and courts fully supported these strikebreaking activities. "The government's handling of the affair was a disgrace," Kaplan concludes. (53) Not surprisingly, the strike was broken, and in 1951 the CSU quietly expired. The SIU now represented the sailors on almost all Canadian ships.

Kaplan carries the story forward into the new era of SIU corruption and violence under Hal Banks's leadership. As early as 1950, the federal labour department was aware of the lack of democracy in the union, the blacklisting of former CSU members and union dissidents (on a "Do Not Ship" list), various forms

of racketeering and extortion by union officials, and the intimidation of anti-Banks activists. But this style of unionism clearly was more palatable to civil servants and federal politicians than that of its predecessor. Banks actually was appointed to the Canadian delegation to the International Labour Organization in Geneva. The Cabinet also rejected an immigration department decision to deport him, and labour department officials openly supported his union. The TLC leadership also embraced him warmly, until in the late 1950s the SIU began raiding other unions to consolidate its control over "everything that floats" in Canada. In 1960 the new Canadian Labour Congress expelled the union and supported rival organizing drives. Blood flowed once again on the docks. Eventually, in 1962, the CLC convinced the Conservative government to appoint Justice Thomas G. Norris to inquire into the union's activities. His subsequent report was based on over 100 days of highly publicized hearings at which scores of witnesses appeared, and a mountain of documentation was presented. He recommended that a legislated trusteeship be imposed on all maritime unions in the country in order to bring about a single, democratically controlled organization in the industry. After some tortuous negotiations with the American government and the Canadian and American labour movements, the Canadian government complied. The three trustees appointed found their housecleaning task anything but easy, as the SIU fought back with legal challenges. Banks was fired, convicted of conspiracy to assault, and sentenced to five years in prison. But he quietly slipped away to the United States, where the American Secretary of State would block his extradition to Canada in 1967. Moreover, the trustee-supervised elections left most of the SIU old guard in office in Canada. Although their behaviour seemed sufficiently reformed by 1967 for the government to end the trusteeship, there were enough repeated charges of blacklists, intimidation, and violence on the Banks model during the next two decades to suggest that little had changed.

In contrast to Kaplan's much-briefer discussion of the CSU years, this last phase of investigating and confronting corruption takes up more than half of his book. From a literary standpoint, he tells this story well. Beneath the polished prose, however, are many unexplored questions. What exactly was the role of the shipowners in supporting Banks's union? What did the sailors think of all these developments? (We so seldom hear their voices in this book.) And, above all, into what context - social, economic, and political - should we place this story? This book never makes it clear enough that the real source of conflict lay in the post-war crisis created for Canadian employers and the Canadian state when thousands of workers dug in their heels to defend their newly-won power in the workplace, and allowed radicals to lead and speak for them. The brutal suppression of one seamen's union, and the tolerance of its successor's appalling gangsterism, have to be connected to the economics of the industry, the particular form of state management practiced by the post-war "Government Party" in Ottawa, and the generally repressive, Cold-War climate that stifled any civil-libertarian dissent. Instead, Kaplan is content to focus on the Communists and the gangsters as isolated

problems *within* unions, and concludes by proposing legislation to protect the rights of individual workers from manipulation by union leaders. Surely the federal government's record in allowing shipowners to ignore legislation protecting workers' rights to collective bargaining offers little hope that such a measure would suffice.

The last word has not been uttered on the agonizing saga of the Canadian seamen's unions. Ultimately, we will need more insights into the nature of the industry itself and its problems, into the changing conditions of life and work for the industry's workers in the postwar period, and into the dynamics of the Communist movement as a social phenomenon, not merely as a pack of conspirators or band of heroes. In this context, as in so many others, we have to work harder at conceptualizing a social history of the working class in postwar Canada.

**CANADA'S
QUARTERLY**

WORKER CO-OPS

**FOR
CONCERNED
WORKERS**

**Join the network...
subscribe today!**

INDIVIDUAL	
Canada	1 yr. \$15 / 2 yrs. \$28
U.S.	1 yr. \$16 / 2 yrs. \$30
Abroad	1 yr. \$18 / 2 yrs. \$33
INSTITUTIONAL	
	1 yr. \$18 / 2 yrs. \$33

Send cheques payable to:
Worker Co-ops
 Centre for the Study of Co-operatives
 Diefenbaker Centre
 University of Saskatchewan
 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
 S7N 0W0

JOURNAL OF HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY

Edited by **Gavin Williams, Derek Sayer,
Roy Porter and Jane Schneider**

Recent years have witnessed a growing erosion of traditional boundaries between history and the social sciences. Women's history, history from below, quantitative history, *mentalités* and the *longue durée*, are now central concerns for historians. Sociologists have increasingly adopted historical approaches to the study of areas as diverse as crime, law and the state, education and sexuality, and reopened the large-scale comparative and historical questions which lay at the foundation of sociology in the 19th century. The *Journal of Historical Sociology* aims to further this *rapprochement* of history and the social sciences. With a distinguished editorial board of historians, sociologists and anthropologists drawn from several continents, the *JHS* is avowedly international and interdisciplinary. It provides a forum for the best in contemporary historical sociology, irrespective of its disciplinary provenance or theoretical standpoint.

..... ✂

Journal of Historical Sociology is published in March, June, September and December

Subscription Rates Volume 2, 1989

Individuals: £22.00 (UK) £30.00 (overseas) US\$38.50 (N. America)

Institutions: £44.00 (UK) £51.75 (overseas) US\$71.50 (N. America)

- ☐ Please enter my subscription to **Journal of Historical Sociology**/send me a sample copy
- ☐ I enclose cheque/money order made payable to Basil Blackwell
- ☐ Please charge my Access/American Express/Barclaycard/Diners Club/Mastercharge/Visa account number:

..... Signature

Card expiry date

- ☐ For payments via the National Giro Bank, the Basil Blackwell account number is 236 6053

Name

Address

.....

If address registered with card company differs from above, please give details. Please return this form together with your payment if applicable to:

Basil Blackwell • Journals Marketing Manager,
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK or Journals Marketing Manager,
432 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016, USA.