

Gérard Dion (1912-1990)

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8 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

GÉRARD DION, "L'ABBE" as we knew him familiarly at Laval University, came to public attention most recently through his massive *Dictionnaire canadien des relations du travail*, an encyclopedic work devoted to industrial relations terminology, concepts, legislation and the union movement. His written contributions on labour, management, and related questions, however, were both numerous and varied. They included academic and applied research, spanning the better part of five decades, appearing in book form and in numerous journals: *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations Perspectives sociales*, and a dozen others. Gérard Dion was not averse to controversy, and was ever willing to confront people and positions in writing when he felt they did not stand up to scrutiny. The personal inconvenience which some of these forays entailed were accepted by him as part of the process of improvement. In some cases, as in his co-authorship with Louis O'Neill of *Le Chrétien et les élections*, he provoked the fury of a Duplessis government still very much in power, and had a bumpy ride for some time.

Gérard did more than write, though. He acted, intervening in various capacities. He served in turn as: unofficial spokesman for Quebec's international unions, chaplain of management associations, member of the Catholic clergy's think-tank on social questions (the Commission sacerdotale d'études sociales), commentator on the Asbestos strike, conciliator between rival factions in disputes between school board associations, president of the Canadian Textile Labour-Management Committee, member of the Woods Commission, labour arbitrator, consultant to Labour Canada, to the Ministère du travail du Québec, and to both levels of government, and so on.

He was also a teacher and academic administrator. Gérard held degrees in philosophy, theology, and sociology. He taught for 36 years at Laval, and acted in turn as secretary, assistant director, and director to the Industrial Relations Department from 1944 to 1963. Gérard headed the department's journal for over 40 years and played a considerable role in the organizing and diffusion of results of its annual conferences from 1946 on. He was just as active after retirement as he had been before. In fact, just two months before his death, he was still regularly at his desk, and later in hospital talked of getting back to his unfinished dossiers.

Sometimes he combined his roles of educator and actor. A case in point was the seminar on unionism in Quebec offered to a special group of adults just after the Asbestos strike. One of the "students" was the international president of Johns Manville, the company involved in the strike, who had come to Canada to participate, convinced that he had been badly advised concerning the union movement and industrial relations practices in Quebec. His participation, and leaks that filtered out concerning the contents of the seminar (apparently through the US consulate in the course of an off-hand exchange), resulted in a verbal attack by the entourage of Maurice Duplessis against Dion for "frightening off" foreign investors. Nevertheless, the message had been delivered.

Gérard, as usual, had found the time to involve himself in current questions. He would continue to do so until the end, in spite of hostile reactions, even when

they came from former friends: on state encroachments on the democratic rights of school boards, the errors committed by the P.Q. government, the unreality of the first referendum vote, the necessity for parapublic sector unions to respect the helpless among the general public as well as among their members. Concerning the language debate, when many Canadians were bickering over bilingualism, he made a point of maintaining a bilingual orientation and functioning in both languages on a daily basis. In fact, he went further, because of his network of contacts in Latin America he decided to learn to speak and write in Spanish as well.

Of additional interest to historians were his constant defence of courses on labour history within the industrial relations programme and his encouragement of historical articles on labour and labour-management relations within *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*. Then, during the years before the official birth of *Labour/Le Travail*, he also offered to reserve one issue *per annum* of his own journal exclusively for articles by labour historians, in order to help out. Most recently, the two journals participated in an exchange of publicity.

As a result of his considerable activities, Gérard Dion was widely appreciated and received many decorations, among them: the Order of Canada, l'Ordre National du Québec, the Royal Society of Canada Dawson Prize, the CIRA Award, and five honorary doctorates from Canadian universities (Concordia, McGill, St. Francis Xavier, Toronto, University of British Columbia). His work continues in numerous ways, through the department, journal, and conferences he helped establish as well as through the organizations and individuals he influenced.

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