

Thesis Abstract

Michael J. PIVA, "*The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921*", Ph.D. Thesis, Concordia University, 1975.

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the acceptance of micro film images as evidence in Courts of Law in place of original documents", and "That municipalities be authorized to dispose of original documents after they have been properly micro filmed."

Copies of the resolutions have been circulated to the senior governments and other major cities in Ontario "for their support and endorsement".

The implications of the resolutions in terms of the preservation of urban records is at this point unclear. Inquiries are being made and the results of these inquiries will be reported in a subsequent issue of the UHR.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Michael J. PIVA, "the Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921," Ph.D. Thesis, Concordia University, 1975.

The traditional interpretation of Canadian economic history stresses relative stagnation and lack of growth during the late nineteenth century and the reversal of this pattern during the early twentieth century. The years between 1896 and 1921 are seen as a period of intensive economic growth which produced domestic prosperity. This prosperity thesis emphasizes the enormous increase in the value of production. The question of the distribution of wealth, however, has generally been ignored. Thus, the prosperity thesis begs the question: to what extent did workers benefit from rapid economic growth?

Toronto was particularly suited to benefit from the economic expansion of the first decades of this century. Ontario was already the most industrialized province in Canada at the turn of the century. Within

Ontario, Toronto was by far the largest and most important commercial and industrial centre. If there existed an eastern economic imperialism, as many western farmers argued, Toronto, together with Montreal, was the metropolis of that empire. Toronto, then, was the logical choice for a study of the standard of living of workers for if anyone benefitted from economic growth, it should have been a Torontonians.

The evidence, however, demonstrates that the standard of living of blue-collar workers in the city did not improve during the first decades of the twentieth century. After more than twenty years of intensive economic growth the central fact of life for most workers continued to be enduring poverty. The majority of industrial workers earned minimal wages and could not support a family at an acceptable level of health and decency. The single most important variable in the standard of living was real earnings; real earnings in Toronto declined after the initiation of the open-shop campaign in 1902-1903. Although wages rose throughout the period, they never rose fast enough to offset the increase in the cost of living. The cost of a family budget rose by 54 per cent between 1900 and 1914. Prices rose another 96.4 per cent between 1914 and 1920. The cost of a family budget tripled during the first two decades of this century. In the face of this virtually uncontrolled inflationary spiral real wages fell from 10 to 15 per cent between 1902 and 1920. This deterioration in real earnings was only partially offset by improvements in other areas such as living and working conditions.

Public health standards were greatly improved during these years. Both the local and the provincial Boards of Health introduced new reform programmes after 1911 which significantly reduced the death and infant mortality rates. Important as these reforms were, however, their overall impact must not be exaggerated. Morbidity remained exceptionally high, much housing remained substandard, and overcrowding intensified. Similarly there were only minor improvements in working conditions. The average number of hours worked declined but the intensity of labour increased. The government amended and strengthened factory legislation but then failed to enforce the law. As late as 1920 most workers continued to toil in

dirty, unsanitary and poorly ventilated and lighted factories and shops. The Workmen's Compensation Act was the most important and effective piece of reform legislation adopted by the provincial government during these years. This Act stands as the only exception to an otherwise dismal picture because compensation legislation enjoyed the support of both business and labour. The emergence of welfare capitalism within the business community explains business support for limited and specific reforms. Businessmen can usually be found taking the initiative in those few instances where working conditions were improved; welfare capitalism more than any other single factor accounted for the minimal reforms adopted.

The absence of significant reforms and the deterioration in real earnings occurred despite Toronto's advantageous position in comparison with other industrial centres, most notably Montreal. Toronto-based industries enjoyed many advantages not the least of which was relatively easy access to a prosperous agricultural economy in both Ontario and the west. This provided a ready and expanding market for Toronto's industrial products. In addition, the structure of Toronto's industrial economy benefitted its workers. The absence of a port as a major employer of labour helped reduce the impact of seasonal unemployment as compared to Montreal. More importantly Toronto, compared to other cities, possessed a high concentration of high-wage industries and an absence of low-wage industries. For example, printing and publishing, a very high-wage industry, employed a substantial number of manufacturing workers. Similarly machinery, agricultural implements and land vehicles -- all high-wage industries -- dominated Toronto's iron and steel industries. At the same time the city lacked large concentrations of low-wage industries such as textiles and tobacco. These structural advantages offered the working-class population a relatively large number of skilled and semi-skilled jobs which in turn produced relatively high average incomes as compared to Montreal. Yet the cost of living, particularly the cost of housing, was much higher in Toronto than in Montreal. Thus while actual wages were on the average higher in Toronto, real earnings were roughly comparable in the two cities. Despite all of these advantages, workers in Toronto were at

best only marginally better off than workers in Montreal. And given such advantages it is doubtful if workers in other centres fared much better during these years.

Workers fared poorly during this period because they lacked power. The trade unions were the only institutions controlled by the working class which actively defended their interests. The employers in 1902 organized the Toronto Employers' Association to do battle with organized labour; this marked the beginning of the open-shop campaign which reduced the ability of unions to force improvements in wages and working conditions. The labour movement also was handicapped by structural weaknesses when mass production techniques crippled the craft unions. In most cases these craft unions were unable to convert themselves into industrial organizations. At the same time factional in-fighting both within the unions and between the unionists and the socialists prevented the emergence of an effective political organization. Thus between 1900 and 1920 unions made no headway against business hostility and government indifference, and in many cases they lost ground in the face of employer aggression.

In the free market economy of the early twentieth century there were few checks indeed upon the power of capital. It was not to be expected in a climate of trade union ineffectiveness that the owners of capital would pay higher wages than the "free" market demanded. Instead employers could be expected to keep costs to a minimum. Unless the men and women who laboured in factories and shops could organize effectively, they could force neither recognition nor consideration of their problems by businessmen. In Toronto, as in other centres, workers were defeated in their efforts to organize effectively. As a consequence their standard of living suffered.

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