

"Hands-off Labour Forum": The Making and Unmaking of National Working-Class Radio Broadcasting in Canada, 1935-1944

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine la série d'émissions radiophoniques National Labour Forum, de la Worker Educational Association, alors qu'elle devint un programme populaire, mais aussi politiquement contesté, avec une audience hebdomadaire de 100,000. La série fut rapidement condamnée par C.D. Howe, dirigeant du puissant ministère des Munitions et des Approvisionnement. Le programme et la WEA furent aussi mêlés aux luttes intestines du mouvement ouvrier. En fin de compte, la WEA fut expulsée de son rôle central dans la production de Labour Forum et le contrôle de l'émission fut transféré à la Commission d'information en temps de guerre. Le Congrès des Métiers et du Travail du Canada et le Congrès Pancanadien du Travail retirèrent leur appui au programme en 1943, suite aux protestations persistantes de travailleurs et de syndicats locaux, soit un an avant son annulation.

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Marcus Klee

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC] as a public service organization belongs to the Canadian people and operating under the authority of the parliament recognizes this right and supports the claim of the workers of Canada to be represented through their organized trade unions and labour movements on such a radio program.¹

THESE WORDS MARKED the apex of *Labour Forum* as an effective medium for working-class self activity and opposition to capitalism during the Second World War. The constitution from which they are taken, not only appropriated part of the public broadcasting domain for workers, but also claimed to be furthering “democracy by making articulate the voice of the industrial worker of Canada” and combating “the poisons of privilege, exploitation, prejudice, racial and religious distrust.” There is no indication that these statements were ever endorsed by senior CBC officials, but the first series of broadcasts, which premiered on 6 April 1942, became an unqualified success, attracting a national audience of 100,000 with praise from politicians and workers alike. The program succeeded precisely because it opened a space for labour and spoke to its concerns and experiences. Trade union leaders anticipated that it would help to “ensure that the public outside of the union movement know and support the aims and activities of organized labour.”²

Radio had developed from a curiosity attracting a small but dedicated group of enthusiasts to the most popular pastime, ahead of movies and reading, by the

¹National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, (NAC), Draft of a proposed agreement between the CBC, WEA, TLC, CCL, [1942], RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt.3.

²NAC, Report of Committee on Publicity and Education, Meeting of the Canadian Congress of Labour, 17-18 September 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt.4.

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end of the 1930s.³ Unions and their bureaucrats were slow to realize its potential and did not lead workers into national radio broadcasting but followed Drummond Wren and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) into weekly *Labour Forum* radio broadcasts. The power and influence that this program gave Wren and the WEA brought *Labour Forum* under intense scrutiny and eventually evoked condemnation from C.D. Howe, head of the powerful Department of Munitions and Supply, and embroiled the program, the WEA, and Wren in the sectarian struggles of the labour movement. A mere nine months after *Labour Forum's* debut the show was usurped by the CBC and the WEA was expelled with the support of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) and the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL). This move, designed to stifle Communist involvement in the broadcasts, drew protest from workers and unions, but the CBC weathered the storm. It slowly ushered *Labour Forum* into the hands of the state's Wartime Information Board (WIB) and its Committee of Industrial Morale (CIM). Eventually even the TLC and CCL could not pretend the show was produced for workers, let alone by workers, and withdrew their support. *Labour Forum*, now thoroughly discredited, met a silent and ignoble end in 1944, with cancellation finalizing defeat.

While these *Labour Forum* broadcasts occupy a limited historical moment, they embody a significant instance of working-class resistance to capitalism and the privately owned media. This was evident in the content of the broadcasts — which often articulated criticisms of capitalism — but more significant was the WEA's attempt to secure a working-class presence on the publicly-owned national radio network and use it to help define working-class identity and class-specific interests. *Labour Forum* was only a WEA controlled project for nine months but it represented the culmination of seven years of WEA broadcasting.⁴ In 1935, Wren started to work with E.A. Corbett, of the newly-founded Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), promoting educational radio broadcasting, hoping to create his own broadcasting projects. Corbett's lobbying of the CBC, through his influential position on the Executive Committee of the Canadian Radio League, probably facilitated the WEA's use of radio, which was inspired by the Chicago Federation of Labor and its ground-breaking labour radio broadcasts.⁵

Wren approached the Department of Labour to solicit support for the *Workers' Educational Series* launched on CBC radio in late 1937. Although no recordings of

³For a detailed analysis of the early years of radio in Canada see Mary Vipond, *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Montréal 1992); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York 1990), 134, 326-7.

⁴Rodger Schwass, "National Farm Radio Forum: The History Of An Institution," MA thesis, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), 1972, 20. The WEA's first programmes were designed for "Agricola Study Clubs" in rural Canada.

⁵Ron Faris, *The Passionate Educators* (Toronto 1975), 67, 94-133. NAC, George Keen to Drummond Wren, 11 November 1930, MG 30 A15, Vol. 5. See also, Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 136-8.



BRAINTRUST PONDERERS beneath flags of the United Nations. Drummond Wren stands between W.E.A. President George Sangster (right) and his airman son. Sangster is an iron moulder by trade. (NAC Canadian Labour Congress Collection), original in *Star Weekly*, 23 November 1979, MG28, 1 103, Vol. 209.

these early broadcasts survive, related documentation indicates that the nine programs produced featured WEA academics, predominantly from the University of Toronto.⁶ Designed to parallel closely the content of WEA classes, these broadcasts addressed general topics such as inflation, labour history, and labour legislation, presented with the intention of being of use and interest to the working class.⁷ Despite the educational project of the WEA, the broadcasts angered certain anti-labour advocates who interpreted them as seditious attacks upon capitalism and the state. Bora Laskin, a WEA lecturer, radio speaker, and future Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was accused of inciting picket-line violence because he questioned

⁶NAC, Summary of previous co-operation between the WEA and the CBC, [1942], RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3.

⁷NAC, General Manager of the CBC to J.S.B. MacPherson, K.C., Montréal, 4 January 1938, *ibid.*

the fairness and impartiality of the courts in dealing with organized labour. J.S.B. MacPherson wrote to the CBC complaining that,

Mr. Laskin is preaching class warfare of the worst type for he tries to teach that the interests of employer and employee are directly opposed to each other, and that it is the duty of labour to seize every opportunity to fight and embarrass the employer.⁸

The CBC defended the WEA broadcast from this particular assault, but eventually decided to discontinue the *Workers Educational Series*, citing as its rationale inferior technical quality.⁹

Wren's programs used moderate language, stressing that the "WEA exists to help workers become intelligent and informed Canadian citizens."¹⁰ He aimed to win the support of the Department of Labour for his broadcasts. Wren responded to the cancellation with praise for the impartiality of the decision-makers in the CBC. In a letter to Dr. McLeod, Minister of Labour in 1939, Wren claimed that "[l]abour in Canada does now realize that the Broadcasting Corporation in our country is neither biased nor prejudiced in favour of any one interest group."¹¹ With this response Wren was undoubtedly attempting to secure future access to the CBC. Given the nature of the WEA as an autonomous working-class organization committed to establishing an independent centre of labour cultural activity, government officials felt some trepidation in facilitating its access to the mass media.

The WEA had in fact been viewed with suspicion since its transformation from "an experiment in social control by the province's educational elite" into an autonomous working-class organization.¹² A 1928 clash between W.J. Dunlop, head of the University of Toronto's Department of Extension, who deplored the growing class-consciousness of the WEA and sought to draw WEA students into the confines of classes offered by his department, and the labour element of the WEA decimated attendance at WEA classes.¹³ Wren was central to the project of rebuilding the WEA as a working-class organization and certainly shared WEA President George Sangster's belief that "workers' education must be run for workers by workers, not run by some other section in society for the working-class" because "... there is a strong danger that they may not run it for the working-class but for

⁸NAC, J.S.B. MacPherson, K.C., Montréal to General Manager of CBC, 30 December 1937, *ibid.*

⁹NAC, Summary of previous co-operation between the WEA and the CBC, [1942], *ibid.*

¹⁰NAC, Drummond Wren to Dr. Norman Rogers, Minister of Labour, 8 January 1937, RG 27, Vol. 3504, 11-10-w85.

¹¹NAC, Drummond Wren to Dr. McLeod, 9 February 1939, RG 27, Vol. 3504, 1-10-w85.

¹²Ian Radforth and Joan Sangster, "'A Link Between Labour and Learning': The Workers' Educational Association in Ontario, 1917-1951," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), 42, 44.

¹³Radforth and Sangster, "A Link," 58. Harold Logan, Bora Laskin, and H.R. Kemp were representative of the socially-conscious academics working with the WEA.

the class that is running it."¹⁴ Despite this militant purpose the WEA was non-partisan and prohibited the promotion of any political party. The WEA was not, however, apolitical; its courses in municipal government were designed to urge workers to act "to protect their own interests."¹⁵ Some of the volunteers and staff at the WEA office in Toronto were active socialists or Communists, including Wren's secretary Lil Greene who held membership in the Young Communist League (YCL).¹⁶

The role of the WEA in facilitating this sort of open-ended consciousness of class and providing a pluralistic milieu in which labour activists, social democrats, socialists and Communists could collaborate in defining and advancing working-class goals generated considerable controversy. The WEA's Montréal branch was raided in August of 1931 and radical political literature was seized by police.¹⁷ Wren's friendship with the Communist Party's General Secretary, Tim Buck, was common knowledge and earned him a reputation as a fellow-traveller.¹⁸ Although Wren associated with Communists and had a sympathetic understanding of their political project he was also quite involved with the reformist League For Social Reconstruction (LSR).¹⁹ Wren's political orientation — he described himself as a person "who is militant, who is aggressive, who is going to fight every inch for what the workers want"²⁰ — led him to encourage the WEA to publicly commit itself to a position of undaunted social criticism. In February 1937, the front page of the WEA's main organ, *The Link*, quoted George Bernard Shaw's assertion that "[a] civilization cannot progress without criticism ... and this means impunity for propositions that shock the uncritical as obscene, seditious, blasphemous, heretical and revolutionary."²¹

¹⁴ Archives of Ontario, Toronto (AO), Minutes of WEA meeting of 8 November 1942, MU 4041.

¹⁵ AO, Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the WEA, 8 November 1942, MU 4041. Wren's understanding of his class position and the importance of workers' education was perhaps rooted in his early experiences as a soldier returning to work as a manual labourer in Toronto during the early 1920s. He had to support his mother and younger brother after his father, a machinist by trade, passed away. His eagerness for debate drew him to the WEA where he augmented his seven years of public school education and became editor of the WEA newspaper *The Link*.

¹⁶ Interview with Lil Greene, Toronto, 21 June 1993.

¹⁷ AO, R. Nickerson, "Inventory of the Workers' Educational Association Papers F1217, May 1970," unpublished photocopied finding aid, 5.

¹⁸ Historian Irving Abella refers to Wren as one of the "Communist or pro-Communist labour dignitaries" in *Nationalism, Communism, And Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1975), 93.

¹⁹ AO, Drummond Wren numerical file on the LSR which includes the program for the 4-5 January conference and a list of members and associate members of the LSR Toronto Branch, MU 4026.

²⁰ Quoted in Radforth and Sangster, "A Link," 75.

²¹ *The Link*, 2, 1 (1937), 1.

In the interval between the end of the *Workers Educational Series* and the start of *Labour Forum*, Wren became involved with a number of controversial leftist organizations. He criticized the Canadian government in a May 1940 New York speech, stressing his disapproval of the imprisonment of Communists and other anti-fascists, apparently acting in support of the National Council For Democratic Rights, which fought to free Communists imprisoned under section 21 of the Defence of Canada Regulations. The *Ottawa Morning Journal* vilified Wren for his critique of the Canadian government.²² Wren's dissident views were adopted by the WEA, which took a public stand in support of campaigns to free jailed Communists. The June 1941 edition of *Labour News*, a supplementary organ of the WEA, exposed the hypocrisy of the government for releasing one of fascist Adrien Arcand's supporters, T. Dumain, at a time when anti-fascist Communists, such as J.A. Sullivan of the Canadian Seaman's Union, were being imprisoned.²³ Wren eventually became Vice-President of the Civil Liberties Association of Toronto, whose main project during the war was to push for the release of interned Communists.²⁴ Wren's attention to the questions and principles of wartime incarceration practices apparently established a reputation for the WEA with the forces of law and order. On 27 June 1941, police in Toronto stopped and searched a photographer. Upon discovering his WEA membership card the police detained him, charging that the WEA was a breeding place for Communists and its General Secretary took his orders directly from Joseph Stalin.²⁵

All of these controversies and public associations with the Communist and non-Communist left must have alarmed top CBC executives such as Ernest Bushnell and Gladstone Murray, who supported the Liberal government and consequently expressed some reservations about Wren and his proposal for a new WEA radio series in the fall of 1941.²⁶ Wren, in fact, had to use his good standing with Dr. Bryce Stewart, Deputy Minister of Labour, to allay the CBC executive's fears. Stewart acted as an intermediary, advising Wren to inform the CBC that the broadcasts would reflect the WEA's full support of the government's wartime

²²NAC, Copy of an unaccredited article, or editorial, in the *Ottawa Morning Journal*, 25 May 1940, and held in a dossier containing information on Drummond Wren and the WEA, RG 27, Vol. 3504, 1-10-w85. This episode was noted by both the CBC and the Department of Labour, which held copies of the *Journal* article in their confidential files on Wren and the WEA.

²³*Labour News*, 8, Series 2, June 1941.

²⁴AO, Drummond Wren numerical file on the Civil Liberties Association, MU 4035.

²⁵AO, Drummond Wren to Van Kemp, RCMP Superintendent, 27 June 1941, and Van Kemp, RCMP, to Drummond Wren, 3 July 1941, MU 4029, 76.

²⁶Frank Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting: 1920-1951* (Toronto 1967), 339. Murray would eventually leave the CBC to promote free enterprise in a policy council for thirty leading businessmen and industrialists. One of these industrialists was the President of International Nickel, whose company was harshly criticized in the second series of broadcasts.

economic policy. Wren tactfully accepted this advice but proposed that the broadcasts contain ten percent criticism in addition to ninety percent explanation of the government's "sound economic principles."²⁷ Nevertheless, Bushnell, who came to the CBC through his experience in private radio, was reluctant, insisting that all of the scripts be examined before approving the show.²⁸ Bushnell even took exception to the word "Union" in the original title "*Union Grill*" and the show was consequently renamed *Labour Forum*.²⁹

Despite the obvious constraints under which the broadcasts emerged, Wren still had substantial influence in their production. Brock King, whom Wren probably met at an LSR conference held in January of 1941 where King gave the keynote speech on the advancement of socialism in Canada during the war,³⁰ was hired to write the scripts. The WEA was extensively used as an archive for information, and Wren chaired the on-air discussions.³¹ The broadcasts focused on worker discussion and debate of the problems they faced in an effort to "bring to the audience clarification of Labour's policies and the meaning of Labour's cry for an active voice and participation in war production."³² Specific sectors of industry, such as ship or aircraft building, or regions of the country — including Francophone workers in Montréal — were explored in each broadcast. Some episodes were dedicated to examining new government programs and their effect upon workers. The treatment of government policy tended to be one of accommodation, perhaps allowing for numerous attacks upon the ability of capital to meet wartime needs. Themes of managerial inefficiency, profit-gouging, and bad planning ran through virtually all of the broadcasts. The 25 May 1942 *Labour Forum* on price control cited the WEA's own survey of corporate profits, exposing twenty companies whose profits jumped 123 percent during the first year of the war. The textile industry, in particular, experienced a doubling of profits despite increased taxes. Allegations were also made that businesses were abusing depreciation clauses to avoid taxes while simultaneously receiving generous subsidies from the government.³³ These criticisms coalesced within the series as an oblique, but persistent, questioning of

²⁷NAC, Drummond Wren to Dr. Stewart, 23 December 1941, RG 27, Vol. 3504, 1-10-w85.

²⁸NAC, Letter from the Supervisor of Talks to E.L. Bushnell, Ottawa, [1942], RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

²⁹NAC, Internal memo from Bushnell, n.d., in which he explicitly states his dislike for the word "Union" in the title, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

³⁰AO, Drummond Wren numerical file on the LSR which includes the program for the 4-5 January conference and a list of members and associate members of the LSR Toronto Branch, MU 4026.

³¹NAC, Teletype message from H.W. Morrison to W.C. Anderson, 29 June 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

³²NAC, Proposal for WEA broadcast entitled *Union Grill*, [1941], RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

³³CBC Radio Archives, Toronto, (CBCRA) Recording of Labour Forum broadcast 420525 on reel-to-reel format, T.C. 811120.

the profit system and the class interests it served. Comments by Wren's guests that such businessmen "only considered their own interests" were part of a recurrent anti-capitalist dialogue, setting out the contradictory positions of workers and bosses.³⁴

The "interests" of capitalists were occasionally portrayed through short dramatizations as having life-threatening consequences for workers. The broadcast of 13 April, for example, opened and closed with an account of a fatal industrial accident. Joe Branson, a shipyard worker and one of Wren's many studio guests, criticized management for installing frivolous solid brass fixtures in the captain's quarters while failing to provide ships under construction with essential safety railings. Furthermore, it was argued that workers' "interests are 100% production in the fastest time for the common purpose of smashing fascism — regardless of whether anyone makes any profit out of it or not." The scene leading up to the worker's death is prolonged, and emotive. Portrayed as the epitome of innocence, the ill-fated worker is young, inexperienced, and fresh from the country. The seasoned worker who brings him to the shipyards to do his part in the fight against fascism is almost fatherly in his concern for the boy. A nameless foreman, scripted only as "voice," is portrayed as criminally negligent for ignoring the safety of the workers. In contrast to management's dangerous ineptitude, Brandon claims that "workers in a factory know just as much about production problems as management itself," justifying demands for greater worker control at the point of production.³⁵

Statements proclaiming the ability of workers to assume managerial functions within industrial production were in sharp contrast to the propaganda produced by John Greirson's National Film Board (NFB). Joyce Nelson, in her controversial reconsideration of the Greirson legacy, portrays the elevated status of specialist, scientist, and manager in NFB productions such as *Tools For War* and the corresponding dehumanized representation of industrial production through a fetishistic focus upon the aesthetics of technology.³⁶ Long sweeping shots of industrial plants in which humans were frequently absent, edited with a sound track featuring a solitary narrator's "voice of authority," and the consequent silencing of workers were in sharp contrast to another documentary tradition which included Greirson's sister. Ruby Greirson's *Housing Problems* was filmed with the subject as active agent. She approached workers with the words "The camera is yours. The microphone is yours. Now tell the bastards exactly what it is like to live in slums."³⁷

The first *Labour Forum* series was closer in spirit to the productions of Ruby Greirson than the productions of John Greirson, but stopped short of encouraging workers to "tell the bastards exactly what it is like." Perhaps the limited criticism

³⁴AO, Transcript of 13 April 1942, *Labour Forum* broadcast, MU 4031, 91.1.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶Joyce Nelson, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking The Greirson Legend* (Toronto 1988), 101-7.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 71.

articulated in the broadcasts allowed for an enthusiastic reception from politicians and government officials. The criticisms and oppositional statements that Wren broadcast were lauded by executives within the CBC. Neil Morrison praised *Labour Forum* because,

[e]xpressions of opinion of this kind confirm my contention that the airing of labour problems on the national network performs a valuable service in strengthening national morale and unity.³⁸

"Congratulations on an excellent broadcast" were sent from the Wartime Prices and Trade Board.³⁹ M.J. Coldwell, of the CCF, wrote that he had "heard a great many favourable comments in connection with these broadcasts."⁴⁰

The *Labour Forum* series was also enthusiastically received by working people from across Canada, provoking a flood of letters ranging from elaborate and typewritten political manifestos to pleas for help scrawled on scraps of paper. Letters came from union as well as non-union workers, both male and female, in a range of blue and white-collar occupations.⁴¹ Self-proclaimed housewives sent well-articulated criticisms and suggestions for the program. Many letters requested anonymity, or arrived unsigned, and some made direct or oblique references to censorship, indicating an awareness among the working class of the sort of constraints on class-based organizations. Most of the letters praised Wren, and/or the WEA, for working on behalf of the working class and struggling to defeat fascism. Support was occasionally followed by requests that went well beyond the bounds of Wren's role and abilities. A worker from Port Arthur, Ontario, perhaps inspired by Wren's exhortation to workers to take it upon themselves to smash bottlenecks in production, asked Wren to help boost output at a northern Ontario pulp mill by arranging an increase in the supply of electricity going to his industry.⁴² On a more human scale, a worker in one of Québec's lumber camps asked for information and assistance in getting a cost of living bonus which had not been paid.⁴³

³⁸NAC, Note from Neil Morrison (CBC Farm broadcasts) to Ira Dilworth, Vancouver, 8 May 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

³⁹NAC, Drummond Wren to Hugh Morrison, 26 May 1942. Wren quotes an official in the Wartime Prices and Trade Board to Hugh Morrison, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt.1.

⁴⁰NAC, Coldwell (CCF) to Drummond Wren, 9 June 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

⁴¹The extent to which the letters are indicative of the mood and views of the workingclass as a whole is impossible to determine. The letters do, however, provide a fair cross-section of the English-speaking working class and present workers' testimonials containing specific examples of working conditions, rates of pay, union activity, discrimination, the cost of living, and political and ideological views and perceptions of capitalism and socialism.

⁴²NAC, Letter from Mr Edward Lauzon of Port Arthur, later named Thunder Bay, 5 June 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 1.

⁴³AO, Letter from D.J. Chambalain, Mam's Québec, 22 July 1942, MU 4031, 91.2.

The broadcasts also acted as a magnet for working-class discontent with capitalist practices and disenchantment with government propaganda. A farmer in Dunkirk, Saskatchewan wrote to express his disgust with big business and "bourgeoisie" frills produced to satisfy "highly cultivated tastes" at a time when the government was calling for sacrifice.⁴⁴ His categorization of the government's propaganda, with its warnings of "too little too late," as hypocritical, paralleled Wren's call for a total war effort.⁴⁵ *Labour Forum's* ongoing criticism of capitalism and the government for not giving enough to win the war of production seemed to find some resonance among the working class.

Some workers seized upon the selfishness of capitalists in undermining the war effort. Many used the language of the WEA broadcasts in calling for "equality of sacrifice."⁴⁶ J. Phillis of Montréal wrote that "[t]he Boss only takes a war order at a profit, there is nothing patriotic but good business."⁴⁷ Others, such as A. Creighton, from Windsor, Nova Scotia, wanted *Labour Forum* to "show all Canada that working men and working women are the real victims of the war."⁴⁸ *Labour Forum* drew out a seething discontent among segments of the working class and cultivated a coherent focus for their anger.

The broadcasts also attracted the attention of several quite articulate radicals. J.S.B. MacDonald, of Alberni British Columbia, submitted a document of five typed pages. Presumably the manifesto of a radical political group which listened to *Labour Forum*, it equated capitalism with depression and war. His group took a hard line on Keynesianism, proclaiming it to be a device to raise capitalism from the dead and rejected all but "that which gives complete control to the worker."⁴⁹ The politics of R.B. Allen, of Calgary, are more easily identified. In his rambling letter to *Labour Forum* he called for education to dispel the ignorance and lies fostered by the ruling class. Allen posed the rhetorical question of "have we not been kept frightfully stupid about Canada, to say nothing about Russia, and is it not about time we had Communism to distribute some of the old loot?"⁵⁰ Whether these radicals really expected Wren to read the letters over the air is not clear. Most seemed to be responding to the questions that *Labour Forum*, in one way or another,

⁴⁴ AO, Letter, not signed or dated but within a group of letters pertaining to the first series of broadcasts, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ The slogan "too little too late" was a common phrase used in Victory Bond campaigns during the war. Usually the text of the posters extolled the virtues of personal material sacrifice so that all resources could be channelled into the war effort. For examples see Frederick I. Ker and Wilfred H. Goodman, *Press Promotion of War Finance* (Toronto 1946).

⁴⁶ AO, Letter from E. Summerhill, Toronto, 2 June 1942, MU 4031 File 91.2. This phrase, as mentioned earlier, was central to the 25 May 1942 broadcast on price control.

⁴⁷ AO, Letter from J. Phillis, Montréal, 29 October 1942, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ AO, Letter from A. Creighton, Windsor, Nova Scotia, 7 May 1942, *ibid.*

⁴⁹ AO, Letter from J.S.B. MacDonald of Port Alberni, British Columbia, 16 July 1942, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ AO, Letter from R.B. Allen, [1942], MU 4033, 91.6.7.

placed before the nation, perhaps sensing that the broadcast was sympathetic to their experiences.

The appeal of *Labour Forum* was apparently deep, as well as wide. Telephone surveys, conducted in May 1942, indicated that *Labour Forum* was popular, particularly in the West where the broadcast attracted more than seventy per cent of the total radio audience.⁵¹ And although the surveys were limited in terms of the number of people contacted, they do give some indication of the amount of people the show reached; the WEA itself claimed an audience of 100,000 weekly.⁵² The surveys also found that an overwhelming majority of listeners agreed with the views being put forward.⁵³

The CBC was wary of the WEA's primary role in the making of *Labour Forum* — apparently it was more comfortable producing controversial broadcasts such as *CBC Discussion Club*, *Of Things to Come*, *Opinions* and *Weekend Review*⁵⁴ — and hired Andrew Cowan in the summer of 1942 in an explicit attempt to counter Wren's influence.⁵⁵ Cowan shared Wren's commitment to developing a strong voice for labour on the CBC, but his allegiance ultimately lay with the corporation, not the working class. Cowan worked closely with Wren in planning and organizing the new series of broadcasts, and in so doing gradually managed to impose CBC control over the programs. Wren appeared to appreciate the work that Cowan performed, oblivious to the moves being made to extend CBC control over *Labour Forum* broadcasts. He apparently interpreted the increased involvement of the CBC as a sign of support and endorsement as well as a beneficial allocation of resources. In a letter to George Burt, of the United Automobile Workers (UAW), Wren enthused that "labour is having a house built for it by the CBC ... I don't need to explain any further to you how valuable it is to have a program sponsored by the CBC."⁵⁶ He failed to grasp the motivation behind the changes, partly because

⁵¹AO, Listener survey summary and individual sheets used by telephone interviewers, MU 4031, 91.3.

⁵²Audience figures are presented in the WEA's 'official' history by Edward Comor and Emilia Casella, *Challenge and Innovation, A History of The Workers' Educational Association* (Toronto n.d.). No reference is given for this figure, but it does seem credible, given that it was a national broadcast.

⁵³AO, Listener survey summary and individual sheets used by telephone interviewers, MU 4031, File 91.3. The survey questionnaires asked if the listener agreed with the views being put forward on *Labour Forum*. The vast majority of respondents indicated their agreement.

⁵⁴Peers, *Politics of Canadian Broadcasting*, 333-6. These popular CBC productions became quite contentious, attracting the wrath of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* as well as outgoing Conservative Party leader, Arthur Meighen, whose scorn was unmistakable. Meighen made extensive criticisms of these broadcasts during his farewell address as Conservative Party leader on 9 December 1942.

⁵⁵NAC, Memo from Andrew Cowan to Supervisor of Programme Planning, 15 July 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 2.

⁵⁶AO, Drummond Wren to George Burt, 21 October 1942, MU 4032.

Cowan, acting in accordance with CBC policy, augmented the ability of *Labour Forum* to present a provocative, and more bluntly critical, working-class perspective.

In August 1942 *Labour Forum* was officially reorganized and expanded to include a formal executive committee comprised of George Burt, UAW-CIO Windsor; Russel Harvey, Toronto District Trades and Labour Council; Drummond Wren; and Andrew Cowan.⁵⁷ The direct involvement of organized labour with the broadcasts appeared to be on Wren's terms. The WEA, and their researchers, were still used extensively to provide background information for the broadcasts and the socialist scriptwriter, Brock King, was retained for the second series. Wren was consulted in the selection of the executive members and shared the responsibility for day-to-day operations with Cowan.

Wren's choice of George Burt to represent the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) on the executive committee, however, proved to be problematic. Burt had worked closely with Wren since 1937 providing educational services to the UAW through the WEA.⁵⁸ His merit and experience made him a competent member of the executive, but his appointment angered more conservative elements of the CCL. Burt rose to leadership in the UAW by defeating the staunch anti-Communist and Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) supporter, Charles Millard; his victory was secured with the backing of Communists, precipitating factional rifts in the UAW. For the duration of the war Burt sided with the besieged Communist element within the CIO, frequently taking a public stand against the Congress leadership. He was active in the unsuccessful left-wing opposition to the 1940 merger of the CIO with the All Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL). He also supported the rebellious Ontario Executive, which partially split from the CIO in protest over the appointment of Millard as Sub-Regional Director. Burt's resistance of CCF hegemony in mass-production unionism frequently put him at odds with the leaders of the CCL, who were either social democratic sympathizers or members of the reformist party.⁵⁹ The selection of Burt by Wren consequently placed *Labour Forum* within the sectarian struggles which were raging in the CCL and CIO.

Andrew Cowan, meanwhile, was working to break the WEA link and diffuse the power it bestowed upon Wren. At the September 1942 CCL meeting held in Ottawa, Cowan circulated among labour delegates and union leaders to gauge their opinions of the *Labour Forum* program, Wren, and the WEA. Cowan reported his findings to CBC executives in what was to be the first of a string of confidential reports.⁶⁰ In this particular document Cowan claimed that Wren was often accused

⁵⁷NAC, Memo from Supervisor of Talks to General Program Supervisor, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 2.

⁵⁸Radforth and Sangster, "A Link," 65.

⁵⁹Abella, *Nationalism*, 32, 49, 52, 58, 62.

⁶⁰NAC, Confidential Memo from Andrew Cowan to Supervisor of Talks, September 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 2.

of being a fellow-traveller who actively promoted other Communist sympathizers to represent the unions on *Labour Forum*. Eugene Forsey, then a member of the CCF and recently appointed Research Director of the CCL, was particularly scathing in his attack on Wren and Burt; he essentially suggested that the two of them represented a conspiratorial Communist bloc within the labour movement.⁶¹

Cowan consequently denounced Wren to the CBC executives, probably reinforcing their earlier apprehension about giving Wren and the WEA time on CBC radio. In his report Cowan warned that

Wren ... must not be allowed to use Labour Forum as an advertising medium for W.E.A. exclusively or for personal propaganda, and that in advising us on Labour Forum's relations with individuals or groups in the labour movement, we should be careful that the people he suggests or selects are not going to use Labour Forum as a platform for special pleading or internal intrigues. This I believe is a further reason why CBC should personally acquaint itself with the personalities and problems of the labour movement in Canada.⁶²

At the same time that old suspicions about Wren's political orientation were being brought to the fore by the CCF element of the CCL, Wren became chairman of the controversial Committee For The Offensive. This organization agitated for a second front and material aid to the Soviet Union.⁶³ Unlike the Civil Liberties Union, which had a plurality of leftist supporters, the Committee For The Offensive was a predominantly Communist body. Wren's acceptance of such a high-profile position strengthened the hand of his behind-the-scenes opponents. To make matters worse, George Burt was also active in this committee, apparently confirming the categorization of the Wren-Burt team as fellow-travellers.

During a consultation at the CCL general meeting Forsey told Cowan that he favoured the direct appointment of representatives from the major unions to *Labour Forum* without consulting Wren. Cowan believed this to be the best means of crushing Drummond Wren and the Communist influence he brought to bear on the program through his selection of labour representatives. A month later, in October 1942, the CBC decided to approach the TLC and the CCL and have them appoint spokespeople directly to *Labour Forum*.⁶⁴ George Burt consequently lost his position on the executive committee, replaced by the anti-Communist, CCL figure, Patrick Conroy. It would appear that a purge of suspected Communists within *Labour Forum* was unfolding, orchestrated by CCF elements who were in the midst

⁶¹ *Ibid.* This is obviously Cowan's understanding of what Forsey said, but it is borne out by Forsey's later activities, in which he devoted considerable time and energy to smearing the WEA as a Communist stronghold.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ AO, File on Committee For The Offensive, later renamed the Committee To Support the Offensive, MU 4045, 194.

⁶⁴ NAC, CBC internal Memo from Elspeth Chrisholm to Supervisor of Talks, 19 October 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184 11-18-3 pt. 3.

of the same project in the CCL.⁶⁵ David Lewis, CCF national secretary, was so convinced of Wren's "pro Communist Trade Union bias" he unsuccessfully attempted to infiltrate the broadcasts with a CCF "party man."⁶⁶

The organizational structure of *Labour Forum* was thus altered, yet again, to accommodate direct union appointments. The role of the General Secretary was formalized and made contingent upon support from a new executive committee to be appointed by the TLC, CCL, WEA and CBC.⁶⁷ The TLC and CCL also agreed to contribute money to maintain *Labour Forum*, a goal which Wren had been previously unsuccessful in accomplishing. These changes created a strong, independent institution based in the co-operating labour congresses but run by the CBC, while simultaneously subduing and diluting the influence of the WEA. Wren endorsed these organizational changes, seemingly unaware of the motivation which inspired them or else overawed by the historic importance of CCL and TLC co-operation, an event for which he could ironically claim a dubious credit.

Maintaining his position as commentator and mediator on the air, Wren would pose the topics for discussion and introduce guests, as well as ask questions and sum up discussion. Ironically, the official involvement of the unions, which was intended to stifle Communist influence, radicalized the *Labour Forum* broadcasts. Cowan, who was already travelling in CCF circles, became affectionately referred to as "Spartacus" by executives within the CBC.⁶⁸ The original criteria of constructive criticism only applied to government policy, while criticism and slurs directed against capitalists became sharper and more frequent. Wren openly chastised employers for their anti-union attitude, and spoke with the support of the leaders of the TLC and the CCL when claiming that "[we] feel that if this is really a people's war that we're fighting then it's a contradiction of democracy for this employer domination of the worker to continue either in its present form or with new tricks."⁶⁹

The broadcast of 17 November 1942 featured A.R. Mosher and Percy Bengough discussing labour legislation P.C. 5028, the effect of which Mosher categorized as lulling the workers into a false sense of security.⁷⁰ Furthermore, this legislation was described as working in the interest of employers only, and damaging the war effort because labour produced less when exploited. Wren was

⁶⁵ Abella, *Nationalism*, chapters 5 and 8.

⁶⁶ NAC, David Lewis to Mr. Carol Coburn, 7 December 1942, Co-operative Commonwealth Federation papers, MG 28 IV 1, vol. 43, file Ontario General Correspondence Dec-Oct. 1942.

⁶⁷ NAC, Draft of the proposed agreement between the CBC, WEA, CCL, TLC, [1942], RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-1 pt. 3.

⁶⁸ NAC, Telegram from Hugh Morrison to Andrew Cowan, 16 December 1942, which Morrison addressed to "alias Spartacus," RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 3.

⁶⁹ Cartographic and Audiovisual Archives Division (CAVA), formerly the Moving Image and Sound Archive Division (MISA), Ottawa, recording of *Labour Forum* broadcast of 31 October 1942.

⁷⁰ CAVA, Recording of 17 November 1942 broadcast.

careful to forewarn the government of these criticisms. Together with the leaders of the TLC and CCL, Wren was undoubtedly attempting to influence the government as it drafted new legislation, knowing that P.C. 5028 was to be replaced.

The broadcasts of the second series addressed a wide range of labour-related topics, including the right of workers to elect radical as opposed to responsible leaders and state economic planning and its effects upon the working class. Unions also used *Labour Forum* to pressure the government on questions of social and labour policy. Arguments in favour of a national minimum wage, and wage parity for men and women as well as workers within the same industry, were put forward and illustrated, with numerous examples of employers exploiting wage differentials to the detriment of the war effort.⁷¹

Letters sent to the program from workers continued to offer overwhelming support for *Labour Forum*. One worker wrote:

We were listening to your National Labour Forum broadcast ... and it is our frank opinion that it is an opportunity for the suppressed voices of labour to be heard across the dominion. We the labour in Sudbury have no avenue to the press, radio or the theatre, the Company controls all these, nor have we a voice in the production line.⁷²

Individual union locals offered support in maintaining the program.⁷³ Mrs. Langs, a listener from Dunnville, Ontario, wrote echoing the comments made on the show, exclaiming "what shall it profit us to win the war in Europe and Asia and lose it at home?"⁷⁴ *Labour Forum* obviously still remained popular among the working-class.

The programs produced between October and December 1942 drew strong support from labour and ringing denunciations from business circles and government officials. A broadcast on 17 November, that chastised employers for not working with unions to increase production, led to bitter reaction from the business community. W.E. Mason of the *Sudbury Daily Star* complained that "[t]he stuff you permit to be broadcast across Canada on the night of November 18th is the same sort of stuff that rises from the gutter in Sudbury and always from the same source."⁷⁵ Oddly enough, the broadcast was actually on 17 November, not 18 November, and the same mistake was made in a hostile letter from W.J. Woodhill

⁷¹CAVA, Recording of 16 December 1942 broadcast, *ibid*. This broadcast was extensively rewritten to please the CBC management.

⁷²AO, Letter from Obs Felcus, Sudbury, 31 October 1942, MU 4033, 91.6.7.

⁷³AO, Letter from W. Patterson, Sointula, British Columbia, for the Sointula Local of the [UFFU], 9 December 1942, MU 4033, 91.6.7.

⁷⁴*Ibid*, Letter from Mrs. G.M. Langs, Dunnville Ontario, 8 January 1943.

⁷⁵NAC, W.E. Mason, the *Sudbury Daily Star*, to J.R. Radford, Supervisor of Station Relations, CBC, 19 December 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 3.

of radio station CKSO, also in Sudbury, concerning the same broadcast.⁷⁶ Conspiracies seemed less the practice of Wren and his allies than those of his opponents.

Andrew Cowan rushed to the defence of *Labour Forum*. The Supervisor of Station Relations, who received the complaints about the program, was advised that Woodhill's attack should be of little concern to the CBC:

His letter is the usual farrago of misinformation, question begging and prejudiced editorializing that one associates with a reactionary mind. Who does he think the CBC is to give assurances to his penny-ante radio station as to what it will say on the air ... We serve the public interest and it is unfortunate if the light of public criticism causes annoyance to privileged groups such as he represents ... The voice of a Sudbury worker is just as important to us as the voice of Mr. Woodhill, Mr. Mason or the president of International Nickel himself. That's the principle of democracy.⁷⁷

Hugh W. Morrison, Supervisor of Talks, apparently approved of Cowan's position, offering a supportive annotation of "Good for Andrew!" in the margin.⁷⁸

The sharp prose and principled stand of Cowan would not, however, protect *Labour Forum* from a complaint originating from C.D. Howe. The broadcast of 25 November carried a letter from a worker in a government-subsidized plant, under the supervision of Howe's Department of Munitions and Supply, containing allegations of a gross lack of expenditure control and a great waste of labour and materials. Howe charged that broadcasting this letter was a violation of the law, also complaining that the tone of *Labour Forum* "was wholly derogatory to Canada's war effort ... and a wholly false impression is being created, with the help of the CBC."⁷⁹

The letter of complaint from Howe shook the foundations of *Labour Forum* and caused a feverish reaction from all involved. Howe had tremendous influence within the CBC as the Minister responsible for introducing the Act establishing the broadcasting corporation in 1936, and as Minister of the powerful Department of Munitions and Supply.⁸⁰ It was to Howe that the Board of Governors reported, and his influence went well beyond his position on the parliamentary committee overseeing the CBC. In fact, Gladstone Murray, who preceded J.S. Thompson as CBC General Manager, had first to convince Howe of his merits before being hired as General Manager.⁸¹ It is not surprising that James Thompson would take a special interest in defusing Howe's hostility.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, Memo from Andrew Cowan to Supervisor of Station Relations and Supervisor of Talks, 26 November 1942.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹NAC, C.D. Howe to Dr. J.S. Thompson, 4 December 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 3.

⁸⁰Peers, *Politics of Canadian Broadcasting*, 187.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 192-5.

The authenticity of the letter from the worker was verified and his allegations were found to be correct, but the damage to the reputation of *Labour Forum* brought the entire broadcast under closer scrutiny. The general meeting held to discuss the Howe letter revealed a deep rift between the labour Congresses, the WEA, and the CBC over fundamental questions. The veracity of facts originating from non-government sources was debated, as was the tone of criticism which the CBC characterized as slur and innuendo. Pat Conroy argued against Howe's claim that *Labour Forum* was "derogatory" to Canada's war effort and "that everything was rotten." Conroy countered with the bold assertion that "it is our war and our government ... Mr Howe is inclined to think that anything said against his routine is wrong."⁸²

The WEA and the Congresses were united in defence of the broadcasts but divided over the question of politics; this involved accusations that Wren was promoting certain unions, such as the United Electrical Workers and the United Automobile Workers. Both of these CIO unions were perceived to be Communist-influenced and thus a threat to more moderate labour leaders.⁸³ The TLC and CCL leaders present at the meeting with the CBC refused to support Wren against the accusations of political partisanship, claiming that the "Congresses should not be put on the spot."⁸⁴ While resisting much of the CBC's criticism, the Congresses isolated Wren and the WEA by ultimately agreeing that certain broadcasts had gone beyond acceptable limits. Pat Conroy, acting for A.R. Mosher, President of the CCL, asserted that the facts "should be presented in a manner that will be convincing not only to the people whom we are trying to reach, but also pleasing and attractive to those who might ordinarily be regarded as antagonistic."⁸⁵

The pressure from Howe also threatened to sink Cowan's CBC career, but the agile broadcasting bureaucrat had already prepared a plan which would eliminate the WEA, and bring *Labour Forum* under direct control of the CBC. In assigning blame for any past problems to the WEA, the CBC was insulated from being too closely associated with *Labour Forum*, maintaining the impression that it was still an independent working-class broadcast. The organizational changes involved "having independent offices and a General Secretary who would be the director of the forum. By paying for both of these CBC would retain the necessary control over the organization."⁸⁶ Knowing that he was to be sent overseas, Cowan transformed this independent labour broadcast into little more than a CBC program produced for

⁸²NAC, Minutes of meetings between the CBC, TLC, CCL, and WEA, 10 December 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 3.

⁸³See Abella, *Nationalism*, 140, for the politics of the United Electrical Workers; see 163 for the politics of the UAW, particularly the Windsor local.

⁸⁴NAC, Minutes of meetings between the CBC, the TLC, the CCL, and the WEA, 10 December 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, File 11-18-3 pt. 3. Mr. Conroy of the CCL made this comment, apparently also speaking on behalf of the TLC.

⁸⁵AO, Pat Conroy to Drummond Wren, 8 January 1943, MU 4033.

⁸⁶NAC, Confidential Memo regarding *Labour Forum* from Andrew Cowan to Supervisor of Talks, 21 December 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, File 11-83-3 pt.3.

Canadian workers. Central to this scheme was the removal of Wren. This outcome was anathema to all that the WEA had struggled to build: a *Labour Forum*, for workers by workers. The WEA was thus clandestinely split off from the TLC and CCL by an orchestrated coup which isolated and then ousted Wren as General Secretary of *Labour Forum*. Cowan secured backing from the CCL and TLC representatives by promising to continue the program with the same labourite constitution. Percy Bengough, acting president of the TLC, declared that there was no wedge between the WEA and the TLC at the very moment that Wren and the WEA were being unceremoniously dumped.⁸⁷

Cowan's behind-the-scenes manoeuvres pose many interpretive problems. Yet the end result was unambiguous: when confronted with hostility from high state officials Cowan reacted unequivocally by jettisoning the WEA from *Labour Forum*. The proposal that he prepared for the CBC executives was straightforward in its condemnation, claiming that,

Wren has personal and political ambitions ... Wren's political connections are too public to be treated as his personal concern. ... [H]is ability to be devious and expedient on matters of principle where political issues are involved makes me distrust him ... [H]e also takes a lively interest in certain political movements ... [He] tends to further the interests of the political crowd he associates with ... [B]reak off present relations with the WEA before Wren has further opportunity to strengthen his ties with certain groups throughout the country. The longer we carry on with Wren the harder it is going to be to break away from him.

Recognizing that *Labour Forum* was an established and popular voice of workers, Cowan concluded that "we could not drop the programme even if we wished."⁸⁸ The recommendations put forward by Cowan were adopted in their entirety by CBC executives.

On 14 January 1943 Wren announced publicly that he and the WEA were disassociated from *Labour Forum*; he also made C.D. Howe's interference a matter of public record.⁸⁹ Workers and unions responded angrily and with indignation to Wren's dismissal and the encroachment upon *Labour Forum* by Howe and the pliant CBC, offering their support to the ousted working-class advocate.⁹⁰ Many unionists embraced the WEA as representative of workers and felt that *Labour Forum* accurately voiced their opinions.⁹¹ J.P. Ragan, of the Stratford District

⁸⁷NAC, Minutes of meeting of the CCL, TLC, CBC, and WEA, 19 January 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 4.

⁸⁸NAC, Confidential Memo regarding *Labour Forum* from Andrew Cowan to Supervisor of Talks, 21 December 1942, RG 41, Vol. 184, File 11-83-3 pt.3.

⁸⁹NAC, Telex s.n., 14 January 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 4.

⁹⁰NAC; Letter to Drummond Wren from the International Association of Machinists, 8 January 1943, in support of his controversial broadcasts, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 4.

⁹¹For examples see NAC, John R. Doughty, Education Director for Local 199, St. Catherines, of the United Automobile and Aircraft and Agricultural Implement Workers of America

Trades and Labour Council, eloquently expressed his displeasure with the changes in *Labour Forum* noting that:

our workers are sacrificing life itself in order that freedom of speech etc. will continue as an inalienable right. Our workers support the war by the purchase of bonds, by long hours of labour, and by temporarily relinquishing some of our hard won gains.⁹²

Other unions provided a militant defence of *Labour Forum*: "Local 516 deplors the recent attacks against Labour Forum of the WEA ... [H]ands off Labour Forum."⁹³

Wren and other persons sympathetic to *Labour Forum* as a working-class medium, including Cowan himself, would eventually be shut out. Brock King, who often performed unpaid duties in producing the broadcasts, noted rather ominously upon learning of his dismissal that "the new policy — and its silent inauguration — have robbed me of opportunities now for redressing the past."⁹⁴ Cowan was transferred overseas to work as a war correspondent for the CBC; he apparently maintained his interest in the conditions of the working class. Hugh Morrison left the CBC to work for a dubious airline in central America, returning to the corporation after the war to accept a senior management position. Neil Morrison, of the *CBC Farm Forum*, replaced Hugh Morrison as Talks Supervisor and Marjorie McEnaney replaced Andrew Cowan. She became the new Assistant to the General Secretary, exerting a strong influence over the broadcasts and writing at least one script. The new management would eventually boast that "the Canadian Manufacturers Association would no longer say that Communists ran the CBC."⁹⁵ Letters of complaint from business organizations ceased almost entirely after this wholesale change in personnel.

Behind the movements of the CBC to seize control of *Labour Forum* was the Wartime Information Board (WIB). Its Committee of Industrial Morale filled the

(UAW/CIO), to C.D. Howe, 15 January 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 4. John Doughty claimed that *Labour Forum* "was, in our opinion, an excellent presentation of labour's views and suggestions on the various subjects discussed." See also the letter of support for Drummond Wren from the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, 26 January 1943 which is also critical of C.D. Howe and Mitchell Hepburn. NAC, RG 41, Vol. 184, 11-18-3 pt. 3.

⁹²AO, J.P. Ragan of the Stratford District Trades and Labour Council, to the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the CBC, 17 January 1943, MU 4033.

⁹³NAC, Telegram from Local 516 of the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America, 269 St. Helens, to J.S. Thompson, General Manager of the CBC, and Hugh Morrison, Supervisor of Talks, 13 January 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 4.

⁹⁴NAC, letter from Brock King to Andrew Cowan, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 4.

⁹⁵NAC, Memo from Sid Simpson to Supervisor of Talks, 30 April 1943, with a handwritten comment in the margin which states that at least the CMA would no longer accuse the CBC of being Communist, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 5.

void created by the displacement of the WEA, radically transforming the tone and content of the show. Through the WIB the state appropriated what had been an historic working-class achievement, effectively denuding it of meaning. After hearing the first non-WEA broadcast, Wren sniped "[t]here is about as much sincerity about your program ... as there is about an atheist attending a revival meeting."⁹⁶ The ouster of the WEA from *Labour Forum* was a calculated act designed to consolidate government control over what had been a relatively autonomous working-class cultural production. The suspicion surrounding Drummond Wren's political orientation was crucial in determining his departure. Andrew Cowan had warned of the need to isolate the WEA and neutralize its influence as the intermediary between labour and the CBC. Rather than cancelling the show, which would have elicited an even noisier protest from labour, the CBC built an elaborate facade to hide the dramatic shift culminating in Wren's forced departure. *Labour Forum* could now be offered to the government as a propaganda outlet to the industrial working class. As early as October 1942, the WIB observed "that information regarded as official or government-inspired does not enjoy too high a repute among labour circles."⁹⁷ By controlling *Labour Forum*, with its history as an independent labour broadcast, the WIB and the CBC could produce more credible propaganda.

Under its new masters the overarching purpose of *Labour Forum* was to "help the relations between management and labour in establishing national unity."⁹⁸ The WIB took over the production of *Labour Facts* and converted it into a government propaganda sheet for industrial workers and soldiers.⁹⁹ The provocative headlines that were its hallmark as a WEA production were superseded by the new editorial directive "to interest workers in their job of producing for the war effort."¹⁰⁰

The absorption of *Labour Forum* into the CBC and its transformation into a production at the disposal of the WIB was a gradual process, initiated with the arrival of Andrew Cowan in the summer of 1942 and catalyzed by C.D. Howe's complaints at the end of the same year. Before Hugh Morrison, the Supervisor of Talks, and his assistant, Andrew Cowan, departed they recruited individuals involved with the labour movement to give *Labour Forum* the appearance of being an independent medium for working-class views. Cowan at one time considered recruiting Eugene

⁹⁶ AO, Minutes of the meeting of the executive of *Labour Forum*, 19 January 1943, MU 4032.

⁹⁷ NAC, Minutes of the WIB meeting, 26 October 1942, RG 27, Vol. 848, 8-3-10 pt. 1.

⁹⁸ NAC, Sid Simpson to the editor of *Industrial Canada*, a CMA paper, 30 January 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-8-3 pt. 6.

⁹⁹ NAC, Letter from David Petegorsky to Neil Morrison, 10 February 1944, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-8-3 pt. 8.

¹⁰⁰ NAC, Victor Phalen, Director of Information, Department of Labour, to Mr. McNamara, Information Division, 4 September 1945, RG 36/31, Vol. 12, 8-2D.

Forsey to replace Wren.¹⁰¹ Ultimately he hired Sid Simpson of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees to act as General Secretary of *Labour Forum*.¹⁰² Simpson, unlike Wren, seemed to take no part in the production of scripts or the selection of topics to be discussed. He worked closely with the WIB, serving as a CBC representative on the Committee on Industrial Morale (CIM). John Grierson, head of the WIB, commended Simpson for his work on behalf of the Board, noting to J.S. Thompson, General Manager of the CBC, that he "has made a valuable contribution to our work."¹⁰³ Through Simpson and the newly appointed Supervisor of Talks, Neil Morrison, the WIB exerted a strong measure of control over the broadcasts. David Petegorsky, who ran the CIM for the WIB, also communicated directly with Marjorie McEnaney, the assistant to Sid Simpson, in order to exert influence over the broadcasts.¹⁰⁴ In many instances Petegorsky simply issued a directive instructing *Labour Forum* to promote certain ideas or organizations.¹⁰⁵ The WIB's role in producing and directing the general flow of ideas through *Labour Forum* meant that the WIB agenda formed the core of topics on *Labour Forum*. Professional actors often replaced workers in the role of chairperson and guests, drawing the ire of the Stratford District Labour Council. "We are not prepared to have professional actors, regardless of their good intentions, speak for labour," noted J.P. Ragan in a letter to the CBC board of Governors in January 1942.¹⁰⁶ More importantly, with the exception of a few episodes on women's issues, the tone of the shows veered sharply to the centre of the political spectrum.

WIB officials used various propaganda campaigns as the medium for "their own progressive educational and social philosophies."¹⁰⁷ Going beyond the imagery of a flourishing wartime democracy, as evidenced in the forum debates, the WIB introduced and popularized a social welfare discourse. Workers may have supported these sentiments, but they began to recognize and resent the direction *Labour Forum* was taking. Simpson was recruited to give *Labour Forum* the

¹⁰¹NAC, Teletype from Andrew Cowan to Neil Morrison, 18 February 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 3.

¹⁰²NAC, Sid Simpson to Edward Keating, Washington D.C., 29 June 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-8-3 pt. 6.

¹⁰³NAC, John Grierson to Dr. J.S. Thompson, July 1943, RG 36/31, Vol. 12, 9-2.

¹⁰⁴NAC, Memo, s.n., February 1944, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-8-3 pt. 8.

¹⁰⁵NAC, David Petegorsky to Carl Goldenberg, Chairman of the Interdepartmental Committee on Labour-Management Production Committees, Department of Munitions and Supply, 12 December 1943, RG 36/31, Vol. 12, 8-2-1. In this letter Petegorsky indicates that he instructed the CBC to use *Labour Forum* to promote Labour-Management Production Committees.

¹⁰⁶AO, J.P. Ragan of the Stratford District Trades and Labour Council, to the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the CBC, 17 January 1943, MU 4033.

¹⁰⁷William R. Young, "Making the Truth Graphic: The Canadian Government's Home Front Information Structure and Programmes During World War II," PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1978, 288.

appearance of advancing the interest of workers by articulating their opinions and demands. The broadcasts produced under Simpson's name, however, were a pale shadow of the earlier programs created by Wren, Cowan, and King. A professional announcer, government spokesperson, and academics made for a less than authentic show. This had been noted by Professor C. Sivertz who claimed that,

I have recently had evidence on listener response to Labour Forum, from two casual workers who were unaware of my connection with the WEA and who stated simply that they do not listen now; that you can tell by the tone of voice that none of these people are real workers. It used to be different and worthwhile.¹⁰⁸

This shift in orientation and style was also observed by the TLC, which announced its withdrawal of support from the program on 13 July 1943. The TLC cited complaints from rank-and-file members "regarding the type of programme being put out by the National Labour Forum."¹⁰⁹ Mr. Munro, a past President of the Saskatoon Trades and Labour Council, was much more lucid in his denunciation of Labour Forum. The Saskatoon *Star Phoenix* quoted him as saying that "they tell us we are fighting for freedom, yet we have a controlled radio as well as a controlled press." The Saskatoon TLC, which Mr. Munro addressed, took the position that the program had become "middle class" and no longer offered the "working man's point of view."¹¹⁰

While the first series of post-WEA broadcasts were running, Wren wrote J.S. Thompson expressing the concern that "we are reluctant to believe the CBC can present and express labour's point of view, particularly in the exacting months that are ahead of us."¹¹¹ By polling workers' sentiments and drawing upon their personal experience, David Petegorsky and Marjorie McEnaney constructed a reasonably progressive range of topics. But the style, presentation, and language were not accepted by workers as authentic expressions of the working class. Sid Simpson's resignation, which signalled the withdrawal of the CCL, coupled with the departure of the TLC, cast uncertainty on the possibility of summer broadcasts. The CBC had originally planned, and announced, that Allan May would spend the summer visiting industrial plants for *Labour Forum*. Instead, the CBC introduced a new show in *Labour Forum*'s time slot, still featuring Allan May, but called *Production Front* which ran for twenty weeks. The format, at the very least, was inspired by *Labour Forum*.

¹⁰⁸ AO, C. Sivertz, Associate Professor, University of W[estern] to Drummond Wren, 14 May 1943, MU 4033.

¹⁰⁹ NAC, J.A. Sullivan to Sid Simpson, 13 July 1943, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-8-3 pt. 6.

¹¹⁰ NAC, Newspaper clipping from Saskatoon *Star Phoenix*, 27 May [1943], RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-8-3 pt.6. For an interesting discussion of the tension between working-class and middle-class identities in 1930s left politics see James Naylor, "Politics and Class: The Character of 1930s Socialism in Canada," CHA paper (unpublished 1993).

¹¹¹ AO, Drummond Wren to J.S. Thompson, 20 April 1943, MU 4033.

The CBC and the WIB were planning to replace *Labour Forum* with a program on reconstruction entitled *Of Things To Come*, at the same time that the 1944 series began.¹¹² Workers continued to voice protest over the direction *Labour Forum* had taken, perhaps realizing the magnitude of their collective loss. The Winnipeg District Trades and Labour Council, for example, issued a statement at its 7 March 1944 meeting condemning the CBC and the program *Labour Forum* because it failed to consult with the advisory committee composed of prominent labour leaders for over a year.¹¹³ R.G. Anderson, a delegate at the meeting said "he wanted the real artisans on the air not the professors," obviously referring favourably to the union leaders and workers who had been frequent guests when Wren ran the program. By ostracizing Wren and the WEA, CBC bureaucrats and CCF allies within the labour movement handed *Labour Forum* over to the state. One worker summed up the situation accurately when he proclaimed the need for labour to rely on the abilities of the working class alone in producing cultural institutions, noting that,

A careful scrutiny should be made among the ranks of labour for members ... not politicians and professors ... who are capable speakers and who understand labour problems ... The Machinists Union had one of the best organizations and it was not built by professors but men who lived the life of the worker.¹¹⁴

These words were uttered in memory of a unique episode of working-class experience in which the structure of cultural creation allowed workers to alternate between producers and consumers without the taint of commercial mediation or the condescension of the professional culture creators. As *Labour Forum* faded into historical memory it marked the passage of a potentially powerful opportunity for workers to colonize the institutions of an emergent mass culture.

Certain working-class historians and cultural theorists emit a qualified lament for the erosive impact of mass culture on working-class community cohesion that is borne out by much of the historical record and reinforced by the present marginalization of the working class in the media 'spectacle'. Bryan Palmer's interpretation of radio's role in the late thirties and early forties as an agent which "undercut the experience of [class] collectivity, replacing it with individualized or family centred activity" speaks to the displacement of sport and spectacle from their community-bound class context.¹¹⁵ Raymond Williams interprets radio as a "significant index of a general condition" of "mobile privatization" in which mass as a physical grouping of individuals, rooted in community and occupation, is transformed into individuated private homes connected by a "unified social in-

¹¹²NAC, Memo, s.n., 5 January 1944, RG 41, Vol. 185, File 11-8-3 pt. 8.

¹¹³NAC, Clipping from the Winnipeg *Free Press*, 8 March 1944, RG 41, Vol. 185, 11-18-3 pt. 9.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹¹⁵Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992), 234-5.

take."¹¹⁶ The historical record seems clear on these points but generalizations about each medium within mass culture neglect the possibilities for reformulating working-class collectivity inherent in each emergent technology. Prior to the war workers around the world seized the possibilities that every new medium of mass communication offered. The International Worker-Photographer Movement sprang up in Weimar Germany with the aim of proletarianizing the camera and transforming it into a weapon in the class struggle.¹¹⁷ In the Netherlands, Filmliga and other bodies organized working-class film screenings and undertook film productions to politicize and radicalize workers.¹¹⁸ During the inter-war period the Austrian Socialist party engaged, albeit ineffectually, in a struggle to create working-class programming on the state owned radio monopoly.¹¹⁹ Closer to home, the Chicago Federation of Labor's own radio station WCFL overcame the resistance to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the indifference of the AFL executive, and the apathy of the CFL executive, and began broadcasting in 1926. The founding of the station was described by its principal supporter, Edward Nockles, CFL secretary, as a "revolutionary action."¹²⁰

Some leftists active during radio's incipient period saw the possibilities of radically transforming radio, while also acknowledging its socially disruptive effects. Bertolt Brecht argued in 1932 that radio could be claimed by workers if it could be made to "receive as well as to transmit ... to let the listener speak as well as hear ... to bring him into relationship instead of isolating him."¹²¹ In Brecht's Germany the possibilities for attempting, let alone accomplishing, this transformation of radio were soon eclipsed by the rise of Hitler. The Austrian experience was directed by specialists interested in raising the cultural standards of the working class as audience, not actors, and ended with the fall of the Austrian Socialist Party to Austrian fascism. The force of Brecht's insight ironically found a concrete manifestation in Canada where Drummond Wren was struggling to turn workers into the producers of radio broadcasts. Wren's success, measured in relation to Brecht's project, was ephemeral but almost total. Workers ran the WEA, which initiated the broadcasts, and also sent in letters to be read over the air or used as subject material in the broadcasts. Workers and their representatives appeared as

¹¹⁶Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York 1974), 28-9.

¹¹⁷See Franz Hollering, "The Conquest of Machines That Can Observe Things," and Edwin Hoernle, "The Worker's Eye," and Willi Munzenberg, "The Tasks and Aims of the International Worker-Photographer Movement," all in Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub, eds., *Communication and Class Struggle*, Vol. 2 (New York 1983) 174-82.

¹¹⁸See Bert Hogenkamp, "Workers' Newsreels in the Netherlands," in *ibid.*, 157-64.

¹¹⁹Helmut Gruber, *Red Vienna, Experiment in Working-Class Culture, 1919-1934* (New York 1991), 135-41.

¹²⁰Nathan Godfried, "The Origin of Labor Radio: WCFL, the 'Voice of Labour,' 1925-1928," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 7, 2 (1987), 143-59.

¹²¹Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" in John Handardt, *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation* (New York 1990), 53.

“on air” guests or gathered in union halls to tune in to *Labour Forum* or met in listening groups to discuss and debate the issues raised in each broadcast. For some, *Labour Forum* broke the isolation of working and living in remote regions of the country. For others it was an opportunity to share their particular and general experiences with workers across the country. *Labour Forum* allowed workers to speak as well as listen, to transmit as well as receive, and to forge local and national relationships premised upon their collective identity as a class. Its emergence demonstrates the possibilities within mass culture for articulating working-class identity and opening new sites of resistance.

New sites of resistance are often transformed into new sites of defeat. *Labour Forum*'s disappearance illustrates the need to remain attentive to the established emphasis in working-class history upon leadership and the contradiction and complexities of class politics, capital and the state, particularly the way control over mass culture and communications technology is structured to undercut working-class solidarity. Craig Heron has recently argued that working-class solidarity was reforged through mass culture because “Canadian workers watched newsreels of sit-down strikes in movie houses across the country in the 1930s, and unions later broadcast their own radio shows ...”¹²² Lizabeth Cohen argues for the resilience of a distinct working-class/ethnic culture in the face of an emergent mass culture in the 1920s and 1930s. She cites the example of the Chicago Federation of Labour's (CFL) radio station, WCFL, to argue that “Radio, probably more than any other medium, contributed to an increasingly universal working-class experience.”¹²³ But by the end of the thirties WCFL was “struggling for survival,” eclipsed and marginalized by the consolidation of private radio networks, shunned by the AFL leadership, and reduced to selling advertising space to large corporations interested in reaching “the best paid and most constantly employed working people.”¹²⁴ Despite the eventual commercialization of WCFL, it remained labour-owned and for a brief time offered an alternative broadcasting model and a challenge to the hegemony of the corporate radio networks.

Unfortunately these examples of working-class media alternatives are counter to the dominant trend in the control of mass culture which distances workers from cultural/communications production. Instances when workers have been excluded, or protest has been rendered unknowable beyond the limited number of participants by means of media silence, far outnumber instances of inclusion and exposition. During the bitter and prolonged Windsor strike of 1945, for example, Wallace

¹²²Craig Heron, “Towards Synthesis in Canadian Working-Class History: Reflections on Bryan Palmer's Rethinking,” *left history*, 1, 1 (Spring 1993), 120.

¹²³Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 325.

¹²⁴Robert W. McChesney, “Conflict, Not Consensus: The Debate Over Broadcast Communication Policy, 1930-1935,” in William S. Solomon and Robert W. McChesney, eds., *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives in U.S. Communication History* (Minneapolis 1993), 231; Nathan Godfried, “The Origins of Labor Radio,” 155.

Campbell, the President of Ford, monopolized the local media in an effort to undermine the UAW's struggle for union recognition. George Burt, Regional Director of the UAW, eventually crossed the border and opened his broadcast from a Detroit radio station with "Mr. Campbell isn't going to have the last say."¹²⁵ Burt's media victory, while resourceful and clever, nonetheless reveals the extent of labour's exclusion from the communications apparatus in Canada. This exclusion was a direct consequence of labour's failure to secure permanent access to, and a measure of control over, radio broadcasting in Canada during the war. As went Wren, the WEA, and *Labour Forum*, so too, went a part of the history of the Canadian working class, a part looking to be reclaimed.

¹²⁵George Burt, "The UAW and the Ford Windsor Strike 1945," in Gloria Montero, *We Stood Together: First Hand Accounts of Dramatic Events in Canada's Labour Past* (Toronto 1979), 94-5.

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