

TRANSFORMING LABOUR

Women and Work in Post-war Canada

Joan Sangster

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While I laboured over my chapter on grievances, I became involved in a grievance issue, later a libel action, involving my own union. In this sad case of life imitating – or perhaps mocking – one's writing, the benefits and perils of trade-union politics were brought into bold relief for me. It was a depressing experience for those of us committed to the social justice unions should deliver, to the academic freedom they are supposed to protect, and to the leadership they ideally need. While few of these were in evidence, my faith in political integrity and honesty was kept alive by a few good colleagues including Peter Dawson, Bryan Palmer, Gillian Balfour, and Mary Jo Nadeau. I thank Gillian and Mary Jo especially for their friendship during trying times.

Books are written not only in an intellectual and academic context, but in a personal one as well, and without the love and support – and sometimes sceptical ribbing – of my family, I can't imagine that my work would hold as much pleasure and meaning as it does. I am extraordinarily lucky that my intellectual and personal lives overlap in my partnership with Bryan Palmer, with whom I have shared my thoughts on this book, on politics, and on history more generally, for more than a decade. This is not to say that our political perspectives are always simpatico; but intellectual differences can be enlivening and stimulating, and his support for the project at the heart of my work – creating a feminist labour history – has always been unwavering. I sometimes feel as if he writes books faster than I can read them, but I know we work to different rhythms, creating different kinds of history, while supporting each other with love and affection. I count it our good fortune that we are finally together in the same city: with him close, as Bruce says, 'these are better days it's true.' Our children, Kate, Laura, Rob, and Beth are now all away from home, following their own different intellectual and political paths, which we follow with great pride and interest. They remain a joy, even when they sigh and commiserate over their parents' outdated Left lifestyle.

As I wrote this book, I found myself sometimes reflecting on my own memories of the post-war years, on what it meant to grow up in a time of contradictory messages to girls and women, not only about education and work, but also about the family, in real life often falling short of its over-idealized popular image. I want to thank my older sisters, Carol and Wendy, for weathering those times together, for their unfailing support over the years. We grew up as baby boomers, and experienced, first hand, the promise, the opportunity, but also the disquieting contradictions of life in the post-war interregnum. This book is for them.

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TRANSFORMING LABOUR: WOMEN AND WORK
IN POST-WAR CANADA

Introduction

When I first began writing labour history thirty years ago, I could never have imagined researching this book. The subject was too close to the present, too close to my own childhood. In the 1970s, I was only beginning to puzzle through what feminist politics, women's history, and socialism meant. Then, I might have perceived women's labour activism of the 1950s quite differently, perhaps as overdetermined and constrained by the prevailing ideology of femininity. After all, we were trying to escape our mothers' lives, escape the prescribed femininity and domesticity doled out in home economics classes, and escape the meek politics of respectable social democracy. We wanted to build a politics of radical transformation and new lives of possibility and equality.¹

Those dreams of transforming women's lives have yet to be fulfilled. I am not one of those baby boomers who looks back on the 'long sixties' and tut-tuts our political naivety and foolishness in imagining radical change, but I do recognize that my scholarly and political perspectives have shifted. I may now have more empathy for women of my mother's generation, more understanding of the struggles they faced, and more awareness that they were living through significant changes in women's working lives. Of course, perhaps it is simply the knowledge that we have now become what our daughters wish to escape that has altered my perspective.

Many women, I now realize, while not self-described feminists, felt quite deeply the contradictions and inequalities in their work lives. As one homemaker wrote privately in 1968 to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), 'married women with children' are now at a 'crossroads ... [They] are in the unenviable position of being 'damned if they do, damned if they don't. On the one hand, we hear about the

damaging effects on the family unit if the mother goes out to work,' and on the other hand, 'we are being constantly urged to make more use of our potential.'² Single mothers writing to the commission, who supported their children on meagre 'women's wages' did not have the luxury of this choice, but they too felt the unfairness of an economic system that did not compensate them as breadwinners, and the restrictions of a familial ideology that made their children 'third-class oddities' because they had single working mothers.³

The post-war period looked very different in 1974, the year I graduated from university. The first ripples of an oil price crunch had generated some government budget cuts to social services and education. These cutbacks seemed so shocking in 1973 that our radical student union, with a Trotskyist as the president, shut down the university for a day to debate the cuts. Little did we know that this 'crisis' in capitalism would become normalized and, as a result, that the state would move decisively away from a Keynesian compromise; that welfare-state principles of universality and entitlement would be whittled away; and that education costs would be placed more squarely on students' heads, making the limited democratization of education that my generation had briefly enjoyed even more limited. These 1974 cutbacks signalled what we would later call the beginning of the end of the post-war Fordist accord or 'accommodation,' the tacit agreement between capital, the state, and the established labour movement that gave labour some important legal protections, and capital the stability it needed to Taylorize production, augment productivity, and sustain profits. Always a double-edged sword offering labour very real benefits but also constraints, this accord was based on the assumption that increased consumption would ensure both rising wages and profits, that respectable organized labour would support an anti-communist offensive within the labour movement, and that North American capital would remain a dominant force in the world.⁴

Those of us who became involved in socialist and labour politics did not immediately absorb the extent of change occurring – or perhaps we did not want to see it – until the early 1980s. By then, many women who had fought their way into non-traditional work were laid off. Public-sector unions, which had only recently secured the right to strike, were fighting a rearguard state action to limit their power, and a new term, the 'feminization of poverty' had emerged, a reference to the growing income spread between 'haves' and 'have-nots' that would increase over the 1990s. The last twenty-five years of the century have been

characterized, in contrast to the Fordist period, as an era of 'competitive austerity',⁵ in which the promise of permanent, full-time paid work has begun to unravel, and, in the context of intensified global competitiveness and state deregulation, more precarious, flexible employment has emerged in its place.

This narrative of decline is, however, problematic, for it assumes there was a decisive break between the post-war era and the post-1970s crumbling of the accord. Some critics, feminists among them, are not so sure that a 'virtuous circle'⁶ of growth characterized the twenty-five years after the war's end, and warn that a 'golden age' perspective masks continuities in the pre- and post-1970s economy. Most important, such an outlook obscures the experiences of female, immigrant, and racialized workers. I would certainly concur. Fordism, however, remains useful as a historical label, even if the contention that post-Fordism was a 'radical break' with the past is less salient.⁷ After all, the accord was not a figment of our imagination: it worked reasonably well for some powerful sectors of the economy, usually mass production work, and, as the chapter on grievances indicates, the legal changes it ushered in had a broader impact on the 'rules of the game' in the workplace. Those workers benefiting from this arrangement may have been the exception, but the security the accord seemed to promise also became an important goal and symbol for other workers. Moreover, the accord's assumption of a male breadwinner ethic structured other key elements of the welfare state, such as unemployment insurance and welfare provision, and its emphasis on consumer power became a driving force in union bargaining. As Elizabeth Cohen argues for the United States, however, such bargaining ultimately produced some negative consequences for women workers.⁸

Furthermore, the term 'accord' should not be equated with quiescence. The achievement of industrial legality (the right to bargain collectively with employers) after the Second World War was obtained after immense struggle, and was rather grudgingly offered by capital and the state.⁹ Nor did it suddenly put the lid on all class conflict: tensions, disagreements, and, by the 1960s, outbursts of angry rebellion were also part of post-war labour history. Perhaps scholarship has concentrated inordinately on the death of the accord because it became a symbol of what some workers had fought for, but also lost.¹⁰ The post-1945 period may not have been a golden age, but the more recent decline in union density, along with the concurrent intensification of work, and worldwide emphasis on the rights of capital, does indicate a depressingly successful attack on workers' rights.

Focusing too intently on the accord, however, problematically recreates a labour history that privileges certain regions of Canada, and especially white, male workers, the main beneficiaries of post-war unionization. The accord was premised on what Leah Vosko calls the 'standard employment relation' (SER), equated with permanent, full-year, long-term jobs, often with one employer, and carrying benefits linked to the job; married women were assumed to be working in the home, supported by their husbands' wages.¹¹ This SER may have been a normative ideal, but it was not necessarily the norm. Fordism was also characterized by a 'second tier'¹² labour force within Canada: those workers without the security, pay, and entitlements enjoyed by the better-paid, permanent unionized workers. Many of these workers, though not all, were also more likely to be found in the 'have not' regions of the country, where multiple jobs and forms of labour were patched together for a living. Capital's search for more flexible, contingent labour, while equated with more recent times, was therefore already present in the 'affluent' post-war period, even if it has taken on more concerted, intense, and brutal characteristics in the latter part of the twentieth century.

As the importation of European women as contract labour, described in chapter 2, indicates, the state saw some groups of non-citizen workers as flexible and expendable, even if immigrant workers themselves had other hopes for their lives in their new country. International migration, often from poorer areas of war-torn Europe, provided a reserve of low-paid, flexible labour that was crucial for the expanding economy and a secure rate of profit.¹³ The post-war accord was thus also premised on the tacit assumption that some new Canadian workers would have more circumscribed work opportunities and mobility; many immigrant families relied not on a male breadwinner, but on the pooled resources of the family wage economy. This second tier of labour was also gendered female. Contingent (part-time, insecure) work for women blossomed during the post-war period; employment agencies such as Drake Personnel and Kelly Girl, for instance, drew in women who could not obtain permanent work because of a continuing marriage bar set by employers, or because they had to combine both home and wage labour. Moreover, the labour of these 'white collar wives'¹⁴ was premised in turn on the importation of immigrant women who would pick up the jobs in domestic, manufacturing, and service work that these women wished to escape, a point made in the chapter on immigration.

As the last example indicates, the Fordist period was characterized by a significant change in the gender composition of the paid labour force,

and over time this transformation had consequences far beyond the workforce, shaping home, family, and reproductive labour, and raising questions about the gendered division of labour, mother work, and the heteronormative family. An increasing 'feminization' of the workforce occurred as a rising percentage of Canadian women went out to work, particularly after marriage and children.¹⁵ As chapter 1 indicates, there were significant differences in women's labour-force participation based on class, immigrant status, ethnicity, race, and age, but the overall theme of feminization was still quite clear. Many working-class families needed a second income simply in order to reproduce themselves; women in professional occupations were staying in the workforce for longer periods; and female-typed jobs were opening up in rapidly expanding and traditional sectors of the workforce. This feminization of work, in a period when a male breadwinner ideal was still strong, reinforces the contention of many historians that the much vaunted affluence of the post-war period was more circumscribed than we often think, and that the reigning cultural ideal of home-bound wives, whether in *Playboy* or on TV sitcoms, was just that – a popular image.

Of course, women had not suddenly discovered 'work.' As many homemakers writing to the RCSW in 1968 tried to point out, they worked too, often with little 'esteem or recognition.'¹⁶ The feminization of the workforce, then, represented a shift in the nature and place of women's labour, sometimes resulting in a difficult double or triple day for women. The dominant scholarly definitions of work, as many feminists have argued, have been saturated with masculinist biases, putting market-related labour at the top of a hierarchy of importance, and women's unpaid, voluntary, and informal labour at the bottom.¹⁷ Feminist political economists have challenged this hierarchy with excellent research on social reproduction (defined here as 'the daily and generational maintenance of working people'), examining its pivotal role in capitalist economies, its significance to family survival, and its relationship to women's paid work.¹⁸ While unpaid familial labour is a theme that weaves itself through some chapters, and is central to my discussion of Aboriginal women, I have focused predominantly on waged labour, and especially that of blue- and white-collar women, in order to probe women's experiences of work as wages became more and more central to their lives, in a period when the 'citizen-worker' stood at the centre of the welfare state entitlement.¹⁹

Questions about the nature of the Fordist accord have been less central to historical research than to political economy. Nonetheless, a growing

literature on the post-war period has resulted in a proliferation of excellent work exploring the welfare state, culture, legal and moral regulation, nationalism, the Cold War, family forms, and youth revolts, to name a few areas of research.²⁰ As Magda Fahrni and Robert Rutherford argue, there are some overarching themes that provide a backdrop to this era: the emergence of the welfare state, the rise of nationalism, Cold War politics, urbanization and suburbanization, increased affluence and consumption, the baby boom, and reinvigorated immigration.²¹ Within these broad themes, there are some minor interpretive differences: some writing on the welfare state, for example, stresses gender as a defining influence, while other historians and political economists explore the interconnected dynamic of class and gender relations shaping welfare provision.²² In contrast to earlier scholarship focusing on political life, many social historians are exploring the divisions, differences, and inequalities characterizing post-war Canadian society, demystifying the image of an unmitigated post-war consumer heaven and also making the point that citizenship was always defined in gendered and racialized ways, establishing a hierarchy of 'insiders and outsiders.'²³ Periodization may also be a point of difference. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, in their work on post-war citizenship, accent shifts in the economy over time, distinguishing the immediate post-war years from a period characterized by increased affluence after the mid-1950s.²⁴ While I agree that the post-war era was characterized by economic change, including a short depression in 1957–8, I have used Fahrni and Rutherford's more expansive chronology of 'les trente glorieuses' to frame this book, trying to balance general conclusions with some attention to change over time.

A proliferating historical literature on the sixties, including attention to youth radicalism, Red Power, the rise of feminism, and a wildcat labour rebellion, indicates the difficulties of generalizing about this decade in particular, as demands for social change seemed to escalate significantly at the very end of the decade. This was true for the labour feminists described in chapter 7 who spoke out during the RCSW, yet for the rank-and-file meat packers and telephone workers discussed in chapter 5, these movements may not have had a decisive impact until the early 1970s. For the Dupuis Frères department store workers, the 1952 strike, with its frontal challenge to Quebec's political, religious, and economic elite, might have been more of a turning point than events usually associated with the 1960s. In short, periodization is necessary, but always problematic and contestable.

While some American historians have stressed the cultural conservatism and confining gender roles promoted during this period, particularly during the Cold War, a 'revisionist' current has increasingly challenged this interpretation, pointing to alternative images of 'achieving' women in the media, to women's continuing paid labour and political activism, and to evidence of women's refusal or negotiation of prescribed gender, sexual, and familial roles.²⁵ These two approaches are seldom posed as starkly oppositional and absolute, yet historians often lean one way or the other, notwithstanding our repeated invocations to contestation and contradiction in our writing. As my chapter on representations suggests, idealized, popularized images of gender 'normativity' varied according to who was speaking, and are not to be confused with reality. However, even if June Cleaver was a figment of the contemporary 'Mad Men's' imagination, the idealized, domesticated femininity promoted in advertising, film, and magazines had an ideological influence, always existing in tension with women's actual working lives. Like the labour-movement beauty contests described in chapter 1, an idealized, heteronormative femininity fostered class-based, racialized, and gendered images of desirable bodies and working-class womanhood that implied women's paid labour might be less important than their romantic and familial goals. As Joy Parr argues in a collection on Ontario post-war women, despite ample evidence of women's activism, this was still a period of 'fear, conformity, consensus and denial.'²⁶

Canadian writing on women's paid work has contributed to this revisionist view of the post-war years with studies of women's unionization, workplace cultures, and immigrant labour.²⁷ As in the American literature, there have been important attempts to decentre the prevailing historical emphasis on white working women,²⁸ though notions of 'race' and race politics obviously played out quite differently in the United States. Indeed, while there were similarities between working women's experiences in the United States and Canada – not the least because of international unions that spanned the border – there were also divergences in our histories and historiographies. The linguistic and cultural divide of English and French was particular to Canada, while the civil rights movement in the United States arguably had a more powerful influence on labour women's struggles for equality in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁹ Labour feminists (trade unionists promoting gender equality) were presumably a less organized group in Canada than in the United States during this post-war period, due to our significantly smaller labour movement, the lack of a long-standing federal Women's Bureau able to