

Ian Milligan

REBEL YOUTH

1960s Labour Unrest,
Young Workers, and New Leftists
in English Canada



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Introduction

Canada's 1960s were profoundly shaped by labour. Skyrocketing labour unrest captivated young people, their elders, the media, and governments alike. Young workers, who made up the majority of the baby boom generation, brought an anti-authoritarian sentiment to their workplaces, a critical story underlying much of the decade. New Leftists, too, were sundered by their failure to find any agreement on the labour question, would the working class play a significant role in strategies of fundamental social change, or had economic and cultural changes moved the praxis toward a nebulous "dispossessed"? After a brief flirtation with a new path forward, New Leftists returned to ideas of organizing among a working class, and with unions – but on new terrain. There would be a hesitant *rapprochement* with labour, an emphasis on social justice and non-material gains, and an idea of direct engagement with working people rather than through union organs. This new terrain was a significant legacy of the sixties.

Three powerful social, cultural, and political currents converged during the decade. Young people in growing numbers embraced a new culture of defiant anti-authoritarianism and self-expression. Young activists combined this new youth culture with a new brand of radicalism, which became known as the New Left, and aimed to build alliances with marginalized groups. At the same time, young workers defied their aging union leaders in a wave of renewed militancy, including wildcat strikes. We need to understand these three currents as aspects of a single youth phenomenon.

The Canadian sixties can also further be understood around the central question of the working class and labour unrest. This perspective presents a significant lens through which to view the major intellectual developments, debates, and events that transformed Canada from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s. Labour formed the backdrop for most young Canadians at the time – nearly 90 percent of youth moved directly into the paid labour market instead of post-secondary institutions after high school. Here, they brought elements of the same culture and spirit that animated New Leftists, with very different results. Although labour is not the only lens through which to view the sixties – it was also a decade of significant upheaval in the realm of women’s rights, human rights, and self-expression – the pages that follow stress its centrality to our understanding of the period. As much as any other current, this was labour’s decade.

Some illustrative vignettes convey the breadth and depth of this youthful phenomenon. Through the summer of 1966, youth unrest swept across large English Canadian industrial cities. This was very different from the type of unrest commonly seen in Canadian universities. In Sudbury, 2,200 feet (670 metres) below ground level, young workers gathered at mine cages, banging their lunch pails and shouting at their foreman, demanding a return to the customary right of having their lunch before a work shift. These young men had listened to the old hands and were now on the cusp of shutting down the Sudbury mining operations of the International Nickel Company of Canada for more than three weeks, leading almost sixteen thousand fellow workers out onto the picket lines. A month later, young workers – hired into clustered low-seniority jobs at the massively expanding Hilton Works of the Steel Company of Canada – led their colleagues out onto the streets, lashing out at management and their United Steelworkers local alike. Sitting on the warm pavement of Hamilton’s Burlington Avenue as police officers arrested several of their colleagues, these youth formed a critical yet insufficiently understood part of postwar English Canadian youth culture.

Throughout Canada’s 1960s, largely middle-class New Leftists also grappled with how they could transform a society that many increasingly saw as fundamentally unjust and unequal. Would they look to the “dispossessed” – Aboriginals, blacks, the working poor – to animate fundamental social change? Or could the working class be redeemed, returned to its traditional Marxist position as *the* agent of social change? I use the term “New Leftist” purposely throughout, as opposed to a more homogenizing “New Left.” Both were part of a shared social movement, to be sure, but their disagreements and debates lie at the heart of much of this book. Indeed, as we will see, debates on social change

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became key to the very foundation of English Canadian New Leftists, and their inability to grapple with this question led to the dissolution of the largest group, the Student Union for Peace Action.

Whereas in 1965 many New Leftists would have written off the working class as co-opted or marginalized, even undeserving of a special place in theories of social transformation, by 1968, and certainly by 1969, a widespread turn toward Marxism and the working class had dramatically transformed the landscape. At places as widely disparate as Cape Breton; the University of Saskatchewan's Regina campus; Simon Fraser University, on Burnaby Mountain; and Peterborough, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Brantford, with their union struggles, New Leftists moved outward to the working class in a variety of ways. New Leftist activity was motivated by this fundamental desire to reach out into the surrounding community, to affect change, and to be an outward-looking rather than inward-looking group. When New Leftists declared "The university is for people," they did so in a context that recognized the social role of the institution but also its classed nature.

By late 1973, when a few dozen immigrant picture-frame makers in Toronto went on strike at Artistic Woodwork, hundreds of young men and women would wake before dawn, take buses out to a cold picket line in a desolate suburban industrial park, and stand together in solidarity. As the 1970s progressed, the two currents of New Leftists and labour ultimately began to come together. The latter started to look for a new generation of staff representatives and members who could help them make sense of the youthful upsurge of the 1960s, while many in the former were beginning to look for work and ways to continue their activism. It turned out that the gulf between New Leftists and the labour movement was, after all, not as big as it may have seemed to many onlookers in the late 1960s.

The decade was one of dramatic change and unrest, not simply on the campus or in the coffee houses of places like Toronto's bohemian Yorkville. In the wake of the Second World War, a massive demographic and economic change reshaped Canada. As I explore in Chapter 1, the baby boom generation emerged out of a postwar craze in children and child rearing, leading to almost 4 million births between 1946 and 1955. With the lessons of Nazi Germany fresh in the minds of elites and parents alike, these children grew up in an environment where permissiveness and democracy were upheld as ideals (if not a reality). As the discussion that follows reveals, however, the degree to which these ideals were implemented depended in large part on parents' class backgrounds. The backdrop of the longest sustained economic boom in Canadian history animated this generation. In this context of so many children and youth, in an

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economic boom time, more and more completed high school, more went to university than before, and a common youth culture apart from mainstream culture emerged. Out of this youth culture came a sense of youth apart that sparked much of what would follow.

As Canadian universities came alive with cries for a new world, or a fairer world, or a more equitable world – in many cases, all of the above – picket lines sprang up across the country, many led by young workers demanding that society live up to its professed ideals. Our popular and scholarly understanding of the baby boom generation has been informed by a particular set of parameters, largely middle-class, on-campus actors; this book demonstrates that the story of young workers developed along similar lines. Working- and middle-class youth alike developed a shared sense of difference, which found divergent expression, first in youth subcultures (the working-class motorcycle gang versus the middle-class sock hop) and then in “work” environments (the working-class factory versus the middle-class university). Chapter 1 deals with the emergence of this common culture, and Chapter 2 continues by focusing on the lesser-known story of working-class youth during the 1960s and 1970s.

Class was a key structural component, which had profound impact on the period’s youth, alongside discussions of gender and ethnicity. Although there was a degree of social mobility during the period, structural categories and forces shaped individual experiences and outcomes. To that end, this book explores several questions. How were identities formed during the postwar period? To what degree can we speak of a common youth culture that spanned social classes or, conversely, how divided was it? Can we see elements of class or generational consciousness in upheavals during the period? Chapter 3 explores some of the points of division that emerged, tracing the parallel and ultimately divergent path taken by university-destined youth during the upheavals driven by working-class youth.

Canadian youth realized that they were not alone in their alienating perception of being somehow apart from society. Globally, youth began to revolt. In the United States, this occurred at university campuses such as Berkeley and Columbia and in the streets outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago during the summer of 1968. Beyond Canada and the United States, youth seethed in Paris during the famous uprisings of 1968; in Poland, where Eastern European youth rose up against Communism; and in Mexico City, Prague, London, and beyond.¹ Events such as the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and community organizing movements gave a sense of urgency and inspiration to young Canadian youths. As this book shows, even a young person

in a place as seemingly remote as rural Manitoba would begin to feel connected to this broader movement.

Global trends would see unique expression across English Canada, which is the framework for this book. This story played out at a national level, between the individual experiences of campuses, workplaces, and cities and the overarching youthquake that shook the Western world. Local studies do not do the story justice, since they are too restrictive. Focus on only Vancouver or Toronto would occlude a national story. The local does matter, as is evidenced by the recent scholarly attention given to the Canadian student movement at such active campuses as Simon Fraser University and the University of Saskatchewan's Regina campus.² A common theme of these studies is that radical campus leaderships, often dominated by New Leftists, frequently overstretched the humbler aims of students, who were instead focused on more immediate issues affecting their everyday lives. My interest here is in the related off-campus activities: the building of community support, activities with trade unions, and the enduring legacies that ensued.

The various experiences of young workers and New Leftists interacting with regional traditions and histories were borne out by the diverse stories and sources I gathered, from Metropolitan Vancouver's Burnaby Mountain to the communities by Cape Breton's Strait of Canso, from small-city Sudbury to Metropolitan Toronto. As I argue in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, these places all saw distinctive realizations of New Leftist, labour, and worker cooperation emerge. Yet this story is bigger than the sum of its separate geographical parts. A national study allows me to stitch together these disparate local contexts; a similar intellectual culture motivated comparable yet divergent reactions throughout English Canada. The most substantial contribution to our pan-Canadian understanding is Bryan Palmer's impressive *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*, which provides a thematic overview of major issues that dominated the decade. He maintains that the decade destabilized Canadians' self-conception as a British society, fragmenting identity so that it could not be distilled to a single narrative. Significantly, Palmer's book has extensive sections on young workers and on the early Canadian New Left, providing substantial narratives and discussions of both.³

I aim in this book to add to this picture by focusing on three critical currents – New Leftists, young workers, and youth culture generally – and argue that the narrative of labour and class lies at the centre of this story. The influences playing on students and activists in Vancouver were, in many ways, similar to what was playing out across Canada in Halifax. Yet, because of Canada's

history and development, this story – while connected to the global – developed along its own lines. As I note in Chapter 3, English Canadians began to engage with the same thinkers, and read the same publications, forming an intellectual network that motivated their actions.

French Canada stands apart, however. The Quiet Revolution fundamentally transformed many aspects of Québécois and francophone society, leading to radically distinctive experiences in the two poles of English and French Canada. Certainly, both were shaped by common global events, and there was some intellectual engagement between these two groups – primarily through print media such as *Our Generation*, published in Montreal and distributed across the continent – but this was ultimately rather limited. Repeated evidence emerged from interviews and archives concerning political developments that created distinctively different intellectual, political, and cultural spheres for Franco- and Anglo-Canadians. There is little doubt that this sphere created a very rich and active oppositional movement in Montreal, borne out in contemporary politics. However, this world looked more to the Third World – not only to francophone nations but also beacons of liberation such as Cuba – for intellectual inspiration than to the North American English experience.⁴ In this regard, Sean Mills’s *The Empire Within* is of immeasurable significance and importance, especially for understanding the francophone experience.⁵ It is important, of course, to not draw too much of a dividing line between these two aspects of Canada in the 1960s. As the pages that follow reveal, English Canadians did look to French Canadians for inspiration, especially those in Montreal; the two histories are intimately connected.

As a work of engaged scholarship, *Rebel Youth* builds on, complements, and challenges the growing literature on the Canadian sixties. Before the relatively recent explosion of historical interest in this period, the sixties were generally under-studied in Canada. The reason for this has been traced in part to the general reluctance of New Leftists to write of their experiences and memories, a notable difference between Canadian and American participants.⁶ A triptych of works dominated the field until recently: Cyril Levitt’s (1984) *Children of Privilege*, Doug Owsram’s (1996) *Born at the Right Time*, and Myrna Kostash’s substantial and evocative semi-autobiographical (1980) *Long Way from Home*. Each provides valuable insight into its subjects, although Levitt’s thesis that the student New Left in Canada can be understood as a revolt of “privilege against privilege” is insufficient and overly reductionist. Students were disproportionately privileged as compared with their non-student peers (a critical point established by the exhaustive travails of the Canadian Union of Students itself), but this universalizing model ignores opportunities for social

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mobility: working-class youngsters *were* attending universities in smaller numbers, which gave the movement a particular flavour absent in previous periods of student unrest.⁷ I further believe that we see New Leftists in that period moving out into the community, onto picket lines, and into working-class settings in an attempt to effect fundamental social change, a revision of Levitt's argument concerning a post-1967 New Left retreat to campus.⁸

For this book, I selected two bookends to the "long sixties" as defined here. The year 1964 is a useful starting point, as it saw the transformation of Canada's Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament into the overtly political and extra-parliamentary Student Union for Peace Action. By the following year, both the English Canadian New Left and the youth wildcat strike wave were emerging. Until a few years ago, the story of the wildcat wave was known primarily through survey treatments by Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer.⁹ More recent work by Palmer in *Canada's 1960s*, as well as a chapter by Peter McInnis on the subject, have solidly established the broad contours of events.¹⁰ Through in-depth treatments of particular case studies using oral interviews and archival research, this book seeks to move beyond the wildcat wave, noting the importance of this time period as a statistical period but arguing that many seeds were sown and processes begun that would not culminate until the late 1960s or even the early 1970s.

For that reason, if late 1964 is a useful starting point, 1973 is a compelling end point for political, economic, and cultural reasons. The economy, which had been faltering since the late 1960s, was brought to a crisis point in October of that year with the oil embargo crisis, leading to precipitous impacts on the labour markets, as well as on the post-secondary sector. From that point onward, labour would be on defensive territory, and fears of post-secondary under-employment as well as on-campus reforms would quell on-campus dissent. Yet the 1970s would also see the eventual coming together of New Leftists and labour unions.

Minutes were rarely taken and reports rarely written by both workers and New Leftists. Consequently, oral histories provide one of the few inroads to the questions asked in this book, especially when establishing people's intellectual viewpoints. Indeed, many of the important discussions key to shaping the intellectual world of the English Canadian New Left took place over drinks – in pubs, sitting on lawns at meetings, and at innumerable kitchen tables in communal homes. Some of this was written down in *Our Generation*, an important New Left periodical, or other sites of discussion, such as *Canadian Dimension* and the *SUPA Newsletter* (published by the Student Union for Peace Action), but most was not. To hear these stories, I crossed Canada, travelling

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from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast, from Springhill, Nova Scotia (and an interview in the Springhill Miners Hall), to Vancouver, British Columbia. I found interviewees through archival sources, as well as Internet searches and Canada 411 online, and through tapping into peer networks. My methodology was to start with a few rote, scripted questions (background, path toward political activity, particular events, and so on) and to then let the interview evolve into a conversation. In my interviews, I sought to ensure that questions involved the interviewees' thoughts on labour unions and class as a category of analysis, but I did not want them to be overly prescriptive. As a result, I tried to keep my initial questions as general as possible so that the interview could evolve to include areas I may not have thought of. Interviews often ended with a list of more people to contact. My initial goal of finding thirty interviewees quickly revealed itself as too limited; by the project's end, I had met over seventy.

Oral history is invaluable for our understanding of these individuals and social movements but, of course, it does not provide a perfect representative snapshot of the period or these movements. More men were interviewed than woman, with only nineteen of the latter having their voices recorded for this book. This is partly because of historical circumstances: the unionized workplaces discussed in Chapter 2 were overwhelmingly male during the period under question, and as I note there, penetrating these social networks was difficult. Women were involved in the strikes discussed, especially as family members, but newspapers and archives did not record individual names, and I was unable to learn them. Similarly, the early New Left was particularly male-dominated. Many of the intellectual debates contained within this book involved men arguing with other men. Indeed, some women eventually tired of the neglect and endemic sexism, forming women's caucuses and women's liberation groups; by 1967, they had begun meeting separately.¹¹ In some questions of New Leftists and labour, however, more women found themselves involved and here these voices come out more: in Vancouver, with the pro-labour activities of the Vancouver Women's Caucus, and especially in Toronto, with the critical organizing roles played by vital young women at the Artistic Woodwork strike of 1973. Yet, on the whole, the male-dominated nature of the interview pool does need to be kept in mind, as the men interviewed reflect a particular current within the movement. Further work remains to be done in order for us to have a more comprehensive picture of the gendered understandings and roles within these social movements.

Since recollections are tempered through the intervening decades – often more than forty years – and subsequent life events and political developments skew one's remembrance of the past, such sources must be interpreted with

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critical care. Oral histories are intriguing not simply because of the window they offer onto events that may otherwise be beyond the reach of the historian but also because of their very forms, their status as singular constructed entities of the meeting of an interviewer and an interviewee, and the social context of these meetings.¹²

Many of the people interviewed saw these events as important waypoints on the route toward future activism, from involvement with political parties to trade union activism, social justice, the environmental movement, or continuing engagement within academia. I am taking snippets from a particular period in their life, and in the book's Conclusion I trace their onward trajectories. Throughout the book, I have made clear when I am drawing on recollections rather than documents produced at the time.¹³ There is also the potential for the participant to consciously or unconsciously self-select, to privilege or repress certain memories. It is the historian's duty to sift through and compare testimonies with archives and each other, and to advance a case for a particular narrative. Competing authorities are at work: the authority of the historian, rooted in professional training and breadth of inquiry, and the authority of the participant, by virtue of his or her lived experiences.¹⁴ Even if these two factors cannot always be balanced, we need to be aware of them.

In the six chapters that follow, I demonstrate the salience of labour and how this significantly affected the direction of radical and not-so-radical political and cultural movements through the long sixties. We move forward from an introduction of youth culture and its classed dimensions to the realization of an outward-looking New Left, in the final three chapters. Profound transformations took place in the way many young Canadians interpreted labour by the end of the period. The early sixties ideas of C. Wright Mills, arguing for the obsolescence of the traditional working class as an agent of change, gave way to widespread Marxism, both within and outside the universities, as hundreds of youngsters took to the streets – from Vancouver to Cape Breton – in support of a working class. Yet their understanding had been profoundly shaped and altered by a combination of intellectual debates and practical experiences. The labour movement would similarly become unsettled by the end of the sixties; formerly quiescent and seemingly docile, it would now have to increasingly engage with youth issues as the Canadian economic context shifted under its feet. Although the period is commonly seen as one of profound change, labour histories need to view the period as a significant site for their own narratives. As much as for any other group, the 1960s were labour's decade in Canada.