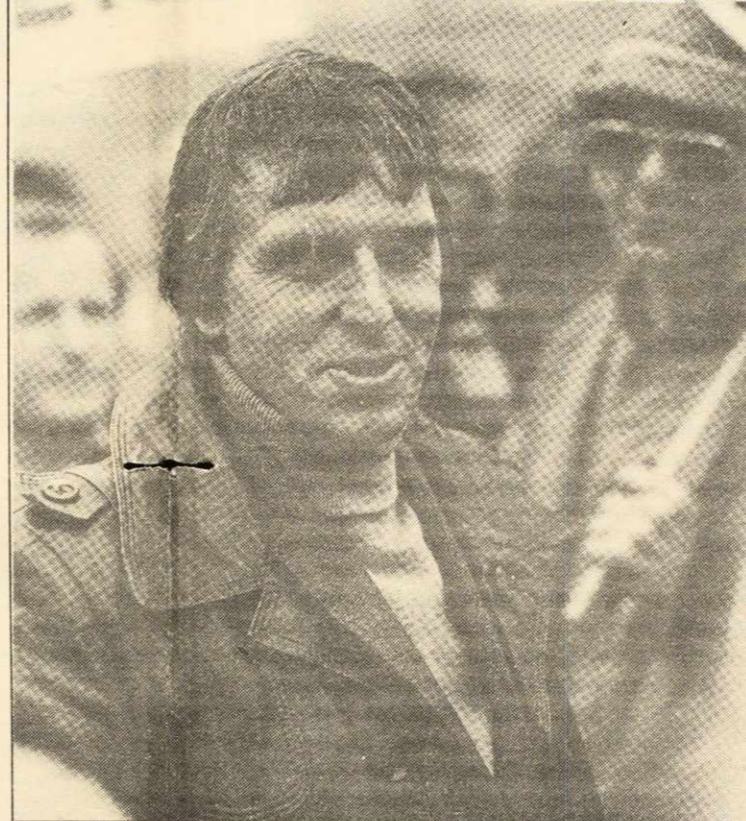


# I DID IT MY WAY



**Bob White: Hard Bargains is hard to swallow. Our receiver says this photo shows you exactly where the union executive wouldn't be - on the picket line with the ordinary guys.**

by Tony Tracy

**B**ob White is undoubtedly the most influential figure currently in the Canadian labour movement, a fact which his autobiography, *Hard Bargains: My Life on the Line*, will not allow the reader to forget. After reading the 400 pages of his personal reminiscences, one is left with a certain feeling that White single-handedly negotiated all major contracts for the United Autoworkers of Canada (UAW) and again single-handedly created the separate Canadian Autoworkers Union (CAW). Little mention is made of the rank-and-file workers within the union, and what little is said about them tends to be negative overall.

The book chronicles White's rise from a young Irish immigrant working in a woodworking plant in Ontario to his current standing as the head of one of the most powerful unions in the country. However, if one is looking for a good history of the Canadian union movement, or even the Autoworkers in particular, this is not necessarily the place to find it. What you will find is much of Bob White's bragging of his personal achievements.

White rose through the ranks of the International UAW from

shop steward in the mid-1950s, to committee-man, to a delegate at the International convention of the union in Atlantic City, New Jersey. It was there that he formulated much of his labour ideology and was "dazzled" by the founder of the UAW, Walter Reuther. White later became a full-time paid staff member of the union and was appointed as assistant to the UAW Canadian Director, Dennis McDermott. When McDermott stepped down to take on the presidency of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), White was elected to take his place. During his term as Canadian Director, the UAW was involved in intense collective bargaining with the "Big Three" automakers: GM, Ford, and Chrysler. White resented the amount of involvement the American head of the UAW had in the bargaining process, and a split developed between the Canadian region of the union and the American union leadership. An independent Canadian Autoworkers Union eventually formed in 1985, with White as president.

There are many good reasons for the formation of an independent Canadian union, including the separate identity, culture, and economy of Canada from the U.S., but one gets the distinct impression from *Hard Bargains*

that the real reason behind the split was simply a power struggle between Bob White and the head of the Detroit-based UAW, Owen Bieber. In fact, much of the book seems to be dedicated to the resentment White felt about having to follow the decisions of the American UAW presidents, including Bieber. White's greatest personal accomplishment seems to be forcing the flamboyant Lee Iacocca, chair of the Chrysler Corporation, to negotiate directly with him without Bieber as a middleman. This seems to give White a feeling of status as one who would rub shoulders with the corporate elite.

White seems to credit the separation of the union, and the formation of the CAW, solely to himself and his two executive assistants, Bob (Nick) Nickerson and Basil (Buzz) Hargrove. He ignores the work of the rank-and-file membership. White would not allow the membership to have a direct say in whether or not to separate from the International union, saying, "A few thought we should not proceed without a referendum vote of the entire membership. I couldn't let that happen." Stating that a referendum vote would only serve to split the union White and his Executive Com-

mittee made the decision to separate from the UAW. In many ways he seems to treat the rank-and-file workers with a certain amount of disdain, and very little respect for their decisions. Perhaps this is what comes from spending nearly thirty years as a professional paid union staff member rather than a worker in one of the plants. In this way, the book presents a unique view: that of a union bureaucrat.

For example, the subtitle, *My Life on the Line*, certainly does not refer to Bob White's life on the picket line. There is noticeably little mention of White himself standing outside holding a picket sign during all kinds of weather for lengthy hours, probably because this simply does not occur. It is the union members, the rank-and-file workers, who are given such dirty jobs, while White flies in a chartered Learjet, staying in the long strikes while drawing a low strike pay. In actual fact, White has little on the line himself: his best of hotels during negotiations to maintain the image of a powerful union leader. It is the members whose life is really on the line, every day, with the working conditions in the auto plants, the threat of layoffs, police brutality on the picket line, and the potential of the loss of their homes and cars during

salary is guaranteed even during the most drawn-out of strikes, and he can always count on the union's picking up the tab for hotel and restaurant expenses. There is no mention of any threat of loss of income to White, and he has not had the opportunity to spend time in jail after being arrested on picket lines, as have many of the union members.

*Hard Bargains* gives too little account of the CAW's fight against the Mulroney Free Trade agreement with the US, although this issue will personally affect all trade union members in Canada, and especially the Autoworkers if the US-Canada trade pact goes on the bargaining table. This most important issue should have received more prominence since it was published shortly before the pact was signed. The union's affiliation with the New Democratic Party is given even less space in the book, and it is only fleetingly mentioned that White is a vice-president of the NDP, as well as being a vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress.

White chooses not to spend much time discussing the roles within the book, especially given the timing of its release, of the CLC and NDP in the formation of the CAW and other

Canadian independent labour unions, but rather spends quite a length giving his own personal accomplishments in this direction. One might speculate that this book is designed to gain political brownie points, perhaps for the next move on the agenda of Bob White's career (could he in fact have his eye on the presidency of the CLC? the leadership of the NDP? a potential seat in Senate?) Or perhaps the book is timed as a catch-up measure to bring White up to par with his famous opponent Lee Iacocca, whose autobiography was published over a year ago (and with whom White seems to have a rivalry as to who arrives at bargaining sessions in the biggest Learjet). One would ask exactly what White's motives are for publishing a book at this time, for, as White himself admits, "Most people write books after they retire, not in the midst of a busy life."

Overall, the book is reasonably good reading, and can provide some history of the labour movement in Canada, if one can filter out this information from White's jet-setting subjective approach. I wouldn't recommend forking out the cover price of \$26.95 for what little information is given, though. My advice: wait for the paperback. Even then it's not a must-buy.

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## 'Shineboy' a local hero

by Rob Fadelle

**E**very now and then, a little bit of local history pops up out of the deep dark dungeons of the forgotten and provides us with unexpected surprise. For example, did you know that a world-famous boxer was born right here in Halifax?

The answers to these heretofore unknown questions came to light upon viewing Neptune Theatre's world premier production of *Shine Boy*. Written by CBC journalist George Boyd,

*Shine Boy* is based on the life story of prize fighter George "Little Chocolate" Dixon. Born in Halifax on July 29, 1880, George Dixon left his hometown while in his early teens to become a photographer's apprentice in Boston. During his time in Boston, Dixon became exposed to the sport of boxing and from that moment on was infected by the challenge involved.

Dixon was a pioneer, a pathfinder, a true trailbreaker of his era. He invented the technique

of shadow boxing and was the first boxer to cut free the lower rope on the heavy punching bag, thus allowing it swing freely, presenting a moving target. He was also the very first black man to climb into the professional boxing ring against a white opponent.

Today, with the advent of Fraser, Ali, and Spinks, this may sound trivial. But in Dixon's time it was unheard of. Besides the supposed indignity of a white man allowing a "nigger" to beat him, it was generally believed that the black man was intellectually inferior and could, therefore, not evolve a sound and successful fight strategy.

Of the production itself, one can only say, 'Excellent'. This is not a 'fight' story but is instead a portrait of a man and his struggle to be recognized as an equal with all other men. It is a story about a battle between the idealistic will

of one against the twisted morals of society gone mad with irrational fear.

George Dixon is most excellently portrayed by Toronto native Dougie Richardson, who looks very much the part of a fighter. Richardson sings several songs in which one can clearly feel the fighter's emotions as he attempts to deal with the sick world he is in.

Fighting her own kind of fight against racism is Rae, played exceptionally well by Caroline Schiller. Rae, the daughter of a simple 'shine boy' (a shoeshiner), is a beautiful young professional singer who is forced (and thus ashamed) to hide her blackness by passing as white under a veil of makeup and finery. After an emotional meeting with her father, Elmer (Lucky Campbell), Rae sings "Chameleons", a heart-rending lyric

about the loss of a special loved one. The loss is great for both father and daughter because while they are both still alive, society dictates that they never associate as father and daughter.

Well-known to Neptune patrons is actor, poet, and playwright Walter Borden. He portrays Dixon's trainer, Geoff, who is a man of great facility of words and something of a philosopher. His character could teach us all a thing or two. You may remember Walter best as Tartuffe in CBC's Mainstage production of the same name. Also well worth honourable mention was Elizabeth Beeler as Kitty O'Rourke in a solo performance of "World Indigo". It is painfully clear that all of the major characters go through their own forms of personal torture and inner turmoil because of society's discrimination.

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