

Canada has developed its own union identity

By DAVE CHUD

It is a symptom of the growing maturity of a people when they set themselves the task of debunking their own national myths. When this re-writing of history and clarification of tradition becomes integrated with the awakening of a particular social class, it is a phenomenon of utmost importance.

We need only look to Quebec to see the dynamic and explosive effects of a redefinition of nation as it becomes more and more identified with the struggles of the working class.

In recent years this same pattern has been developing in Canada. Hesitatingly to be sure, often inarticulate, this emergence of a literature dealing with the problems of class and nation in Canada is nonetheless a reality.

One example is the recent publication of *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour* by Irving M. Abella. Abella, a professor of history at Glendon College, has put together a superbly documented and clearly organized study dealing with the development of industrial unionism in Canada between 1935 — 1956.

There are two truths that up until now have gone largely unchallenged among those who study the growth of industrial unions. The first is that the Congress of Industrial Organization with its strength, money and knowhow, was responsible for the development of the industrial unions in Canada. The second of the great myths of Canadian labour history is that Communists in the unions have always been a disruptive and damaging force.

Abella's method is not to explore directly the two "myths." Rather he describes the early development of each of the major industrial unions: United Steelworkers, Mine Mill and Smelter Workers, International Woodworkers of America, United Electrical Workers and United Auto Workers.

It becomes clear, as he traces the birth of

these unions in Canada, the famous Oshawa General Motors strike and the first organizing campaigns, that it was in fact Canadians who built the CIO unions in Canada.

"... The CIO did not even want to come into Canada; it was dragged in. From the beginning, CIO activity in Canada was more the result of the forceful demands and activities of the Canadian workers than of the plans of the CIO hierarchy in the United States," writes Abella.

Not only was it Canadians who built the industrial union movement in this country, but, to a great extent, it was Canadian Communists and their followers who did this job in which no one else was interested.

"Though on the whole they have been rather maligned by historians and commentators on the period, there seems little doubt that the contribution of the Communists to the creation of the CIO in Canada was invaluable. They were activists in a period which cried for activity; they were energetic, zealous and dedicated in a period when organizing workers required these attributes.

Not only are the expulsions of the Communists from the unions clearly documented, but Abella places the responsibility for the purges squarely on the shoulders of the CCF forces in the Canadian Congress of Labour. Those same stalwarts of social democracy who hesitated before becoming involved with the industrial unions in the first place (because they feared such a move would jeopardize their relationship with the Trades and Labour Congress craft unionists outdid many Tories in their anti-Communist hysteria. CCF adherents like Charlie Millard and Bill Mahoney (recently re-elected head of the Canadian section of the Steelworkers) are exposed by Abella as cold-war red-baiters of the highest order.

Abella goes on in the second half of this book to examine the question of national sovereignty more closely. After all, it is

surprising, given Abella's assertion that Canadians organized their own industrial unions, to find today that these same unions are slavishly linked to the so-called "internationalists."

Abella argues: "Between the CIO and the CCL, there was always a great deal of tension and animosity. One would have thought that the CIO should have stayed out of the CCL's affairs, since the development of CIO unions in Canada was largely the work of Canadians. But right from the beginning the CIO was insistent upon showing the flag in Canada — the American flag."

As well, and Abella only touches on this, both major political tendencies inside the unions were content to see the structural ties across the border. The Communists were tied to their peculiar notion of proletarian internationalism and unity. The social democrats found political allies in their red-scare campaign among CIO leaders like Walter Reuther in the U.S. As well, they found themselves generally compatible with the domestic and international policies put forward by the American leadership.

Despite the rigorous way in which he challenges these myths of Canadian labour, Abella falls prey to another myth, almost in spite of himself.

In his preface, Abella contends "that to most rank and file union members at the time, even these two problems were irrelevant. It was amongst the leadership, and not the rank and file that these two battles (nationalism and Communism) were fought... Only at times when his own economic well-being is at stake — during strikes and collective bargaining negotiations — (the average trade unionist) does take more than a passing interest in the activities of his union." What he is arguing in general is that the workers are interested only in economic issues and leave political questions to the leadership. Consequently, Abella has written

a history of precisely those men, the bureaucrats, both Communist and CCF who held positions of leadership during the period.

But Abella himself gives us enough examples of political activity engaged in by rank and file workers to disprove his own thesis. He clearly describes the scramble for votes and prestige among rank and file workers in the locals of the International Woodworkers of America, between the CCF and Communist factions for control of that union and the B.C. Federation of Labour. He documents the resistance of many rank and file workers to the explicitly anti-Communist crusade carried on by the Steelworkers against the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers.

While it would be silly to argue that all, or even a substantial percentage of the members of these unions were committed Communists, it is equally wrong to pretend, especially in the context of the cold-war, that their actions were not clearly political.

Further, Abella does not acknowledge the way in which economic demands become political sometimes even without the knowledge of the rank and file workers. The best example of this is the formation of the CIO itself. Undoubtedly this was the manifestation of the economic longings of the mass production workers. Yet clearly the formation of the CIO was a profound political phenomenon as well.

Nonetheless, Abella's book is concise, expertly organized and lucidly written. Abella explores in a creative and sensitive fashion two issues which were and still are of utmost importance to Canadian workers. *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour* is by far the finest academic work on Canadian trade unionism and deserves a wide readership.

Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour, Irving M. Abella; University of Toronto Press, 247 pp., \$4.50.

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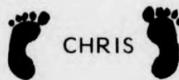
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