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## Kissing cousins: Artists and unions in B.C.

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# *Kissing Cousins*

## *Artists and Unions in B.C.*

S A R A D I A M O N D

SINCE THE 1940s, LITTLE ATTEMPT has been made to link unionism and visual art in British Columbia. Folk musicians, writers and independent radio have dealt with workplace issues more consistently than other media. Even so, the pickings have been slim.

Given the strong labour tradition in the province and the large numbers employed in working class occupations in service, industry and the public sector, the discrepancy feels inappropriate. In the 1930s there was an active and heterogenous working class cultural milieu that combined ethnic community events and institutions; a strong left-wing theatre tradition; union-hosted picnics, concerts and dances. In the 1940s, shop floor theatre groups appeared and the Labour Arts Guild, which brought together visual and performing artists sympathetic to labour, emerged. The Guild organized labour art exhibitions, film screenings and concerts, in union halls, industrial worksites and galleries.

The factors that dissipated an art based on working class institutions were both economic and political — the growth of universally available mass culture combined with the stagnation of political art forms and a period of conservatism and institutionalization of trade unions. The Cold War may have been good for abstract expressionism, but it was lousy for locally based politicized culture.

Like other parts of North America, B.C. experienced a post-war boom. Urbanization, large scale migration and immigration transformed traditional community structures. Ethnic groups such as Ukrainians and Yugoslavians had previously maintained strong left-wing cultural organizations which administered community halls, newspapers, choirs, and theatre groups. These people were integrated into an

English speaking, reactionary culture.

In the economic boom that followed the war, unions were able to stabilize their membership and establish check-off systems for dues and a trained leadership cadre. With numbers and stabi-

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lity came bureaucracy. This process coincided with a right-wing backlash in the States and a play for power within the national union movement by Canadian social democrats. B.C.'s major unions became internally divided on the leadership level between the Communists and their opposition. The eventual defeat of this left in the unions led to a rejection of programs and institutions identified with their ef-



Running off Song Sheets for Post-war Labour Choir

forts, such as women's auxiliaries and cultural committees. One notable exception was a labour choir organized during the early 1950s. A separation between the union as an economic tool and electoral political parties (first the CCF, then the NDP) left little room for education, social life or politics inside the union.

In truth, the erosion of the left within the unions was more symptomatic than causal. The consciousness industries were on the rise at a time when conditions made economic well-being and integration seem viable for working people. Cultural control became centralized into the institutions of mass culture as community structures eroded. Avant-garde art became increasingly inaccessible and engaged in an alienated and internalized dialogue. The star system, begat by the market economy in the sphere of culture, made notions of artists' unions or cultural production as work process unthinkable. Yet, no system is closed: within the hegemony of bourgeois culture in the 1950s and 1960s, unionism neighbourhood based community structures and workplace consciousness continued. Formal cultural expressions did not, however, abound.

A number of factors began the slow move back to a class conscious cultural milieu in the province. The homogenizing elements of mass culture resulted in a radicalization known as the counter-culture in North America — B.C. was no exception. Working class youth who had entered the university environment or who rebelled against the tedium of the industrial or public sector workplace became politically active and interested in music, lifestyle changes and unionism.

B.C.'s labour movement was very militant in the 1970s; there was a large, active left and a nascent interest in

theatre, efforts such as *May Day Magazine*, a wave of politicized bands, the revitalization of Born-in-B.C. folk music, the Union Made programme on Vancouver Cooperative Radio. Artists working with media forms such as graphics, video, photography and film became interested in representing labour as part of the resurgent documentary tradition. Until recently, however, two elements were missing: the participation of visual artists in these projects and the active cooperation, sponsorship and commission of art by the labour movement.

The shift in economic conditions and the resulting swing to the right has begun a redefinition of trade unionism. B.C. has experienced an unprecedented level of unemployment. Unions have had to fight to stay afloat as members watch hard-earned benefits and wages disappear and plummet. Union culture has emerged as a glue that strengthens allegiances and that is an expression of the need for a strong defence beyond the workplace in the face of hard times. Productions have been developed that can be used as organizing tools, for educational purposes and to entertain in the context of resistance.

At the same time, artists have *slowly* begun to respond to the economic and political situation, making a different quality of work possible. Initially, and even during Solidarity, the art community for the most part separated itself from the anger and mobilizations against the cutbacks budget of 1983. The implications of the B.C. budget have become clearer at the same time as federal cutbacks and censorship are on the rise. Artists are frustrated: there are few jobs, art education is drastically cut and social services such as childcare, that make artistic production possible for women, disappear. Artists have organized to defend themselves through the Vancouver Artists League, which functions as a lobbying group.

The formal attempt to bring artists and unions together began with Cultural Workers Against the Budget. This organization was part of the Solidarity movement of 1983. It grouped performers, artists and technicians, as well as art students into a coalition within the larger coalition. It was responsible for addressing specific cuts to arts education on one hand, and for providing entertainment for rallies and publicity for the cause. CWAB were

responsible for rescuing a number of key Solidarity mobilizations from falling into interminable depths of speechifying and boredom.

At the same time, the Canadian Farmworkers Union was beginning to provide a model for the use of culture within the organizing process. The CFU has drawn from both traditional East Indian repertoires and from North American art forms. Their projects have varied from *Picketline* (a drama-



Unemployed Demo — 1930s

tization of a strike), to a traditional dance company, to film, to photomontage works about health and safety to video art. They have drawn on the skills of their own membership and on emerging younger artists and media producers.

In the last three years a workers theatre has begun to re-emerge in B.C. Works have included pieces by Headlines Theatre, a consistent and talented group who do send-ups of the Socreds and full-length works about affordable housing and other issues. The Carpenters Union developed their play *Talking Union*, which was performed for numerous union locals. More recently, *The Midnight Operator* opened featuring striking B.C. Tel operators from the 1919 Vancouver General Strike. Soon to open is *Opening Doors*, a work adapted from an oral history of working class East Vancouver. These plays raise an interesting issue. Some are written by union activists who consulted with professionals, while others are written by "fellow travellers" of the union movement.

Labour art events have coalesced around the Vancouver Centennial. An official labour committee was established which included historians, artists and union leaders. It organized a series of projects, some oriented to labour art, others to labour history. These included a walking tour of the downtown east side from a labour perspective, a series of historical and current post cards, a labour calendar featuring 100 years of labour history through old labour photographs and text; inserts for labour papers, a massive picnic and a series of six labour issue posters by Vancouver visual artists.

As a follow up to these latter events, the labour centennial committee will be banking any revenue generated and recycling it through the community in a series of juried grants to labour art and history projects.

As part of its Centennial celebrations, the Vancouver Artists League gave money towards the development of a labour arts slide show for use in educational contexts. Labour film series and video events have begun to occur through the Capilano College Labour Studies Programme. Interest has extended beyond documentary forms recently, as an organized context has evolved for visual artists and as a body of initial work has developed. "Experimentation" has become more possible.

Despite the progress, a formal committee of artists who would liaise with organized labour does not exist yet in B.C. Such a body could begin a series of discussions within the art community and sympathetic labour organizations. A series of questions remain to be answered: what place is there for non-instrumental (in the immediate sense) art versus art for organizing? How do artists (writers, singers, filmmakers...) relate to unions and produce for their memberships without their work being defined by the perceptions of the union leadership? How can artists avoid a stagnation of their forms (into traditional documentary and enforced realism) and still make their pieces communicate? Should artists unionize? These are not new questions, but the answers to these, both historically and in the current context will be critical in forming a renewed labour arts movement.

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