

Labour / Le Travail Reader Survey: A Report

André E. Leblanc

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Labour/Le Travail Reader Survey: A Report

André E. LeBlanc

IF THE RESPONSE TO the questionnaire sent out with *Labour/Le Travail* 15 is at all indicative, one has to assert that the journal is alive, well, and surprisingly spry. The 124 respondents overwhelmingly gave a vote of support to the journal, and an analysis of who the respondents are and their responses offers food for thought. The following pages provide a comprehensive description of the findings. Numerical compilations being what they are, the conclusions drawn by the author should be taken as tentative at best.

The 124 questionnaires arrived at Memorial University from all parts of Canada, with a few making their way from south of the border and from overseas. Of those who responded, 107 were personal subscribers who obtained their questionnaire with *L/LT* 15. Five responses came from librarians and archivists who received the questionnaire as the journal crossed their desks. The rest obtained a copy when they purchased the journal in a bookstore, or they simply purloined it when they borrowed the journal from a friend or colleague — we hope that they at least returned the issue.

Eighty-five men, 31 women, and 8 who failed to answer the gender question responded. This may or may not be a reflection of the sex distribution of the readership, but it does seem to reflect academic circles and as we shall see below, the journal is primarily an instrument used by academics. Our readership is also relatively young although the mid-life crisis is upon us:

| Age | |
|------------|----|
| under 20 | 0 |
| 20 - 29 | 18 |
| 30 - 39 | 55 |
| 40 - 49 | 35 |
| 50 - 59 | 5 |
| 60 - 69 | 3 |
| 70 or more | 2 |
| ageless | 6 |

This may suggest that career changes and modification of personal interests could create a dent in our established readership; on the other hand it could also indicate another twenty years of loyal readership (and subscribers) from a large base of individuals in the 30 to 49 age group.

Labour/Le Travail readers come from a wide range of professions and occupations, although those related to the academic world dominate by far:

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| teacher/academic administrator | 71 |
| student | 13 |
| librarian/archivist | 8 |
| historian | 7 |
| researcher | 7 |
| journalist/editor | 3 |
| economist | 2 |
| lawyer | 2 |
| clerical | 2 |
| union organizer | 1 |
| graphic artist | 1 |
| furniture finisher | 1 |
| parliamentarian | 1 |
| administrator | 1 |
| retiree | 3 |

This must be weighed in assessing the level of satisfaction of the readership, for *L/LT* is addressing itself to a very particular audience. The exclusivity of this audience offers strength, but it also raises numerous questions. Why is it, for instance, that a journal devoted to improving the "understanding of the lives of the workers" has so few readers from non-academic circles? The ordinary worker is not with us, and the worker's institutional representative is also not there or, perhaps, these readers are less likely than academics to respond to questionnaires. When *L/LT* came to be, a declared objective was to work with organized labour to help further workers' historical consciousness. The nature and number of our respondents belie this aspiration.

Finally the language capabilities of our respondents reflect the quandary that touches our espoused bilingual nature: where are the francophone readers! Ten out of the 124 questionnaires were filled out in French, and not one of these ten readers indicated that he or she read English proficiently. When one juxtaposes this situation to the amount of material that *L/LT* publishes in French, it is obvious that the French readership receives meagre fare. On the other hand, 43 individuals state that they read proficiently both French and English. Fifty-two feel comfortable only with English.

When asked how they became acquainted with *L/LT*, a spread of answers appeared, "word of mouth" taking prominence, and once again reflecting the exclusivity of the reading audience:

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| advertisement | 10 |
| mail promotion | 14 |
| saw in a bookstore | 17 |
| word of mouth | 47 |
| saw in a library | 11 |
| other | 22 |

The "other" category covered a range of scenarios from the "knees of Greg Kealey," to meetings of the learned societies, to seeing citation in books and articles, to use in undergraduate and graduate courses, to being intimidated by a thesis supervisor who happened to be a member of the editorial board, etc.; again, the academic connection! One interesting observation coming from this question, and one having perhaps marketing connotations was the fact that seven of the ten individuals who filled out a French-language questionnaire pointed out that they had become acquainted with the journal through seeing it in a bookstore or in a library.

The question that one can now ask is *why* the journal is read, and the answer is pure and simple: utility. Those who responded essentially remarked that *L/LT* was useful to their work or profession and to their research. Those reading it for interest's sake were few and far between: a retiree, a person who had once typeset the journal and who had subsequently received a subscription as a present, etc.

These respondents were also asked to rank in order of preference major areas of their own personal interest, and the listing of first choices is interesting in terms of who is reading the journal and, perhaps, what they are looking for:

| | |
|----------------------|----|
| history | 66 |
| industrial relations | 12 |
| sociology | 9 |
| labour studies | 9 |
| women's studies | 6 |
| political science | 5 |
| economics | 4 |
| anthropology | 2 |

The final 11 selected the "other" category which, when looked at more closely, boiled down to two general areas: political economy and multi-disciplinary studies.

Common to all was a very high regard for the different sections of the journal as one can see from the following evaluative breakdown:

Articles:

| | |
|---------------|----|
| excellent | 61 |
| good | 53 |
| average | 2 |
| below average | 0 |
| poor | 0 |

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|----|
| Documents: | | |
| excellent | | 19 |
| good | | 61 |
| average | | 16 |
| below average | | 0 |
| poor | | 1 |
| Review Essays: | | |
| excellent | | 51 |
| good | | 53 |
| average | | 6 |
| below average | | 1 |
| poor | | 1 |
| Reviews: | | |
| excellent | | 53 |
| good | | 52 |
| average | | 8 |
| below average | | 0 |
| poor | | 0 |
| Book Notes: | | |
| excellent | | 26 |
| good | | 48 |
| average | | 23 |
| below average | | 0 |
| poor | | 1 |

This generalized approval cut across age, sex, language, and interest lines. More significant is the fact that the respondents came, for the most part, from the academic world where severe criticism is often the rule.

These same respondents reacted in much the same way when it came time to ascertain the usefulness of the journal. In a scale from 1 to 5 (from high to low) they had this to say about the various sections:

| | high→ low | | | | |
|---------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Articles | 59 | 33 | 18 | 3 | 7 |
| Documents | 9 | 20 | 39 | 29 | 16 |
| Review Essays | 37 | 41 | 23 | 8 | 7 |
| Reviews | 49 | 43 | 16 | 8 | 5 |
| Book Notes | 28 | 25 | 24 | 20 | 6 |

Again nothing significant appears as to the quality of the respondent with perhaps one exception: those responding to the French questionnaire indicated they found a higher degree of usefulness for the articles and reviews sections.

From an overall perspective, it appears that the documents section is the least attractive to the respondents. Interestingly enough, however, in verbal comments that accompanied question number 12 and that were added in at the end of the questionnaire, several individuals either called for an "improvement" in the documents or for *more* documents.

One can say that the proof of the pudding is in its tasting, and this perhaps is where interesting conjectures appear. Question number 9 asked the respondents to indicate how much of each section they actually read. Their responses follow:

Articles:

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 15 |
| skimmed most but read one or two | 57 |
| read about half of them | 21 |
| read most or all of them | 18 |

Documents:

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 50 |
| skimmed most but read one or two | 28 |
| read about half of them | 12 |
| read most or all of them | 13 |

Review Essays:

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 36 |
| skimmed most but read one or two | 28 |
| read about half of them | 21 |
| read most or all of them | 31 |

Review/Book Notes:

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 28 |
| skimmed but read one or two | 28 |
| read about half of them | 35 |
| read most or all of them | 27 |

It is obvious from these responses that *L/LT* readers pick and choose, which in turn suggests the need for a wide range of offerings. To narrow the journal's scope or to "super-specialize" it in one direction could have an impact on the number of subscribers. Another finding is that the majority of the French speaking readers indicate that they just skim most of the journal. This appears to confirm the often repeated observation that the amount of French material is sparse. Again, there are marketing implications. Finally, and most interesting, is the fact that only 35 per cent of the respondents read half or more of the articles whereas for the review essays and reviews/book notes sections the figures are respectively 45 per cent and 53 per cent. When one considers the elaborate and formalized evaluation policy that accompanies the selection of articles, and the much more open approach to selection of review essays and

book reviews, one is led to assert that it may be time to ask probing questions. The readership does not seem to indicate that the articles are the "meat" of the journal.

Finally, the questionnaire asked our readers to examine the aims set up in 1976 when *L/LT* first made its appearance. Were they satisfied, yes or no? It was an overwhelming yes (102), and the sampling of comments found in Appendix B serve to explicate this perception. For the fifteen who said no, it was not a matter of disapproval or disenchantment. It was a question of a greater optic and/or a call for a closer tuning to specialized interests. These individuals were without exception numbered in the 32 out of the 103 who felt that it was "time for the journal to broaden its scope so as to encompass material that is not related to the Canadian situation."

When the question of the journal's aims was scrutinized from an age perspective, nothing significant appeared. As for sex, it was generally the same, with the exception that women who indicated women's studies as their first interest were more apt to call for a broadening of scope: 4 in favour, 2 against. As for the interest groupings, the breakdown is as follows:

| Grouping | Number of Respondents | Percentage for Broadening | Percentage for Status Quo |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| anthropology | 2 | 0 | 100 |
| sociology | 9 | 0 | 100 |
| other | 14 | 14 | 86 |
| history | 56 | 27 | 73 |
| political science | 4 | 34 | 66 |
| labour studies | 7 | 43 | 57 |
| economics | 4 | 50 | 50 |
| industrial relations | 12 | 58 | 42 |
| women's studies | 6 | 67 | 33 |
| TOTAL | 112 | 33 | 67 |

From the language perspective, five out of the nine responding to the French questionnaire called for expansion. The interpretation of all this is left to the political philosophers from among the readers of this report.

Indeed, the question of the feasibility of broadening the scope of *L/LT* in the sense of extending its purview beyond Canada touched a raw nerve. One respondent put it bluntly: "If you do, you will lose me as a reader and subscriber." If this was the most strident statement, one saw a more moderate expression of this in the often repeated refrain: it's ours, it's Canadian, and let's keep it this way. Even those calling for expansion indicated a need for

caution: "I would welcome more on the European perspective without arguing for a change in emphasis." When asked where expansion should take place, the 33 per cent who opted for broadening the scope identified the article section 25 times, the document section 10 times, and the review essays section 25 times. The debate that started two years ago within the circle of the editorial board may not be at an end, but a clearer view of the readership's interests is now available.

With the results of this questionnaire, *L/LT* has for the first time more than an anecdotal evaluation of its accomplishments. It has weathered ten years remarkably well, as this compilation shows. By paying close attention to the needs of its readership, it should do as well — if not better — in the coming decade. The ball is, as always, in the court of the editorial board.

Appendix A Numerical Responses

Labour/Le Travail Reader Survey

IN THE FIRST EDITION of *Labour/Le Travailleur* (1976), the editorial stated the aims of the new journal.

Labour/Le Travailleur is a bilingual annual review dedicated to the broad, interdisciplinary study of Canadian labour history. Holding to no rigid position on the definition of labour, the Editorial Board hopes to foster imaginative approaches to both teaching and research in labour studies through an open exchange of viewpoints.

The Board feels that Canadian history lacks a sufficient understanding of the lives of workers. Productive human energy has played a vital role in the development of Canadian society. Our common life has also been richly endowed with the cultural contributions of generations of working men and women. It will be the constant endeavour of *Labour/Le Travailleur* to rectify an all too general Canadian ignorance of these legacies.

The Board welcomes the submission of articles dealing with the following: trade and industrial union organization; social and cultural aspects of the lives of workers; questions relating to labour in politics and the economy; the impact of labour problems on local communities and on various ethnic, cultural and national groups; biographical treatments of union leaders or radicals associated in some way with the labour movement; labour ideologies of reform or revolution; and comparative studies of labour in other countries which shed light on the Canadian situation.

Since that time, the field of Canadian labour studies has grown and developed and the journal has changed to reflect both the new knowledge and the intensified debates of the field. The editorial board is currently interested in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the journal. To help us, we are asking our readers to let us know what you think of the journal. We would appreciate it very much if you would take the time to complete the following questionnaire and return it to: The Editor, *Labour/Le Travail*, Department of History, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada A1C 5S7. A summary of the results will be presented in a future issue of the journal. Thank you very much.

1. What are your major areas of interest? (Please rank in order of preference)

* only first choice is recorded.

| | | | |
|----|-------------------|----|------------------------|
| 66 | history | 9 | labour studies |
| 5 | political science | 6 | women's studies |
| 9 | sociology | 12 | industrial relations |
| 2 | anthropology | 11 | Other (Please specify) |
| 4 | economics | | |

2. What area of labour studies most closely describes your main interest?

3. How did you get this copy of *Labour/Le Travail*? Was it . . .

| | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|
| 5 | from a library |
| 3 | purchased in a book store |
| 4 | borrowed from a friend or colleague |
| 107 | by subscription |

4. If you have a subscription, how long have you had one?

| | |
|----|--------------------------------|
| 39 | since 1976 (first publication) |
| 18 | between 5-7 years |
| 45 | between 1-4 years |
| 6 | new subscriber |

5. What led you to subscribe?

6. How did you first find out about *Labour/Le Travail*?

| | |
|----|---------------------|
| 10 | advertisement |
| 14 | mail promotion |
| 17 | saw it in bookstore |
| 47 | word of mouth |
| 11 | saw it in a library |
| 22 | other (specify) |

7. What language or languages do you read proficiently?

| | |
|----|-------------------------|
| 12 | French |
| 53 | English |
| 43 | both French and English |

8. Do you find *Labour/Le Travail* useful:

| | |
|----|----------------------------|
| 18 | in your research |
| 35 | in your work or profession |
| 68 | both of the above |

9. Considering *L/LT* 13 and 14, how much of each section did you read?*Articles*

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 15 |
| skimmed most but read one or two | 57 |
| read about half of them | 21 |
| read most or all of them | 18 |

Documents

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 50 |
|-----------------------|----|

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| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| skimmed most but read one or two | 28 |
| read about half of them | 12 |
| read most or all of them | 13 |

Review Essays

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 36 |
| skimmed most but read one or two | 28 |
| read about half of them | 21 |
| read most or all of them | 31 |

Reviews/Book Notes

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| just skimmed them all | 28 |
| skimmed most but read one or two | 28 |
| read about half of them | 35 |
| read most or all of them | 27 |

10. Please indicate how useful the different sections of the journal are to you (1 is high, that is very useful, and 5 is low, that is not useful).

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|---|---|---|---|---|-----|----|----|----|-----|
| Articles | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | (59 | 33 | 18 | 3 | 7) |
| Documents | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | (9 | 20 | 39 | 29 | 16) |
| Review Essays | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | (37 | 41 | 23 | 8 | 7) |
| Reviews | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | (49 | 43 | 16 | 8 | 5) |
| Book Notes | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | (28 | 25 | 24 | 20 | 6) |

11. What overall ratings would you give to the following:

| | | | | | | |
|---------------|---------------|----|------|----|---------|----|
| Articles | excellent | 61 | good | 53 | average | 2 |
| | below average | 0 | poor | 0 | | |
| Documents | excellent | 19 | good | 61 | average | 16 |
| | below average | 0 | poor | 1 | | |
| Review Essays | excellent | 51 | good | 53 | average | 6 |
| | below average | 1 | poor | 1 | | |
| Reviews | excellent | 53 | good | 52 | average | 8 |
| | below average | 0 | poor | 0 | | |
| Book Notes | excellent | 26 | good | 48 | average | 23 |
| | below average | 0 | poor | 1 | | |

12. Please suggest any changes you would wish made in the journal:

13. What is your occupation?

14. Your age is:

| | |
|----|------------|
| 0 | under 20 |
| 18 | 20-29 |
| 55 | 30-39 |
| 35 | 40-49 |
| 5 | 50-59 |
| 3 | 60-69 |
| 2 | 70 or over |

15. Are you 31 female or 85 male?

16. Are you satisfied with the aims of the journal, as set forth on the first page of this questionnaire?
- 102 yes
15 no
17. Is it time for the journal to broaden its scope so as to encompass material that is not related to the Canadian situation?
- 32 yes
70 no
5 both yes and no
18. If you have said "yes" to the above question, where would you see this expansion taking place (indicate one or more):
- 25 Articles
10 Documents
25 Review Essays

Please use the back if you have further comments to make. Thank you for your assistance. We really appreciate your help.

Appendix B Comments of Appreciation

The quality of the journal is quite good and quite consistently so. I look forward to getting it which is more than I can say for most of the journals I read.

A very comprehensive resource.

I think it is one of the best academic journals we have.

J'apprécie la revue à un haut point.

I find *Labour/Le Travail* to be stimulating and well done. In fact, I cancelled subscriptions to . . . journals to subscribe.

This is a superb journal. I hope it is widely circulated not only in Canada but internationally as well.

L/ILT is uniformly of high quality, certainly superior to other journals in the field — e.g. *Labour History* or *History Workshop*. It is a strikingly well produced and readable journal . . . — the one journal I love to read cover-to-cover each issue.

Appendix C Comments on Areas of Improvement

More photographs, where appropriate.

. . . there does seem to be a tendency on the part of many writers on labour culture to confuse worker cultural identity with ideological intensity.

Perhaps the annual bibliography section could be better organized. I always find it frustrating to wade through page after page of irrelevant works in the hope of finding something related to what I am researching.

Have you thought about a letter to the editor section? I for one would like to know what other readers are thinking about particular articles or issues. . . .

Interviews with prominent labour or social historians.

More treatment of the labour process, economic structures, and non-paid labourers.

Questions of methodology should be tackled head-on (and not by way of polemics!).

. . . *Labour/Le Travail* lacks a sufficient understanding of the role of ethnicity in the lives of workers.

. . . more frequent publications.

Should devise some means by which the journal is advertised more to graduate students.

Regular historiographical pieces — old vs. new labour history debates.

Get rid of emphasis on international labour in review essays and reviews.

. . . abandon any idea of microfiche.

. . . more material in French.

Archival notes of interest to labour historians.

. . . reports of work in progress.

Would the editorial board entertain articles on Canadian working-class involvement in sports?

. . . more regional diversity and broader political economy focus.

An overly narrow focus on who is a worker tends to exclude non-manual (now 70 per cent of labour force) and domestic labour.

Calling for "theme" issues — e.g. fiftieth anniversary of the On-To-Ottawa Trek.

Encourage more new authors. The journal seems to have become the forum for a particular generation of social historians.

. . . more contemporary labour topics since 1960.

Needs more coverage of working-class women.

Fewer or shorter book reviews.

More economic material as is common in British labour history.

Surveillez davantage les fautes de composition en français.

Appendix D
Notes on Questionnaire Interpretation

AS IN MOST questionnaires, "grey" areas appear, and a matter of judgement comes into play. In compiling the results of this questionnaire the following rules were applied:

- a. Compile all of the information even if one or more question is left fully or partially unanswered;
- b. In cases where two or more responses are given to the same question, take the less favourable;
- c. In cases where the response is clearly ambiguous, exclude it in the compilation.

In most questionnaires there is some form of pre-testing to verify validity. This was not done, although the questionnaire was reviewed by several members of the editorial board. When the final draft appeared, however, nobody noticed a typographical error that was to create havoc with the English version, question number 11. The blank space for inserting the answer preceded the evaluative terms *excellent*, *good*, and *average* but followed the terms *below average* and *poor*. The majority of the respondents caught the error and adapted their responses in consequence: e.g. circling the right term. For those who did not, it meant taking a decision. Whenever this situation occurred, a lower rating was given. This had a definite lowering impact on the categories *excellent*, *good*, and *average*. If this is taken into account one will realize that the results given on page number 324 of this report can easily be interpreted upwards. This would mean that the already high level of *excellent* responses would go up; this could range from a 0 to 30 per cent increase.