

# 'Not a Sex Question'? The One Big Union and the Politics of Radical Manhood

Todd McCallum

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Article abstract

In March 1919, over 230 union delegates assembled at the Western Labor Conference in Calgary to chart a radical new direction for wage workers through the creation of a revolutionary industrial union centre, the One Big Union (OBU). This essay argues that the practices of the OBU's radical manhood, their particular sense of what it meant to be a union man, shaped the organization's structure and politics as well as the emergent culture which fostered such widespread working-class radicalism. Drawing upon already existing practices espoused by Canadian labourists and American Wobblies as well as fashioning new ones, OBU men distinguished radical manhood from both the class politics and the masculinities of male bosses and scabs. While the organization of working women was not seen as an important issue at the WLC, the upsurge in women's militancy during the labour revolt prompted OBU supporters to encourage these women to join their male comrades. At times, advocates of the One Big Union posed the questions of women's oppression and emancipation as crucial elements of the union's purpose; their infrequent ideological commitment, however, too often failed to translate into organizational gains for working-class women and the development of feminist practices within the union. In their challenge to the bourgeois order, OBU men created a program that, in the prevailing context of gender relations, meant that the One Big Union would bring about the transformation, but not the eradication, of men's power.

# ARTICLES

## 'Not a Sex Question'? The One Big Union and the Politics of Radical Manhood

Todd McCallum

THE WESTERN LABOR Conference opened in Calgary's Paget Hall on Thursday, 13 March 1919. In attendance were over 230 delegates from 178 union locals west of Port Arthur and at least two government spies. Their purpose in assembling was two-fold: to coordinate a collective strategy for Western-based unionists for the upcoming Dominion Trades and Labour Congress conference; and, more significantly, to chart a radical new direction for wage workers through the creation of a revolutionary industrial union centre, the One Big Union. Conventions where working men met and discussed politics were a tradition in Canada, and while there were three female delegates to the Western Labor Conference (WLC), the overtly masculinist atmosphere of the gathering was evident both in terms of numbers and the concerns it addressed. This was clear to Helen Armstrong, a radical with impressive credentials who had travelled to Calgary to represent the Winnipeg Women's Labor League (WLL). In the two years preceding the WLC, Armstrong was one of the central figures in organizing the Retail Clerks' Union and the Hotel & Household Workers' Union, both of Winnipeg, a member of the WLL and the Socialist Party of Canada, and had received international notice for her activism against imperialist war and conscription.<sup>1</sup> At the WLC, Armstrong assailed male delegates for their failure to organize working-class women, recalling how she had

<sup>1</sup>Harry Gutkin and Mildred Gutkin, *Profiles in Dissent: The Shaping of Radical Thought in the Canadian West* (Edmonton 1997), 226-37.

"sat in meetings, hundreds of times the only woman — the only woman."<sup>2</sup> She had a vision of how the One Big Union might be different from other movements, how it might enable working women to unite with working men against exploitation and for socialism rather than maintaining the exclusionary policies of the past. Armstrong's program for targetting women workers, however, was rejected by unionists at the WLC; in the words of one male radical, "industrial policy is not a sex question but a class question."<sup>3</sup> We will return to Helen Armstrong and her struggle, but we must first understand why hers was an important, although unheeded, voice about the formation of the One Big Union.

"1919" is perhaps the most contested symbol in Canadian working-class historiography. Liberals, who have come to be known as the "western exceptionalists," and Marxists, who see 1919 in the context of an international working-class upheaval, have offered conflicting accounts of the events of 1919 and their meanings.<sup>4</sup> Emerging in the late 1970s, these often fractious debates have frequently been conducted with an eye towards contemporary class politics.<sup>5</sup> With their focus on the international emergence of monopoly capitalism and the subsequent transformation of Canadian class relations, as well as their general commitment to socialism as a legitimate subject of historical inquiry, Marxist accounts of 1919 better capture the unfolding of events than does the dichotomy of Western radicalism and Eastern conservatism, which obscures the diversity of class experience within these crudely drawn regions.<sup>6</sup> Feminists have also taken up the labour

<sup>2</sup>Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG 10 A14-2, R.B. Russell Papers, Box 10, File 51, *The Origin of the One Big Union: A Verbatim Report of the Calgary Conference* (Winnipeg n.d.), 61.

<sup>3</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 45.

<sup>4</sup>The most popular liberal interpretations are found in David J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* 2nd edition (Montréal 1990); "Syndicalism Sidetracked: Canada's One Big Union," in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, eds., *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective* (Aldershot 1990), 221-36; *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978); "Western Labour Radicalism and the One Big Union: Myths and Realities," in Susan Mann Trokimenkoff, ed., *The Twenties in Western Canada* (Ottawa 1972), 32-49; A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977); and Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968).

<sup>5</sup>The political nature of the debate is made clear in Bryan D. Palmer, "Listening to History Rather than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History," *Studies in Political Economy*, 20 (1986), 47-84; and Bercuson's assessment of the historiography in the second edition of his *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 196-205.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, there is no single Marxist interpretation, a "Party line" on 1919 that everyone uncritically follows. I have relied most heavily on the following: James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis, and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (1989), 9-37; Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian

revolt as an important moment by unearthing the experiences that prompted many working-class women to challenge bourgeois, and to a lesser extent proletarian, gender politics.<sup>7</sup> Despite the excellent Marxist and feminist scholarship on 1919, however, we still lack a thorough consideration of how patriarchal social relations shaped the events of the summer of radicalism. Chad Reimer, for instance, has examined the *Western Labor News* (WLN), the Winnipeg strike bulletin, as a "counterhegemonic challenge" to bourgeois values. He suggests that the WLN "constructed and engaged a language of working-class entitlement which was largely structured along the lines of a prevalent war discourse," thus producing "an historically distinct, working-class definition of citizenship and nationhood."<sup>8</sup> Upon reading the fine print, however, we discover that "the rights [the WLN]

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Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 11-44; Ian McKay, "The 1910s: The Stillborn Triumph of Progressive Reform," in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muike, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto 1993), esp. 223-8; James Naylor, *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914-1925* (Toronto 1991); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* Second Edition (Toronto 1992), 186-213; Larry Peterson, "Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg General Strike: The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and North America," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984), 115-31; and his "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900-1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981), 41-66; Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919," *Acadiensis*, 9, 2 (1980), 56-77; Allen Seager, "Workers, Class, and Industrial Conflict in New Westminster, 1900-1930," in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver 1988), 117-40; and Peter Warrian, "The Challenge of the One Big Union Movement in Canada, 1919-1921," MA thesis, University of Waterloo, 1971. Indispensable to understanding the complexity of events surrounding the Winnipeg General Strike is "Saving the World From Democracy": The Winnipeg General Sympathetic Strike, May-June 1919," in Norman Penner, ed., *Winnipeg 1919: The strikers' own history of the Winnipeg General Strike* Second Edition (Toronto 1975). The forthcoming *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925*, ed. Craig Heron, will add greatly to our understanding of the relationship between local and national movements, and I thank Dr. Heron for allowing me to see a copy of the manuscript.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Horodyski, "Women and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919," *Manitoba History*, 11 (1986), 28-37; Linda Kealey, "'No Special Protection — No Sympathy': Women's Activism in the Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919," in Deian R. Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (St. John's 1989), 134-59; Patricia Roome, "Amelia Turner and Calgary Labour Women, 1919-1935," in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto 1989), 89-117. For a fictional attempt to explore the articulation of gender and class politics during the Winnipeg General Strike, see Margaret Sweatman, *Fox* (Winnipeg 1991).

<sup>8</sup>Chad Reimer, "War, Nationhood and Working-Class Entitlement: The Counterhegemonic Challenge of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike," *Prairie Forum*, 18, 2 (1993), 220.

claimed under the economy of sacrifice applied almost exclusively to men."<sup>9</sup> Suddenly, this "counterhegemonic challenge" appears a little less heroic, its noble shine tarnished if we consider the events of 1919 in terms of gender politics and working-class men's power.<sup>10</sup>

This essay focuses on the group of Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) Marxists, well-known in the historiography of the labour revolt, who were heavily involved with the formation of the One Big Union (OBU) in 1919.<sup>11</sup> From the Western Labor Conference that March, where the idea of the One Big Union was first given an institutional form, through the wave of general and sympathetic strikes across Canada that summer, these radicals articulated a vision of the capitalist present and socialist future that was deeply gendered.<sup>12</sup> The practices of what I have called the OBU's radical manhood, their particular sense of what it meant to be a union man, shaped the organization's structure and politics as well as the emergent culture which fostered such widespread working-class radicalism. While the organization of working women was not seen by most delegates as an important issue at the WLC, the upsurge in women's militancy during the labour revolt prompted OBU supporters to encourage these women to join their male comrades in resistance to capitalism through new forms of unionism. At times, advocates of the One Big Union posed the questions of women's oppression and emancipation as crucial elements of the union's purpose; their infrequent ideological commitment, however, too often failed to translate into organizational gains for working-class women and the development of feminist practices within the union's ambit. The history of the One Big Union was thus not separate from gender politics, but rather the product of gendered historical processes which shaped socialist efforts to reconstitute working-class masculinities as radical manhood.<sup>13</sup> These political practices were part of

<sup>9</sup>Reimer, "War, Nationhood and Working-Class Entitlement," 230.

<sup>10</sup>Steven Maynard's early review article explores the problems with Canadian labour history in terms of minimizing the significance of gender politics. See "Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (1989), 159-69.

<sup>11</sup>For detailed histories of West Coast radicals who would later play important roles in the OBU, see David Akers, "Rebel or Revolutionary? Jack Kavanagh and the Early Years of the Communist Movement in Vancouver, 1920-1925," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (1992), 9-44; Peter Campbell, "'Making Socialists': Bill Pritchard, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Third International," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (1992), 45-63; and Gerald Friesen, "'Yours In Revolt': The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 139-57.

<sup>12</sup>I have discussed the sexual politics of the organization in "'A Modern Weapon For Modern Man': Marxist Masculinity and the Social Practices of the One Big Union, 1919-1924," MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1995, 75-79, 87-117.

<sup>13</sup>For analyses of the connections between union politics and masculinities, see Ava Baron, "An 'Other' Side of Gender Antagonism at Work: Men, Boys, and the Remasculinization of Printers' Work, 1830-1920," in Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History*

what Blye Frank has described as "a process of transforming various meanings and messages to produce a constellation of behaviour."<sup>14</sup> Alongside the OBU's explicit class agenda was the subtle, even unconscious, advocacy of a new masculine politics through which working men would gain control over their lives in the workplace, family, and community. More uneven and contradictory than stable and seamless, the practices of radical manhood espoused by OBU activists were rooted in the idea that working men should direct their collective energies to the creation of a new society rooted in the end of class exploitation. Radicals also countered the rising wave of popular nativism by stressing the commonality of class experience which, they believed, could unite working men regardless of race and ethnicity. In their challenge to the bourgeois order, however, OBU men created a program that, within the prevailing context of gender relations, meant that the One Big Union would bring about the transformation, but not the eradication, of men's power.

In their political activities, OBU men constructed what Karen Dubinsky, in another context, has called "a complex web of male chauvinism and genuine compassion, class analysis and silly sensationalism."<sup>15</sup> Drawing upon already existing practices espoused by, for example Canadian labourists and American Wobblies, as well as fashioning new ones, OBU men created images which distinguished radical manhood from both the class politics and the masculinities of male

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*of American Labor* (Ithaca 1991), 47-69; Mary H. Blewett, "Deference and Defiance: Labor Politics and the Meaning of Masculinity in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century New England Textile Industry," *Gender & History*, 5, 3 (1993), 398-415; Christina Burr, "Defending 'The Art Preservative': Class and Gender Relations in the Printing Trade Unions, 1850-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (1993), 47-73; David L. Collinson, *Managing the Shopfloor: Subjectivity, Masculinity and Workplace Culture* (Berlin 1992); Keith McClelland, "Some Thoughts on Masculinity and the 'Representative Artisan' in Britain, 1850-1880," *Gender & History*, 1, 2 (1989), 164-77; Colleen O'Neill, "Domesticity Deployed: Gender, Race, and the Construction of Class Struggle in the Bisbee Deportation," *Labor History*, 34, (1993), 256-73; Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990); Sonya O. Rose, "Respectable Men, Disorderly Others: The Language of Gender and the Lancashire Weavers' Strike of 1878 in Britain," *Gender & History*, 5, 3 (1993), 382-97; Francis Shor, "Masculine Power and Virile Syndicalism: A Gendered Analysis of the IWW in Australia," *Labour History*, 63 (1992), 83-99; and Michael Yarrow, "The Gender-Specific Class Consciousness of Appalachian Coal Miners: Structure and Change," in Scott G. McNall, Rhonda F. Levine and Rick Fantasia, eds., *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (Boulder 1991), 285-310.

<sup>14</sup>Blye Frank, "Hegemonic Heterosexual Masculinity," *Studies in Political Economy*, 24 (1987), 166. See also the thought-provoking analysis of the dynamics of social practice in R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford 1987), esp. 66-142.

<sup>15</sup>Karen Dubinsky, "'The Modern Chivalry': Women and the Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1891," MA thesis, Carleton University, 1985, 172.

bosses and scabs.<sup>16</sup> In posters, poems, and articles, gendered differences between groups of men were central to understanding class domination, and the links between class and gender politics were made visible in clues ranging from one man's choice of metaphor to another's advocacy of particular strike tactics or union structure. By paying attention to why OBU men created particular images and how their authors wanted them to be read, we can analyze the various ways that these men put questions of gender power on the agenda, both implicitly and on occasion in a more overt manner. Although socialists sought to bring all Canadian workers into the One Big Union, which welcomed wage labourers "irrespective of nationality, sex, or craft," it is clear that patriarchal social relations shaped the experiences of those working men and women involved with the union.<sup>17</sup>

The formation of the One Big Union and the political practices of radical manhood had their immediate roots in the transformation of class consciousness, both bourgeois and proletarian, during Canada's participation in the Great War. C.H. Cahan, a Montreal lawyer commissioned by Prime Minister Borden to survey the extent of popular discontent in the summer of 1918, reported that "the unrest now prevalent in Canada is due to the weakening of the moral purpose of the people to prosecute the war to a successful end; [and] to the fact that people are becoming daily more conscious of the bloody sacrifices and irritating burdens entailed by carrying on the war."<sup>18</sup> On a more dramatic note, future Prime Minister Mackenzie King saw Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the ideal "parable, all too realistic of the War that has destroyed so large a portion of mankind."<sup>19</sup> The tensions caused by Canada's involvement in the Allied war effort were intensified by the anti-war propaganda of numerous pacifist and socialist groups. Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) member Bill Pritchard conjured visions of the alienating effects of violence upon men who "have been maimed, gassed, blinded and arrive back from the battle line greatly impaired physically, even in those cases where the mental processes display signs of improvement."<sup>20</sup> Captain Fred G. Thompson, a member of the Winnipeg Grenadiers, recalled that increasing labour unrest placed returning sol-

<sup>16</sup>On the gender politics of the labourists, see Naylor, *New Democracy*; and Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto 1995). For an international comparison, see Kevin White, *The First Sexual Revolution: The Emergence of Male Heterosexuality in Modern America* (New York 1993).

<sup>17</sup>University of British Columbia, Special Collections (UBCSC), Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 33, File 6, Constitution and Laws of the One Big Union, n.d. (1919-1920), 1.

<sup>18</sup>C.H. Cahan, quoted in Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour*, 164-5.

<sup>19</sup>W.L. Mackenzie King, *Industry and Humanity: A Study in the Principles Underlying Industrial Reconstruction* (Toronto 1918), 2. Interestingly, King inverted traditional class-based interpretations which viewed the monster narrative as symbolic of the destructive capabilities of a radical proletariat. See Johanna M. Smith, ed., *Frankenstein* (Boston 1992).

<sup>20</sup>*Western Clarion*, June 1918.

diers in "a state of confusion and frustration."<sup>21</sup> With the patriotic links between active service and manhood severed at the end of the war, many healthy veterans found it difficult to re-establish their sense of manliness through wage labour due to the high level of unemployment, a crisis which had intensely personal dimensions.<sup>22</sup> Immigrant workers who faced the brunt of Canadian nativism found themselves out of work, replaced by native-born veterans who claimed wage work as their entitlement.<sup>23</sup> As well, the skilled craftsman returned to discover that "his skill, the foundations of his organization, his identity as a working man and his economic security were all placed [in] jeopardy" by changes to production stemming from Taylorism and other forms of scientific management.<sup>24</sup> The effects of anti-war activism, unemployment, and the reorganization of work processes affected different groups of workers in contradictory ways. Nonetheless, these processes coalesced around a critique of the state's post-war reconstruction program, an emergent consciousness which strengthened the OBU's appeal leading up to the Western Labor Conference.<sup>25</sup>

For OBU men, workers had nothing to gain from the government's plans for reconstruction because they were rooted in the continued exploitation of labour under the regime of "imperialistic finance."<sup>26</sup> Joe Knight, an SPCCer in Edmonton, encapsulated this critique by suggesting that workers were forced to sell their labour only to build a world divided by class: "Reconstruct a system of wage-slavery! Perpetuate your class bondage! Make the world safe for mansions and shacks, for private parks and slums, for millionaires and paupers, for \$10,000 poodles and underfed children."<sup>27</sup> Instead of the state-sponsored program of capitalist reconstruction, Canadian radicals took their inspiration from the formation of a workers' government in Russia as well as mass upheavals like the Seattle General Strike of approximately 100,000 workers in February 1919.<sup>28</sup> "We are undertaking the most

<sup>21</sup>PAM, MG 14 C 46, Frederick Geo. Thompson Papers, "OBU General Sympathetic Strike, 1919," 6 June 1969, 4.

<sup>22</sup>On patriotism and British masculinity, see Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*, 134-6. Margaret Hobbs has indicated the connections for some unemployed men between the loss of work, the erosion of male working-class identity and the disruption of marital sexual relations. Hobbs, "Rethinking Antifeminism in the 1930s: Gender Crisis or Workplace Justice? A Response to Alice Kessler-Harris," *Gender & History*, 5:1 (1993), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup>Donald Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners: European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979).

<sup>24</sup>Warrian, "The Challenge of the One Big Union Movement," 29.

<sup>25</sup>For one such critique of reconstruction, see the account of the mass meeting in the Majestic Theatre on 10 January 1919 in "Saving the World From Democracy," 16-21.

<sup>26</sup>UBCSC, Vertical File #213, Appendix 5, Constitution and Laws of the One Big Union (As Amended at the Port Arthur Convention, September 1920), 1.

<sup>27</sup>Joe Knight, quoted in McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 156.

<sup>28</sup>Theresa Catherine Baxter, "Selected Aspects of Canadian Public Opinion on the Russian Revolution and on Its Impact in Canada," MA thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1972.



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tremendous move ever made by LABOR in this country," proclaimed the Seattle General Strike Committee, "a move which will lead — NO ONE KNOWS WHERE!" Despite the accusation that general strikes were a conspiracy of "violence" involving the "forcible taking over of property, [and] the killing or maiming of men," the Strike Committee affirmed a positive meaning of "revolution":

if by revolution is meant that a Great Change is coming over the face of the world, which will transform our method of carrying on industry, and will go deep into the source of our very lives, to bring joy and freedom in place of heaviness and fear — then we do believe in such a Great Change and that our General Strike was one very definite step towards it.<sup>29</sup>

Like their counterparts in Seattle, OBU advocates were captivated by what they envisioned as the collective potential of workers' power once freed from the restraints of capitalist commodity production. In this spirit, they opted at the Western Labor Conference in March to defer the creation of the OBU's organizational structure. In a brief detailing the schedule for the OBU referendum, the WLC Policy Committee reported that "no definite plan of organization can be submitted until after the referendum has been taken."<sup>30</sup> After the convention, Knight wrote to Victor Midgley, Secretary of the committee administering the referendum, to advocate that future action "can be determined on when the returns reveal the temper of the rank and file."<sup>31</sup> Less than a month later, the editors of the *Western Labor News* printed a diagram they received from Bob Russell, who thought Lenin used it "in planning his Soviet organization."<sup>32</sup> From Vancouver, Midgley wrote to Russell, informing him that "I do not care much about it":

We have discussed several times here the idea of drawing up some concise plan of organization and also the idea of drawing a diagram of the proposed plan of organization, but we always come back to the idea that this new form of organization is not something that is going to be wrapped around the labor movement like a new suit of clothes. It will be necessarily a matter of growth, and you can no more draw a plan of the growth of it than you could draw a plan of the growth of a tree. Conditions and circumstances will determine what form the organization will ultimately take.<sup>33</sup>

Socialist organizers were fascinated with the idea that workers themselves, as opposed to leaders, would radicalize the form of the labour movement in creating

<sup>29</sup>History Committee, Seattle General Strike Committee, "The Official History of the Seattle General Strike," in *Root and Branch: The Rise of the Workers' Movements* (Greenwich 1975), 220, 222-3.

<sup>30</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 12.

<sup>31</sup>PAM, MG 10 A3, One Big Union Correspondence, J.R. Knight to V.R. Midgley, 24 March 1919.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, R.B. Russell to V.R. Midgley, 17 April 1919.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, V.R. Midgley to R.B. Russell, 21 April 1919.

the OBU. As the first issue of the *OBU Bulletin* following the labour revolt asserted, "If the mass make not the movement, then indeed our efforts were useless and our organization an abortion."<sup>34</sup> Initial advocates of the OBU encouraged new forms of class organization, in particular a mixture of geographical and industrial unionism, to eradicate the hierarchical sectionalism of craft unionism. The OBU would not be just a "new suit of clothes," to use Midgley's metaphor, because it would transform the "body" of the labour movement. But it is also clear that the OBU's "body" was that of a man. Writers for the *Bulletin* frequently represented the union as having a male persona, such as with the suggestion that "The One Big Union is the Man on the Job — or it is nothing at all."<sup>35</sup> Yet another advocate firmly suggested that "the only labor movement with any virility or militancy in it is the OBU."<sup>36</sup> More than just a manly representation, however, a Marxist form of patriarchal politics was woven into the very fabric of the organization from its inception.

The radical tone of the Western Labor Conference was established at the outset, as delegates unanimously endorsed motions advocating production for use, not for profit and industrial unionism. Other resolutions heaped criticism upon conservative union leaders who "lobb[ie]d parliament for palliatives which do not palliate." A motion recommending the "severance of their affiliation with their international organizations" in order "to form an industrial organization for all workers" was also approved, as was a resolution unanimously endorsing the concept of the "Proletarian Dictatorship."<sup>37</sup> While proving a contentious issue, socialists also managed to win support for their attempt to counter the growing current of ruling-class nativism in a motion asserting that they "recognize no alien but the capitalist." While this position struck fear in the imperial heart of Canada's Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie, it was, radicals believed, common sense to those who saw power in terms of relations of production: "To us workmen no worker can be an alien so far as we are concerned. Our alien, insofar as we are concerned, is the master class."<sup>38</sup> Beyond the wide-ranging critique of imperial capitalist power, the motions put forth by socialists were designed to situate the OBU within a framework of Marxist class politics, as opposed to the reformism of TLC leaders, who cooperated with the Canadian government during the war effort and after with the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations in the spring and summer of 1919. That the OBU was to be a devoutly radical organization was perhaps clearest in the debate surrounding the weighting of referendum balloting. J. Nixon, a delegate from the Vancouver Shipwrights' Union, proposed that the vote be conducted in accordance with the policy already established by the British Columbia Federation of Labor (BCFL). BCFL official Jack Kavanagh explained that "to make a change in the structure of

<sup>34</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 12 August 1919.

<sup>35</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 27 September 1919.

<sup>36</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 27 December 1919.

<sup>37</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 10-1, 30-1.

<sup>38</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 31-2.

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the [BCFL] ... require[s] a majority vote of the organization comprising the vital trades." When asked what constituted a vital trade, Kavanagh replied:

Vital trades are those, which ceasing work compel others to cease by virtue of the fact they cannot carry on without them. In the city of Vancouver, the longshoremen, metal trades, that is the transport workers and metal trades, demoralize the city of Vancouver. Those trades which are the keystones of the industries in any particular centre, that is what is meant by vital trades.<sup>39</sup>

If passed, this resolution meant that the vote of a number of craft unions who were non- and even anti-radical in orientation would have little effect on the overall referendum results. The creation of the OBU was thus conditional on the majority vote of industrial unions with a history of radicalism, unions which would then be able to control the direction of the labour movement in Western Canada. In the ensuing discussion, Kavanagh admitted as much:

Let me point out if you get the majority of the transport workers, the miners, and the metal trades, you could force the others into line. Sure it is force, nothing but force in existence, and unless you are aggressive no other element counts. The boss doesn't take notice of the man that doesn't scrap; he takes notice of those who get up in the meeting and do the business. That is the fellow he will listen to and will call.<sup>40</sup>

Kavanagh and other socialists thus proposed to organize the OBU around specific groups of industrial workers, the "vital trades," whom they believed could shut down important centres of production in the event of a general strike. This strategy was in large part determined by the structuring of the social division of labour by capital, the state, and craft union exclusionism, in which the radical faction of the VTLC and BCFL had played little part. Upon taking majority control of the VTLC, Marxists like Kavanagh, Midgley and Ernest Winch had deliberately established a policy of racial inclusion which broke substantively with the VTLC's sorry history of active racism and nativism.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the socialist traditions of immigrant workers were central to the power of radical unions in many "vital" trades.<sup>42</sup>

There was, however, also a masculinist element to Kavanagh's position, as socialists at the WLC linked radicalism to a particular understanding of gender politics that placed women's activism and specific interests in a secondary position. In terms of membership, the vital trades, as opposed to the garment workers and white-collar clerical staff, were notable for their almost complete exclusion of

<sup>39</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 71-2.

<sup>40</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 75.

<sup>41</sup>On the early history of VTLC racism, see Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto 1995), 125-35, 169-70.

<sup>42</sup>Avery, *Dangerous Foreigners*.

women.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, there was little talk of domestic workers, who in Vancouver had conducted a four month strike through the fall of 1918, as a possible "force in existence."<sup>44</sup> As a result, power within the OBU was concentrated in the hands of men and wielded through the strength of their industrial unions. That following this plan, few women would have an organizational presence in the OBU did not appear to the men at the WLC as a problem that needed to be addressed. Nor would it be addressed, as the social power of the men who played important roles due to their control of the agenda and their voting strength were able to "impose a definition of the situation, to set the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed."<sup>45</sup> The Winnipeg Women's Labor League put forth a motion "that this conference devise ways and means of appointing a woman organizer for Western Canada, to organize the women workers and thereby educating them along class conscious lines for the future welfare of the workers of Canada as a whole." The response of the Policy Committee, that "industrial policy is not a sex question but a class question," was applauded and adopted by the convention.<sup>46</sup> And while OBU men would welcome the organization of working women, especially if done by socialists like Armstrong and Sarah Knight, their enthusiasm in rejecting this resolution indicates their adherence to a strand of Marxism which subordinated feminist politics to a supposedly gender-free conception of class politics. In practice, the OBU's understanding of radical manhood was normalized, transforming gender politics into the narrowly-conceived "woman question." In another sense, the response of the Policy Committee was a falsehood, as OBU advocates were generally unable to discuss socialism without simultaneously talking about gender. The focus on industrial workers not only excluded most working-class women from any involvement in displays of "force" by the "vital trades," but also relied on linkages between aggressive socialist politics and a specific sense of male gender identity. In Kavanagh's description of vital trades, for instance, a dichotomy of masculinities was mapped onto divisions of union politics.<sup>47</sup> The reformist

<sup>43</sup>For the sexual division of labour at this time, see Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 131-64. For the history of women's unionization in Western Canada before the creation of the One Big Union, see Marie Campbell, "Sexism in British Columbia Trade Unions, 1900-1920," in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess, eds., *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in BC* (Victoria 1980), 167-86; and Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver, 1900-1915," *BC Studies*, 41 (1979), 36-55.

<sup>44</sup>See the VTLC Executive Board Minutes from 5 September 1918 to 6 January 1919, in UBCSC, Vancouver and District Labour Council Papers, Series A.

<sup>45</sup>R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power*, 107.

<sup>46</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 45.

<sup>47</sup>See Francis Shor, "Masculine Power and Virile Syndicalism" for an analysis of how conflicts between Wobblies and conservative craft union leaders were similarly articulated in terms of gender identities.

element were cast as timid men, unable to make themselves heard and unwilling to “scrap” for working-class liberation. In contrast was the aggressive masculinity of radical men, who, through collective action, were able to force both bosses and conservative unionists to follow their agenda in “doing the business.” In this representation, the power of radical men emanated as much from their understanding of the connections between manliness and strength as from their socialism. And while this vision of working men’s collective strength had been shaped by the gendered division of labour under monopoly capitalism, the masculinized ideological overtones of socialists at the WLC obscured the work of women, in Women’s Labor Leagues and informal community organizations, that was essential to the labour movement.<sup>48</sup>

The general apathy of OBU men towards the organization of working women is brought into sharp relief when viewed in relation to their anti-imperialist politics and emphasis on racial inclusion. Gillian Creese argues that BC socialists in the union movement placed more importance on organizing Asians than they did on working-class women’s concerns during the 1919 labour revolt.<sup>49</sup> To be a union man, an OBU man, was to reject the racism of the bosses and politicians in favour of working-class unity, a stance which placed the OBU in opposition not only to bourgeois nativism but also to the racially-exclusionary policies of international craft union leaders. One OBU supporter in Vancouver lampooned the entanglement of bourgeois racial and class politics in the “Battle Song of the Citizens’ League”:

And if sad labor troubles rise,  
New slogans we must exercise;  
To clearly be in character,  
We say it is the foreigner.  
To beat a dog take any stick  
And BLAME IT ON THE BOLSHEVIK!<sup>50</sup>

OBUers heralded the fact that the union did not “make either age, sex, color, race, or creed a barrier to membership,” a progressive position that was seen as coherent with the larger aims of socialism.<sup>51</sup> Following the labour revolt, one writer proudly

<sup>48</sup>This point is also made by Janice Newton in *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900-1918* (Kingston 1995).

<sup>49</sup>Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental Problem,’” in Laurel Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth, eds., *Canadian Working Class History: Selected Readings* (Toronto 1992), 311-32; and “The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work, and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement Before World War Two,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 13 (1988), 121-42. The OBU’s racial politics were similar to that of the Wobblies in BC. See Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990).

<sup>50</sup>*Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 20 June 1919.

<sup>51</sup>UBCSC, Vertical File #213, OBU General Executive Board, Bulletin One.

suggested that, "for the workers of Winnipeg, the barriers of color, race and creed had been torn down and are now beyond hope of being rebuilt."<sup>52</sup> This assessment was overly optimistic, for it neglected how the bourgeois reaction to working-class radicalism shattered the institutional basis required for a widespread transformation of white workers' racial consciousness. Consequently, the OBU's racial radicalism intermingled with ideas of how to preserve the cultural traditions of white workers in both the labour market and the labour movement. Alongside their political critique of whiteness, many OBU men continued to view their world in terms of hierarchical racial categories. During the WLC, delegates found themselves in a debate about how "educated" Chinese workers were concerning the true nature of the class struggle. H. Allman, representing the *BC Loggers Union*, opposed excluding Asians from a tactical standpoint, affirming the need for working-class unity and the political supremacy of the class struggle:

You say I don't want the oriental into the unions, his eyes are slant; you don't want the Hindu, why not? [A]s they are not to blame for the place where they were born; I can't help I was born across the water. You people have got to help them. The master class wants them in order to whip the white slave, beat him down to a lower standard, and therefore you must take in the oriental if you are to do away with the club the master has over you and you are going to uphold your own standard of living. (applause)<sup>53</sup>

Allman's statement contained several seemingly contradictory appeals which indicate the blending of whiteness and socialism. While rejecting the irrational aspects of prejudice ("his eyes are slant"), Allman normalized racial divisions by suppressing differences within each racial category. Though he criticized whites who let racial supremacy interfere with the union, Allman also rationalized inclusive unionism as a way to preserve white standards of living. Allman's speech, which was no doubt seen as progressive given the applause, was shaded by the spirit of paternalism, encouraging whites to help Asians because, to paraphrase Marx, they were unable to help themselves. Indeed, white union activists were not above using cultural stereotypes to amuse white workers. The *Vancouver Strike Bulletin* reported that "a teamster was making a delivery to a Chinaman on Georgia Street yesterday — the Asiatic, however, would not receive it. He waved his hand and said, 'No — stlike [sic] on — Scab.'"<sup>54</sup>

However partial, the socialist critique of racism and whiteness in 1919 was a radical contrast to the exclusionary nativism of international union leaders. In Vancouver, for instance, OBU organizers such as Bill Pritchard and Jack Kavanagh attended meetings at the "Hindoo" Temple to forge links with local working-class leaders. The OBU opened a Chinese office, run by Wong Chee Wai, on Pender Street

<sup>52</sup>"Saving the World From Democracy," 78.

<sup>53</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 54.

<sup>54</sup>*Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 7 June 1919.

East, the heart of "Chinatown," and made specific appeals to workers of Japanese and Italian origin.<sup>55</sup> The One Big Union also made headway organizing Native Canadians. According to one RCMP report, approximately 250 Natives, most of them cannery, lumber and sawmill workers, had joined an OBU local in Prince George, BC.<sup>56</sup> Nor were these attempts to create working-class unity solely the initiative of white activists, as Asian groups such as the Chinese Nationalist League in New Westminster passed a resolution in support of the Lumber Workers Industrial Union (LWIU), which was affiliated with the OBU.<sup>57</sup> These ventures stemmed from the socialist commitment to eradicate barriers between workers. Speaking at a mass meeting in Vancouver, Bill Pritchard proclaimed that prejudice against the "Asiatic" was created by the ruling class, "the very men who brought them here in the first place." In this respect, his argument adhered to the classical Marxist position which saw racial divisions as stemming from those who benefited from capitalist relations of production. However, he also laid blame upon white workers who invested emotionally in their racial identity at the expense of working-class unity. Pritchard made it clear that he had little but scorn for such men, caustically attacking "the son of a Polish Jew from Warsaw and an Italian mother from Naples, [who] when he lands in Canada becomes immediately an Anglo-Saxon, and of course joins the c[h]orus with the rest of his kind against the Orientals."<sup>58</sup> Pritchard thus touched upon the socially-constructed nature of racial identity while emphasizing its negative impact upon class politics. Similarly, according to an RCMP agent, Frank Woodward attacked the racial prejudices of white working men, proclaiming that "'The British workers ... were the most despicable of men.' They *created* racial prejudices in Drumheller the same as they did at Bienfait, and they were not worthy to be called *union men*."<sup>59</sup> With appeals such as this one, OBU activists, to borrow from David Roediger, "moved from race to class by inserting gender as a middle term."<sup>60</sup> OBU men sought to overcome racial

<sup>55</sup>National Archives of Canada (NAC), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Files, 88-A-86, Personal File — Jack Kavanagh, Report Re: OBU Generally — Statistics, 17 May 1920. Many thanks to Dr. Gregory Kealey for allowing me access to his RCMP and CSIS files on the One Big Union.

<sup>56</sup>NAC, Canadian Security and Intelligence Services (CSIS) Papers, HV 28, One Big Union File, Report Re: OBU — Native Indians enrolled in, 16 November 1920.

<sup>57</sup>Seager, "Workers, Class and Industrial Conflict in New Westminster, 1900-1930."

<sup>58</sup>NAC, RCMP Papers, Personal File — Robert Boyd Russell, 88-A-73, Report Re: Mass Meeting held in Pender Hall for the purpose of discussing the ASIATIC QUESTION, 10 September 1921.

<sup>59</sup>Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins: The Early Years, 1919-1929* (St. John's 1994), 264. My emphasis. Because the terms "created" and "union men" were not direct quotes, but the phrases of the undercover agent, it is possible that Woodward did not suggest that racism was created by British workers.

<sup>60</sup>David R. Roediger, "Gaining a Hearing for Black-White Unity: Covington Hall and the Complexities of Race, Gender and Class," in *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York 1994), 158.

differences by grounding the OBU in the commonality of radical manhood, a move which reaffirmed the power of union men and the subordination of working women within the movement.

While consciously pursuing a strategy of racial inclusion, signing up hundreds of immigrant workers, especially those in the "vital trades" such as logging, who had been previously ignored if not shunned by conservative union leaders, the men at the WLC were unwilling to chart a similar course in relation to working women by, as the Winnipeg Women's Labor League had wanted, appointing a female organizer. The social consequences of their apathetic stance towards working women was a topic of discussion at the WLC, as the unwavering Helen Armstrong rose on the final day,

to place before the men-folks here how the women have had to suffer because organizers up and down the country for the last thirty years holding mass meetings and public meetings never invited the women workers ... Now these women, the capitalist provides the dope factories and the minister hands it out. The YWCA they don't forget the women, they educate them so well that when the men vote why their wives went and voted against their own best interests.

She appealed to organizers to make an effort to educate women to "take their place in the class struggle" and outlined the activities of the Women's Labor League to that end such as picketing, raising funds and holding economics classes. At bottom, she emphasized that union men were partially to blame for the absence of women, which hampered the movement as a whole. Whether or not Armstrong's concerns were heard is another matter, as she was greeted with laughter when she suggested that "it is your own fault you have been crucified — I have no sympathy for you." She persisted, attempting to impress upon male activists that they had to organize women "unless you want to keep getting it in the neck the way you do." As Armstrong concluded, she was told by the chairman, in a most patronizing tone, that "it would be better to put it in a concise manner and bring it up after we dispose of the remaining resolutions. That will give you some time to think it over and we can continue the regular business at this time."<sup>61</sup> Once again, the "sex question" was suppressed so that union men could get back to "regular business." This gender conflict hardly served as a propitious beginning for the One Big Union. The plans established at the WLC indicate not only the growing power of socialism in 1919, but also the importance of gender, and specifically practices understood as masculine, for the political vision of the OBU. Much of the OBU's appeal lay in the connections advocates made, through the practices of radical manhood, between an active, positive sense of male gender identity and their particular brand of socialist politics. The general omission of women from positions of union power, and the denigration of women's work to the movement as a whole, both stances

<sup>61</sup>*The Origin of the One Big Union*, 61.



challenged by activists like Helen Armstrong, helped to maintain these links and thus the power, however limited, of male unionists. With this inheritance, the OBU was always something more than just an industrial organization. It was also an attempt by groups of working-class men to organize economically and politically around their understanding of gender relations. When examining the groups of workers at the heart of the labour revolt and the culture in which their hopes flourished, the mobilizing power of masculinities are conveyed with striking clarity.

James Conley provides the most comprehensive exploration of the social basis of the 1919 uprising, concluding that frontier labourers and craftsmen in crisis were the most powerful groups to articulate a radical agenda.<sup>62</sup> Frontier labourers, such as loggers, miners, and longshoremen, were primarily unskilled men, many of them migrants, who worked at dangerous jobs for long hours with generally poor living conditions. Their radicalism was shared by craftsmen in crisis, those in the metal and building trades for instance, for whom "a whole culture was at stake."<sup>63</sup> While Conley effectively indicates the social position of the workers most active in the revolt, he fails to consider the association of class subcultures with particular masculinities and gender hierarchies.<sup>64</sup> In their attempt to solidify the socialist politics of working-class men, OBU advocates constructed a narrative that enabled men to read their social situation through oppositional concepts of manliness. The political culture of the union was a blend of both residual and emergent elements in which a traditional comment about the nobility of skilled labour, one aspect of the 19th-century producer ideology that found its articulation through Canadian labourists, could be followed by Marxist conceptions of industrial unionism, racial inclusion, and the collective unity of all wage workers, skilled and unskilled, that had much in common with the Wobbly tradition. With the organization of frontier labourers and crafts in crisis, two overlapping yet distinctive ways of being a man were transformed through collective action into a desire for revolution and the One Big Union.<sup>65</sup>

While miners and longshoremen in the West were initially strong supporters of the OBU, the largest group of frontier labourers to sign up were those commonly

<sup>62</sup>Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis, and the Western Labour Revolt," 12-16.

<sup>63</sup>Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis, and the Western Labour Revolt," 22.

<sup>64</sup>This point has been explored by many historians. See especially Rose, "Respectable Men, Disorderly Others"; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana 1982); Shor, "Masculine Power and Virile Syndicalism"; and Yarrow, "The Gender-Specific Class Consciousness of Appalachian Coal Miners."

<sup>65</sup>For an excellent analysis of the gulf between skilled and unskilled workers, see Andrea Graziosi, "Common Laborers, Unskilled Workers, 1880-1915," *Labor History*, 4 (1981), 512-544.

known as "timberbeasts," the loggers.<sup>66</sup> Initially the work of unionists Helena Gutteridge and Birt Showler, the BC Loggers Union, renamed the Lumber Workers Industrial Union (LWIU), quickly came to be dominated by Ernest Winch, an ardent supporter of the OBU.<sup>67</sup> Writers for the LWIU newspaper, the *Camp Worker*, published reports of camp conditions, warning working men to stay away from sites where they were treated not as men but "dogs." Following in the footsteps of the Wobblies in matters of religion, OBU men also ridiculed the travelling preacher who "runs around like his lord and master in a female night shirt." Largely the work of editor Bill Pritchard, the pages of the *Camp Worker* articulated a symbolic economy of masculinities which differentiated loyal union men from "those unspeakable pimps that, feeding upon the working class movement, at all times act and speak on behalf of their masters." The working man who scabbed was a "lap-dog" who cast "literary bouquets into the bosom of his loving master." Pritchard offered a hierarchy of social problems in which class exploitation was the ultimate symbol of capitalist power relations, while issues he associated with women — prostitution and fashion-oriented consumerism — were trivial, even whimsical, in comparison:

We can feel sympathy for the poor femal[e] driven by the effects of the capitalist system to a life of shame upon the streets, and sometimes a pitying and amusing interest might be displayed in her who, bound to fashion's ridiculous whims, would impede the natural movement of her pedo-extremities by binding her nether limbs around with the horrible skirt of hobble design. But there can be nothing but contumely and disgust for the man mighty in his so-called wisdom, who sells himself so completely to capital, as to put hobbles on his brains and prostitute his mentality.<sup>68</sup>

In contrast to the servile manhood of scabs stood representations of radical male loggers, the "timberbeasts," as bearers of Marxist masculinity. Loggers were told to join the LWIU in order to "Prove your manhood! Think for yourself. Act for yourself!"<sup>69</sup>

With its emphasis on the physicality of work and features such as a weekly death count in the forests, the propaganda of the *Camp Worker* appealed to a particular sense of working-class masculinity rooted in life as a frontier labourer. The subjectivity of craftsmen was quite different in many respects, infused with traditional elements of skill, job control, and respectability which clashed with the

<sup>66</sup>For a fascinating study of the culturally-specific nature of male gender identities among loggers, see Ella Johansson, "Beautiful Men, Fine Women and Good Workpeople: Gender and Skill in Northern Sweden, 1850-1950," *Gender & History*, 1, 2 (1989), 200-12.

<sup>67</sup>According to his biographer, Dorothy Steeves, Winch built the newly re-named Lumber Workers Industrial Union (LWIU) into "a virile organization in the logging camps." Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest E. Winch and His Times* (Vancouver 1960), 46.

<sup>68</sup>*Camp Worker*, 2 June 1919. For more on socialist ideas about consumerism and prostitution, see Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left*, 123-4.

<sup>69</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 15 November 1919.

transient and often brutal aspects of unskilled work. Craftsmen rooted their sense of manhood in the connections they made among their control of the workplace, their position as family breadwinner, and their collective morality of self-discipline, including sexuality. The practices of artisanal independence were founded on the economic dependence and familial subordination of women as well as the maintenance of craft exclusivity through the system of apprenticeship.<sup>70</sup> As a result, for many, entry into the craft fraternity was seen as marking the transition from youth to manhood. OBU supporter Alex Shepherd spoke glowingly of his entry into craft work, recalling that "the machinists in this plant were a wonderful bunch. They helped me in everything I had to do, showed me how to set up my work, and watched over me like a father would." These paternal figures also introduced Shepherd to politics, teaching him phrases to sing to the rhythm of machines such as "You're being robbed — you fool."<sup>71</sup> This feeling was echoed by fellow machinist Bob Russell, who connected his becoming a socialist with the successful completion of an apprenticeship and entrance into the union.<sup>72</sup> While craftsmen-in-crisis and unskilled workers held varying conceptions of manliness rooted in their different life experiences, they shared the almost complete absence of women in terms of political power within their unions. As increasing numbers of women became involved in wartime production, many skilled occupations became the site of conflict over the sexual division of labour.<sup>73</sup> Skilled men clung to their power, which lay in their accumulation of craft knowledge and their ability to represent

<sup>70</sup>Baron, "An 'Other' Side of Gender Antagonism at Work"; McClelland, "Some Thoughts on Masculinity and the 'Representative Artisan'," 164-77; Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*; Rose, "Respectable Men, Disorderly Others"; Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*.

<sup>71</sup>PAM, MG 14 C86, Alex Shepherd Papers, Alex Shepherd to David Bercuson, 24 February 1969. See also Steven Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood in You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926," *Acadiensis*, 23, 2 (1994), 24-5.

<sup>72</sup>PAM, MG 10 F2, Manitoba Historical Society, Orlikow Tapes, Interview with R.B Russell, C813-816, Transcript of Tape 4, 1.

<sup>73</sup>For a good discussion of gender conflicts in skilled trades, see Shirley Tillotson, "We may all soon be 'first-class men': Gender and skill in Canada's early twentieth century urban telegraphy industry," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (1991), 97-125. As numerous historians have indicated, the gendered classification of tasks stemmed from the interactions of male workers and bosses as well as working women. See Patricia Cooper, "The Faces of Gender: Sex Segregation and Work Relations at Philco, 1928-1938," in Baron, ed., *Work Engendered*, 320-50; and Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners*. See also the controversy over socialist symbolism in *History Workshop*: Eric Hobsbawm, "Man and Woman in Socialist Iconography," *History Workshop*, 6 (1978), 121-38; Tim Mason, "The Domestication of Female Socialist Icons: a note in reply to Eric Hobsbawm," *History Workshop*, 7 (1979), 170-5; Sally Alexander, Anna Davin and Eve Hostettler, "Labouring Women: a reply to Eric Hobsbawm," *History Workshop*, 8 (1979), 174-82; and Ruth Richardson, "'In the Posture of a Whore'? a reply to Eric Hobsbawm," *History Workshop*, 14 (1982), 133-7.

their interests as the interests of the wider labour movement. Indeed, socialists such as Bob Russell took part in the gender struggle of craftsmen to prevent the entry of women into the metal trades during the war. As editor of the *Machinists Bulletin*, Russell informed his membership, "we can assure you if they try the introduction of women taking the place of men in the shops of Winnipeg, we will fight."<sup>74</sup> While skilled men associated the feminization of craft work with deskilling and lower rates of pay, their resistance was also deeply gendered, relying on a particular sense of "masculinity as a focal point for individual identity and collective loyalty."<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the transformation of skilled work through Taylorism and other managerial strategies struck at the heart of the craftsman's sense of self in multiple ways.

The One Big Union drew upon the radical heritage of craftsmen and reworked this history of resistance in light of "the industrial changes that have taken place," launching a critique of scientific management and other new forms of bourgeois discipline.<sup>76</sup> OBU advocates believed that the connections made between control of the work process, respectability and skilled unionism could no longer be forged because of the transformation of the work process under monopoly capitalism:

In the days gone by, when the skilled craftsmen produced an article by himself largely by hand work, the craft union organization correctly reflected his interests on the job, but with the introduction of modern methods of production, the skilled worker has been reduced to a large extent to the position of a machine tender or specialist, who contributes but one or two operations in the production of the finished article.<sup>77</sup>

This contradiction between the practices of skilled manhood and "modern methods of production" was to be resolved, they believed, through the creation of an inclusive, revolutionary union which would bring about the end of class exploitation. In this light, the OBU was represented as the institutional expression of male maturity: "Unionism was in the evolution of Society and grew from babyhood to youth and is now approaching manhood. Naturally, in the baby condition it did not realize the fundamental nature of the struggle; it fought blindly and wildly."<sup>78</sup> 1919

<sup>74</sup>Quoted in Mary Jordan, *Survival: Labour's Trials and Tribulations in Canada* (Toronto 1975), 26.

<sup>75</sup>Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism* (Princeton 1989), 259. For an attempt to apply Clawson's ideas to Canadian craftsmen, see Darryl Newbury, "'No Atheist, Eunuch or Woman': Male Associational Culture and Working-Class Identity in Industrializing Ontario, 1840-1880," MA thesis, Queen's University, 1992.

<sup>76</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 8 November 1919.

<sup>77</sup>UBCSC, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 33, File 6, "The One Big Union: A Historical Sketch," 3.

<sup>78</sup>PAM, RG 4 A1, Manitoba Court Records — King's Bench, "The King vs. William Ivens et al." Trial Evidence, Box 7, Central Executive Committee of the OBU, Bulletin #4. See also Elizabeth Fauc, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill 1991), 75.

was the period of the new socialist man; "the man who knows his Marx and is in possession of the technology of industry as well ... is the man of the immediate future," opined Tom Cassidy.<sup>79</sup> Another writer encouraged workers to reject the "moss-covered and age-old institution" of craft unionism by appealing to modernist feelings of unity and progress: "Let us cut those strings which lead us apart and strengthen those cords which bind us together. A new day arises. New conditions produce new needs. New needs demand new ideas, new forms of organization are hammered out. In union there is strength."<sup>80</sup> Thus, while the masculinity of frontier labourers and craftsmen in crisis differed in various aspects, OBU organizers appealed to shared ways of being a working man and attempted to bridge the racial and sectional disparities through new forms of class organization.

Consider Brenton Braily's poem, "The Workers," which was published in several OBU newspapers. While ostensibly about "the workers," men and women, it is clear that working men were the only subject of the poem:

I have broken my hands on your granite,  
 I have broken my strength on your steel,  
 I have sweated through years for your pleasure,  
 I have worked like a slave for your weal.

Braily castigated the "masters and drivers of men" for the pathetic wages which rendered male workers dependent and servile, forced to "beg for more Labor again." However, Braily was concerned with more than just the abolition of the wage system, for he had been alienated from more than his labour:

I have given my strength and my manhood,  
 I have given you my gladness and youth,  
 You have used me and spent me and crushed me  
 And throw me aside without raith.

While Braily saw the gendered experience of working men in terms of class and production rather than race, skill or status, he envisioned exploitation, and its end, in terms of male entitlement:

I have built you the World in its beauty,  
 I have brought you the glory and spoil ...  
 Yet I suffer it all in my patience,  
 For somehow I dimly have known  
 That somehow the Workers would conquer,  
 In a World that was made for His own.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup>PAM, RG 4 A1, Manitoba Court Records — King's Bench, "The King vs. William Ivens et al.," Trial Evidence, Box 7, Tom Cassidy to Richard Kerrigan, 6 April 1919.

<sup>80</sup>PAM, RG 4 A1, Manitoba Court Records — King's Bench, "The King vs. William Ivens et al.," Trial Evidence, Box 7, OBU Central Executive Committee, Bulletin #1.

<sup>81</sup>*Manitoba One Big Union Bulletin*, 15 May 1919.

Poems such as Braily's were shining examples of how OBU men were caught up in a gendered critique of capitalism. To work was to alienate one's manhood; socialism meant its restoration.

In seeking to reconstitute working-class masculinities by ending class exploitation, OBU men distinguished themselves from wage-oriented conservative unionists. As with the rhetoric of the Western Labor Conference, this conflict was mapped out through different masculinities, with weakness, passivity and servility signifying reformist organizers.<sup>82</sup> Bob Russell assailed the "Jimmy willings or the wishy washy guys" who refused to fight class exploitation.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, a writer in the *OBU Bulletin* informed readers that the "labor leader obsessed by the virus of status is ... a plastic, spineless, spiritless object."<sup>84</sup> Yet another depicted labour bureaucrats as "a weak-kneed, spineless crew," while Matt Glenday attacked them for being "a privileged exclusive group" that was "coaxed, petted and fondled by the employing class."<sup>85</sup> Perhaps the most detailed analysis of the miserable masculinity of conservative union leaders was found in Frank Woodward's series entitled "Evolution," which began its run in the *Bulletin* in early January 1920. A future editor of the paper, Woodward provided his readers with a serial outlining the classical Marxist conception of economic stages and its relationship to social problems. Woodward's initial foray was a lengthy discussion concerning how an archetypal "labor leader" was subtly seduced to "betray his comrades" by the ruling class. Woodward suggested that, to undermine the independence of labour leaders, bosses used gradual pressure so as to not pose "an open affront to their manhood." Eventually, union leaders acquiesced, becoming class traitors while losing whatever positive attributes of manhood they previously possessed:

Any return of manliness reacts unpleasantly upon him ... The women-folk of his own household even reproach him, telling him to be careful what he says, and not to jeopardize their future and his own ... At times, he has to confront angry workers. Even the women at his meetings call him traitor and tell him he has "sold out."<sup>86</sup>

The "labor leader" had lost his manhood, and all that it implied—independence, political integrity, and mastery over his world. Indeed, his patriarchal power was

<sup>82</sup>Similar strategies of representation emerged in sectarian conflicts between OBU men and other radicals. For a case involving the OBU leadership's purge of the Wobblies in the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union, see UBCSC, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 55a, File 16, *Report of Investigation Committee and Replies of Those Concerned* (Vancouver 1920).

<sup>83</sup>PAM, MG 10 F2, Manitoba Historical Society, Orlikow Tapes, Interview with R.B Russell, C813-816, Transcript of Tape 5, 13.

<sup>84</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 15 November 1919.

<sup>85</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 28 August 1920; UBCSC, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 33, File 6, *Second Issue of the One Big Union Bulletin of the San Francisco Bay Cities*.

<sup>86</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 3 January 1920.

“even” challenged by “the women-folk of his own household” and “even the women at his meetings,” implying that working women were typically less likely to protest against class treachery than men. In Woodward’s mind, the One Big Union would enable working men to be men, to work, to provide for their families, and to control their future, a sharp contrast to the weakness of conservative unionists.

In its simplest expression, radical manhood was centred around the belief that the workers “produce[d] all wealth” and possessed the knowledge to govern society without the “parasites” — bosses, politicians, and union bureaucrats.<sup>87</sup> Even opponents of the OBU such as David Rees remained “convinced that the overwhelming majority of the workers who do a little studying believe in the slogan — Production for use, not for profit.”<sup>88</sup> This idea was strengthened by a number of strikes which displayed the power of the rank and file. As Bob Russell later observed, if workers, through their collective strength, “showed they had the power to stop the wheels of industry [they] also showed they had the power to start the wheels of industry — they couldn’t start without them, you understand — then you had shown economic sense.”<sup>89</sup> Workers had no need for the bourgeoisie, the “other fellow,” because they could “manage without managers.”<sup>90</sup> Nor did they need politicians, even those who were once workers, since they “are no longer working men. It is years since they had on overalls, or since they toiled at the bench, in the shop or in the mine.”<sup>91</sup> Drawing upon their collective power, working men could also overcome the limitations of international unionism, which was “a menace to every organization which has any wish to struggle for manhood and freedom of action in resisting the aggressions of big capital.”<sup>92</sup>

The key was for working men to act; in the words of Bill Pritchard, “the workers would not be saved by any great man but [by] themselves. ‘The great ... appear great to us because we are on our knees. Let us rise!’”<sup>93</sup> One Calgary striker prosaically expressed a similar proud fascination with working men’s accomplishments and the potential of their future:

<sup>87</sup>UBCSC, Vertical File #213, Appendix 3, OBU General Executive Board, Bulletin #1, 1.

<sup>88</sup>PAM, MG 14 C93, David Rees Papers, Newspaper clipping, April 1919.

<sup>89</sup>PAM, MG 10 F2, Manitoba Historical Society, Orlikow Tapes, C813-816, Interview with R.B. Russell, Transcript of Tape 5, 4.

<sup>90</sup>“The other fellow” comes from a clipping of the *Fernie District Ledger* in PAM, MG 10 A3, One Big Union Correspondence, while “managing without managers” is from the irrepressible T-Bone Slim, in Franklin Rosemont, ed., *Juice is Stranger than Friction: Selected Writings of T-Bone Slim* (Chicago 1992), 35.

<sup>91</sup>UBCSC, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 33, File 6, *Second Issue of the OBU Bulletin of the San Francisco Bay Cities*, 1920.

<sup>92</sup>OBU Bulletin, 27 December 1919.

<sup>93</sup>“Saving the World From Democracy,” 144.

Who broke the shackles of the slave,  
 Made war, to make wrong pardon crave,  
 For union a path to pave?

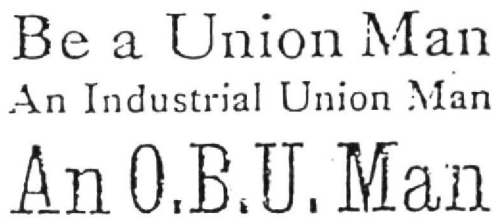
A working man ...  
 Who daily faces death's cold fear,  
 In subterranean caverns drear,  
 To cheer with warmth our homes so dear?

The working man ...  
 Who is it dresses lady fine,  
 To make a woman's beauty shine,  
 By bringing products into line?

The working man.

Indeed, the overwhelming confidence of this Calgary striker led him to proclaim that the "working man" had "blazed a trail of light, / Thro' Afric's darkest jung[le] night, / To let in justice and the right."<sup>94</sup> In this poem, everything from the abolition of slavery and anti-imperialism to familial sustenance and women's consumerism was represented as the product of working men's labours. In one sense, exploitation receded into the background, overcome by the utopian faith in the potential of male workers' power. Propaganda of this sort from the OBU was common, as were continual references to the newly-emerging class and gender identity of working men in "the age of the new democracy."<sup>95</sup> Consider this "silent agitator" (Figure 1):<sup>96</sup>

Figure 1



Be a Union Man  
 An Industrial Union Man  
 An O.B.U. Man

Courtesy of University of British Columbia, Special Collections

<sup>94</sup>PAM, RG 4 A1, Manitoba Court Records — King's Bench, "The King vs. William Ivens et al." Trial Evidence, Box 2, *Calgary Strike Bulletin*, 2 June 1919. It is unclear whether the Calgary striker was depicting the "working man" as the bearer or destroyer of imperialism, given the OBU's critique of imperialism as a dying bourgeois social formation soon to be superseded.

<sup>95</sup>*New Democracy* was an OBU paper which was published in Hamilton for a brief period by Fred Flatman. See Naylor, *New Democracy*, 68-9.

<sup>96</sup>UBCSC, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 33, File 6.



Figure 2

STRIKE BULLETIN



Triumphant assessments of the collective power of working men were a powerful influence on the strike wave of the summer of 1919. Pursuing the theme of revolution, yet another optimistic writer suggested that "the great working-class giant is rising to *his* feet."<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Figure 2 depicted how the collective strength of manual labourers, signified by the worker's body size and shape as well as his overalls and shovel, would save jailed activists from the "powers that be."<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, the figure of "Labor" loomed large in comparison to the imprisoned union leader — although still small against the not-so-invisible hand of the State — an image which resonated with OBU ideologues' emphasis on working-class self-emancipation, which could only be accomplished, they thought, if the movement was not dependent on a small group of officials. One of the most prevalent concerns during the general strikes was the coercive apparatus of the state which, socialists predicted, would be brought to bear against them. Policemen in Winnipeg voted in favour of striking, but remained on the job at the request of the Strike Committee, which feared the declaration of martial law were the police to strike.<sup>99</sup> The newly-formed Citizens' Committee of One Thousand asked policemen to sign a "yellow-dog" contract pledging not to join unions or to strike. This prompted a number of outcries, and the *Western Labor News* ran a column entitled "Britons Never Shall Be Slaves" depicting the pledge as an unmanly act for white working men: "Only a slave could sign it. A free man, a white man — Never!"<sup>100</sup> Many did refuse to sign and found themselves blacklisted for life. In their place was the new force of "specials," which was seen as an attempt by the Citizens' Committee to provoke violence, a charge not without justification. This conflict was represented through a symbolic economy of masculinities. In Figure 3, the "peaceable striker," a well-dressed man of obvious respectability was challenged by two other men of questionable character: the immense bourgeois man, who appeared to have accumulated surplus value as body weight, adorned with dollar signs and jewelry and carrying the club of "militarism"; and the Citizen's Committee, a boy-child bully not yet old enough to wear long pants.<sup>101</sup> By connecting different masculinities — the "good" masculinity of the striker, the "bad" masculinities of the obese boss and childish Citizen's Committee — with opposing economic ideologies, this representation depicted the issue of coercion as both a class and gender conflict. As well, the different body shapes and clothing styles found in the images of male strikers in Figures 2 and 3, which indicate the power of both frontier labourers and craftsmen in crisis in shaping the union's direction, suggests that radicals tried to overcome different gendered occupational traditions by emphasizing certain values which

<sup>97</sup> *Red Flag*, 14 June 1919. My emphasis.

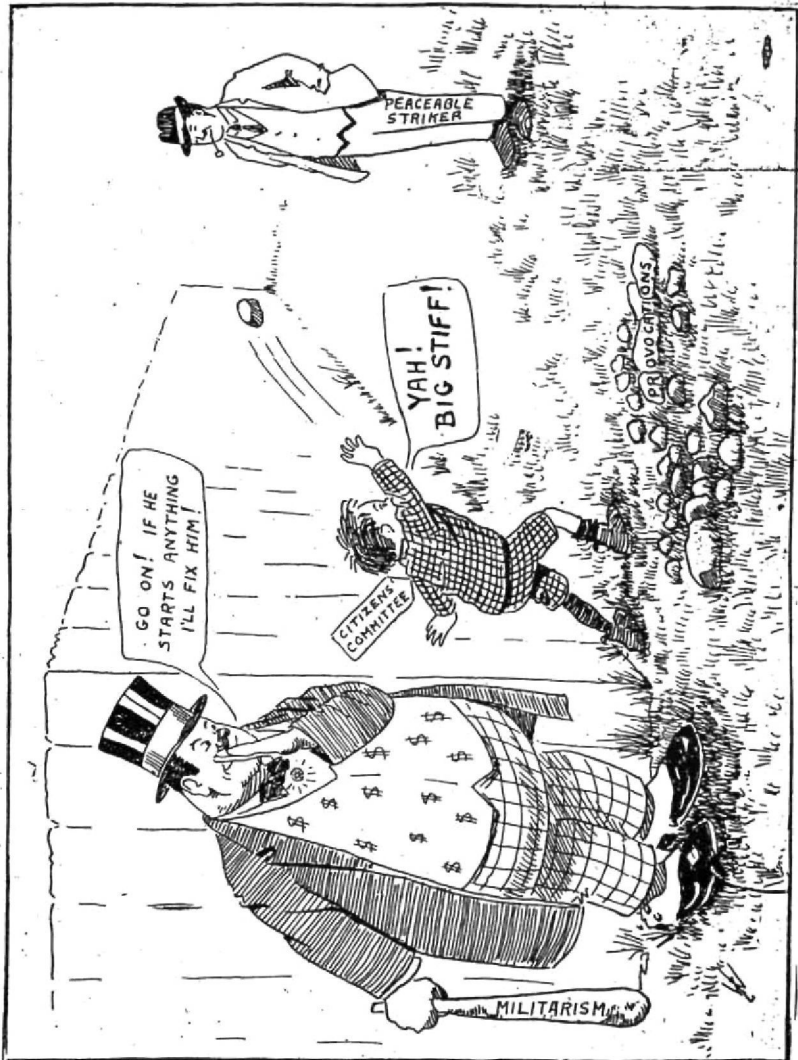
<sup>98</sup> *Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 24 June 1919.

<sup>99</sup> PAM, MG 10 A3, One Big Union Correspondence, R.B. Russell to Victor Midgley, 19 May 1919; "Saving the World From Democracy," 45.

<sup>100</sup> "Saving the World from Democracy," 82-3.

<sup>101</sup> *Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 19 June 1919.

Figure 3



transcended sectoral divisions — militancy, solidarity and resistance — as the fount of the collective potential of radical manhood.

In their efforts to ensure class unity during the general strikes, OBU organizers differentiated radical masculinity from the gender identities of male workers who refused to strike. At times of overt class conflict such as the 1919 labour revolt, men who scabbed — for it was almost always men — likely stood as the labour movement's most hated enemy; OBU columnist William O'Donnell suggested that "Hell is not half hot enough for him, / The thing that scabs on his fellowmen."<sup>102</sup> As powerful symbols against which the values of radical masculinity such as militancy and solidarity were forged, scabs were represented as possessing a servile manhood, set against that of the brotherhood of class-conscious working men. The *Calgary Strike Bulletin* ran entire columns about the "shame of being a scab," asking if there was "a more contemptible creature in the world than the one who deserts his fellows and helps defeat his own side."<sup>103</sup> Their comrades in Vancouver also addressed this theme, inquiring of workers who refused to strike, "don't you think you might try and play the man?"<sup>104</sup> In these instances, OBU men made reference to multiple masculinities, drawing upon already existing stereotypes such as the effete male snob and the male weakling which readers were expected to recognize, and refashioned these diverse elements through a unifying symbol, that of the male scab, to convey differences in class politics. Radical manhood, workers were told, was vastly superior to the subservient manliness of scabs. Nor were scabs typically depicted with "feminine images" as Steven Penfold concludes in reference to Cape Breton coal mining communities in the early 1920s. To suggest that radicals represented men who scabbed with "feminine images," should prompt us to ask, "What kind of femininity were scabs said to possess?" Surely socialists did not mean to suggest that male scabs were similar to, for example, the heroic female telephone operators, the "Hello Girls," who themselves possessed a class-conscious femininity that OBU men saw as distinguishable from the gender identity of bourgeois women.<sup>105</sup> This is not to suggest that scabs were never imagined as feminized men by OBU activists or those within the larger socialist tradition. However, just as gender relations complicated the notion of gender-free class politics, so too the Marxist vision of OBU men challenged ideas about gender

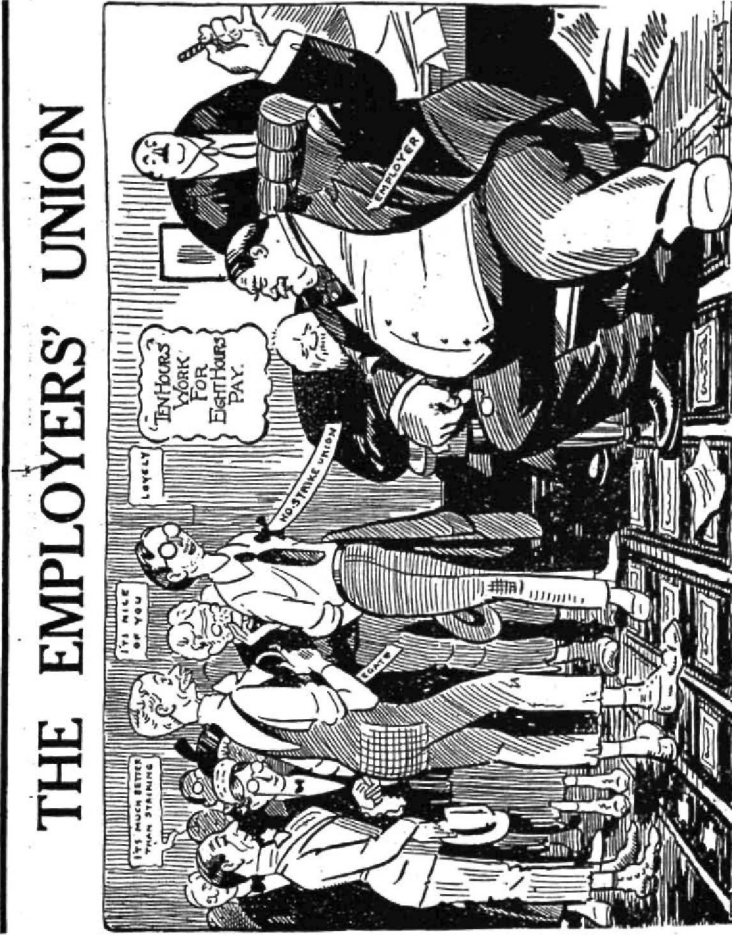
<sup>102</sup> *OBU Bulletin*, 14 February 1920.

<sup>103</sup> PAM, RG 4 A1, Manitoba Court Records — King's Bench, "The King vs. William Ivens et al." Trial Evidence, Box 2, *Calgary Strike Bulletin*, 2 June 1919.

<sup>104</sup> *Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 23 June 1919.

<sup>105</sup> Steven Penfold, "Have You No Manhood in You?," 27. For the "Hello Girls," see Elaine Bernard, *The Long Distance Feeling: A History of the Telecommunications Workers Union* (Vancouver 1982), 50-71. For an excellent materialist-feminist analysis of masculinities, which traces the transformation of the "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali" in relation to an imperial social formation, see Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester 1995).

Figure 4



Vancouver Strike Bulletin, 19 June 1919.

identities which failed to address class differences. When OBU ideologues spoke about labour leaders or scabs losing their manhood, it is clear that they saw their world as populated by different masculinities, in other words, different kinds of men. And while the masculinity of scabs was certainly pathetic and undesirable, it was nonetheless a male gender identity. Consider Figure 4, which portrayed the members of a company union currying favour from the bosses as decidedly weak and somewhat unattractive men (and one woman).<sup>106</sup> Workers were supposed to read off from this image that joining a company union, and agreeing to wage rates which in effect intensified the exploitation of their labour, was not the way to be a real union man.

Perhaps the central reason that scabs were not usually constructed as feminine was that, just as OBU men did not view masculinity as monolithic, nor did they believe that femininity transcended class divisions. While addressing the Western Labor Conference in March 1919, Helen Armstrong gave voice to her political isolation, recalling how she had "sat in meetings, hundreds of times the only woman." Within two months, in the midst of the nation's largest general strike, Armstrong was surrounded by thousands of women who mobilized "to defend working-class interests which included protection of the working class family, women workers, and the democratic rights of organization, free speech and collective bargaining."<sup>107</sup> Following the studies of Linda Kealey, Mary Horodyski, and Patricia Roome, 1919 should be viewed as a period in which working-class women explored dimensions of their collective emancipation through various strike activities. During the strike, many socialists commented on the low wage job ghettos which were the fate of most working women, that "large body of girl and women workers from the departmental stores, laundries, garment factories, candy kitchens, hotels, and restaurants [that] never had more than a week's margin between the pay-envelope and starvation."<sup>108</sup> OBUers attempted to create sympathy for the plight of women who tried to make ends meet during the strike, noting "the cheerful endurance by wives and mothers, of privation and suffering in order that victory might be achieved in this fight for liberty."<sup>109</sup> Many women on strike, finding themselves unable to pay their rent, found free lodging in the homes of other working families.<sup>110</sup> They also received support from the WLL-run restaurant in Winnipeg which furnished 1200 to 1500 meals daily.<sup>111</sup> This campaign was important because it legitimized ideas about the importance of women's domestic labour in the public sphere of socialist political activity.

<sup>106</sup>*Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 19 June 1919.

<sup>107</sup>Linda Kealey, "'No Special Protection — No Sympathy'," 135-6.

<sup>108</sup>"Saving the World From Democracy," 73-74.

<sup>109</sup>"Saving the World from Democracy," 146.

<sup>110</sup>"Saving the World From Democracy," 69.

<sup>111</sup>"Saving the World From Democracy," 74.

And while the organization of working women was not a priority for the union leadership at the WLC, throughout the strike wave OBU advocates articulated images of class-conscious militant women which complemented those of radical manhood. By highlighting the activities of women such as Helen Armstrong and groups of female strikers like the "Hello Girls," they differentiated working women from the "volunteers" drawn from the ranks of the bourgeoisie. The *Western Labor News* scorned "'Society' ladies stepping from their luxurious limousines" to sell scab newspapers produced by the Winnipeg Citizens' Committee.<sup>112</sup> Their counterparts in Vancouver also emphasized class differences in femininity, attacking the members of the International Order of the Daughters of the Empire for scabbing on female telephone operators.<sup>113</sup> Figure 5 contrasted two fashionable and respectable female strikers with the "snooty Society lady," adorned in a man's suit jacket and tie, who did not "understand that we are out for a principle." The "lady's" transgression of gendered codes of dress, which some may have read as signifying a "mannish lesbian," symbolized that she was scabbing.<sup>114</sup> Differences of class and gender were even constructed through their pets, with the bourgeois cat, complete with bow, strolling blissfully by the black sabotage cat, the "Sabo-tabby," of Wobbly fame.<sup>115</sup>

Along with images articulating class politics and femininities, male leaders appealed to the potential of working-class power to transform gender hierarchies. J.S. Woodsworth declared that "In the coming day women would take their place side by side with men, not as dependents or inferiors, but as equals. Thus there would be better relationships based on fundamental love and affinity. This strike was part of the great movement for the emancipation of women."<sup>116</sup> Public statements such as Woodsworth's, although few in number, may well have encouraged working-class women to organize economically and politically on the basis of their particular experiences, and OBU advocates were amongst the strongest supporters of women's labour activism. In particular, their stress on working-class self-determination and the need for collective, public activism stood in opposition to bourgeois values of women's domesticity and passivity.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, fearful of the

<sup>112</sup>"Saving the World From Democracy," 146.

<sup>113</sup>*Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 14 June 1919.

<sup>114</sup>See Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," in Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York 1990), 281-93, 536-41.

<sup>115</sup>*Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 20 June 1919. The meaning of the figure of the policeman is ambiguous, given the general support of many cops, especially those in Winnipeg, for the strikes. On the "sabo-tabby," see Joyce L. Kombluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* Second Edition (Chicago 1988).

<sup>116</sup>Quoted in Horodyski, "Women and the Winnipeg General Strike," 28.

<sup>117</sup>Linda Kealey, "No Special Protection — No Sympathy," 140-1. For an examination of the gendered identities of bourgeois men in the international context, see R.W. Connell, "The big picture: Masculinities in recent world history," *Theory and Society*, 22, 5 (1993), 597-623.

Figure 5



Vancouver Strike Bulletin, 20 June 1919.



deseccration of womanhood during the general strike, Winnipeg's Mayor Gray issued a proclamation before the parade planned for 21 June warning that "Any women taking part in a parade do so at their own risk."<sup>118</sup> Similarly, conservative union leaders in Vancouver reacted against what they saw as the potential threat to morals posed by the radicals, reporting that OBU organizers "were trying to induce young girls to join OBU, offering them same for fee of 50 [cents] per month."<sup>119</sup> Despite their departure from bourgeois gender norms, however, the practices of radical manhood by and large tended to obscure the importance of the activities of working-class women.<sup>120</sup> As Linda Kealey suggests, "while the political agenda of women's organizations usually complemented those of their working-class male counterparts, gender-based perceptions sometimes came to the fore, creating tension between class and gender."<sup>121</sup> And although many OBU men eschewed a passive and conservative image of women — others, of course, did not — they wanted working-class women to be involved while at the same time they created a milieu in which women were subordinated. One article in the *Bulletin* favourably quoted Lenin to the effect that "We are too few to free women from the chains of household slavery. If the emancipation of the workman is the business of the workman himself, that of the women must be their own affair."<sup>122</sup> While such a position recognized the existence of women's oppression, at least in reference to "household slavery," working-class women were to attempt their self-emancipation without the material support of the organization behind them. Male control of the labour press as well as other institutional resources rendered female activists largely dependent on the prioritization of their efforts according to a patriarchal political vision. As well, OBU men encouraged women to be active without addressing feminist issues relating to their participation in the labour movement. They advertised mass meetings in Vancouver with two slogans, "Everybody Attend" and "Women Invited," suggesting they in part realized the masculine specificity of their appeals.<sup>123</sup> Any recognition of the problematic nature of their gender politics that occurred during the general strike wave did not translate into a substantively different set of union practices which would have enabled working women more power in determining the socialist movement's agenda.

Working-class women's activism was hindered by the OBU's particular brand of economism, which proclaimed the union to be a central institution in the emancipation of the working class while at the same time restricting membership

<sup>118</sup>"Saving the World From Democracy," 184.

<sup>119</sup>UBCSC, Vancouver Trades and Labor Council Papers, Vancouver and District Labor Council, Series A, Regular Minutes, 7 February 1920.

<sup>120</sup>See Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left*; Penfold, "Have You No Manhood In You?," 29-41.

<sup>121</sup>Linda Kealey, "No Special Protection — No Sympathy," 136.

<sup>122</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 22 November 1919.

<sup>123</sup>*Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, 17 June 1919.

to those workers who were directly involved in the production of commodities.<sup>124</sup> While, for example, the wives of working men were directly affected by their husbands' determination to strike, the structure of the OBU did not enable them to participate in the actual decision-making process. And although the definition of who was to be eligible for union membership was contested at the local level, OBU leaders were eventually able to secure the consent of the majority of male delegates for their narrow economic criteria, making it next to impossible for women who did not work for wages to have an equal participatory role in the union's internal democracy. In the aftermath of the general strike, Winnipeg radicals began the task of building a strong local organization to act as a bulwark against the resurgence of conservative international unionism. In early August, the Winnipeg Central Labour Council (CLC) began discussing the relationship between the CLC and Women's Labor Leagues (WLLs) with an initial motion proposing that WLLs should have full affiliation, including voting power. Despite claims that the structure of the OBU — the "body" — was to be the active creation of the rank and file, union leaders remained firm in their belief that the basic criteria of membership was to be that of wage labour. Out of jail on bail while awaiting his trial for sedition, Bill Pritchard informed delegates that the OBU Constitution dictated that only "Wage Earners" were able to join. Consequently, the motion allowing WLLs to affiliate on terms equal to those of unions was rejected by an 18 to 23 count.<sup>125</sup>

At this point, the CLC's decision did not appear to exclude housewives from formal participation in union democracy. OBU activists espoused the belief that "labor produces all wealth." In their definition of "labor," however, they used value-laden terms which were open to the inclusion of non-waged workers as a group exploited through capitalist rule: "By the terms WORKER or LABOR we mean all those who by useful work of hand or brain, feed, clothe or shelter; or contribute towards the health, comfort and education of the human race."<sup>126</sup> This analysis attempted to move beyond conceptions of the value of labour being market-driven and instead offered an inclusive definition of class belonging. In a similar vein, the *OBU Bulletin* informed readers that, with the General Workers Unit, which had an open membership, "there is absolutely no excuse for any man or woman not belonging to a union. It absorbs every man or woman of the working class who has to work for a living, and whose welfare and existence depends on the wages doled out by the employers of labor."<sup>127</sup> While these statements appear to suggest that all workers, and not just those paid a wage, would be able to join a local of the union,

<sup>124</sup>For the gendered dimensions of union economism, see Beatrix Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the Eighties* (London 1989).

<sup>125</sup>PAM, MG 10 A14-2, R.B. Russell Papers, Box 4, File 15, CLC Minutes, 5 August 1919. Unfortunately, the minutes do not allow for an analysis of which delegates supported which position.

<sup>126</sup>UBCSC, Vertical File #213, Appendix 3, OBU General Executive Board, Bulletin #1, 1.

<sup>127</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 4 October 1919.

this was not the case. After numerous discussions which failed to arrive at a solution to the "woman question," the CLC meeting on 7 October 1919 voted 28 to 16 to allow the WLLS to send fraternal delegates who would have no voting power. They also rejected a proposal that women be able to join the General Workers Unit as individuals.<sup>128</sup> Thus, while women who did not work for wages but "whose welfare and existence depends on the wages doled out by the employers of labor" were included in the OBU's definition of the working class, they were excluded in practice from having the same organizational status as those who worked for wages. In the words of Janice Newton, "doubtless, socialist women would have been prepared to fight obstacles from their class enemy. This is quite different from fighting obstacles that have been created by one's allies."<sup>129</sup>

The decision of the CLC served to restrict women's institutional activism, forcing them to depend on men to articulate their concerns, but women were also excluded in less formal ways. In February of 1920, Mrs. Fairbairn informed the Reviewing Committee that more women would attend meetings but for the heavy amounts of smoking, which, as Janice Newton observes, was a perpetual issue for some women on the left. According to Newton, the smoke-filled atmosphere was one way in which labour men maintained the masculine construction of socialist radicalism.<sup>130</sup> Less than a month later, a rather curious debate erupted about which women should be eligible for membership in the Women's Auxiliary, those related to OBU men or those "whose principles are OBU." Arguing the former, Comrade Frisken insinuated that women married to men in international unions would spy for their husbands if allowed access to OBU meetings, thus playing upon the time-honoured trope of the deceptive woman. Comrade Anderson had a different viewpoint, suggesting, perhaps with his tongue firmly implanted in his cheek, that just "because a woman was unfortunate enough to have an 'International' husband, that was no reason why we should further humiliate her by refusing her admission into the OBU."<sup>131</sup> Women's Labor Leagues in several districts of Winnipeg changed their name to the OBU Women's Auxiliaries, hoping that through their involvement with the OBU, "they will become more progressive and make greater strides toward helping in our forward movement."<sup>132</sup> The *Bulletin* publicized the weekly meeting times for the Auxiliaries, and provided coverage, albeit sparse, of their activities. OBU women organized their efforts around an appeal to family, informing readers of the *Bulletin* that "Every women [sic] whose husband is a member of the One Big Union should belong to this Auxiliary, which has been formed primarily for the purpose of assisting in every possible way the One Big Union movement."<sup>133</sup> These

<sup>128</sup>PAM, MG 10 A14-2, R.B. Russell Papers, Box 4, File 15, CLC Minutes, 7 October 1920.

<sup>129</sup>Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left*, 44.

<sup>130</sup>PAM, MG 10 A14-2, R.B. Russell Papers, Box 4, File 15, CLC Minutes, 17 February 1920; Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left*, 41-2.

<sup>131</sup>PAM, MG 10 A14-2, R.B. Russell Papers, Box 4, File 15, CLC Minutes, 2 March 1920.

<sup>132</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 17 April 1920.

<sup>133</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 22 May 1920.

Auxiliaries were particularly active in the Winnipeg Labor Defense Committee's campaign to free the Winnipeg Eight, selling "home cooking" and holding raffles of such items as a "Defense cushion, with picture of [the] arrested men on the cover" to raise funds.<sup>134</sup> Women's involvement extended to the OBU Sunday School in Winnipeg, and Bob Russell fondly remembered the role played by women at the OBU's summer camp in Gimli, Manitoba. The camp, which ran programs for "about 250 kids a week," supplied "four meals a day, and ... all the milk they could drink." Russell emphasized the femininity of OBU women at the camp, telling David Orlikow that "we had it supervised; we had the women go down there and *acted as women* — conducting the women."<sup>135</sup> With this memory of the past, Russell unconsciously highlighted the dominant attitudes of OBU men towards working women and the movement in general. Women were to be active in the fight for socialism; however, they were to do so "as women," bringing feminine qualities, such as their ability to raise children in the correct fashion, to the union. Working-class women were commonly represented in a manner which highlighted their femininity while denying the ways in which the socialist movement was structured by a male-centred hierarchy. Thus, the politics of Bob Russell's offhand remembrances lay not only in his one-dimensional characterization of women "as women," but also in his power as perhaps the union's most important organizer to weave his gendered vision throughout the fabric of the OBU. The union's emphasis on familial bonds and class unity meant that it was difficult for feminist practices to be fashioned and integrated into organizational work. In the end, the Marxists of the OBU became idealists when it came to the "sex question": the ideal of harmony among proletarian men and women was to be achieved through feelings of mutual solidarity *without the help of concrete proposals for overcoming patriarchal practices*.

Another crucial element in the subordination of working women within the organization was the continuing critique of feminist ideas about the oppression of women. For example, Bill Pritchard, who was well-known for his oratory power, turned his attention to the issue of women's suffrage in the September 1918 issue of the SPC journal, the *Western Clarion*. Pritchard asked his readers, "Can women, that is women of the working class, receive any great or lasting benefits by taking a mere 'anti-male' stand, the futile policy of denouncing the tyranny of man-made laws? Have working class women anything to gain by lining up in a sex fight?" The answer to these questions was a resounding no. According to Pritchard, the suffrage issue was a bourgeois sham, since the "interests of our masters demand that sex be played off against sex." Instead, working women were to "assert their womanhood" and devote themselves to the class struggle, the necessary precondition

<sup>134</sup>*OBU Bulletin*, 12 June, 21 August 1920.

<sup>135</sup>Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Organization in Canada* (1926), 53; PAM, MG 10 F2, Manitoba Historical Society, Orlikow Tapes, Interview with R.B. Russell, C813-816, Transcript of Tape 6, 7. My emphasis.

tion for their liberation.<sup>136</sup> While Pritchard astutely observed the bourgeois character of mainstream Canadian feminist organizations, his analysis obscured the lucid ideological work of socialist-feminists such as Emma Goldman, who saw the plight of working women as traceable to something more than simply class exploitation.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, by caricaturing feminism as an "anti-male" stance, Pritchard shared much in common with his bourgeois contemporaries. Curiously, Pritchard's feminism-as-futile argument paralleled the socialist critique of religion; just as the worker told by the "long-haired preacher" to suffer on earth so that he may get "pie in the sky when [he] die[d]," women in the OBU were to suspend their "anti-male" politics, their feminism, until after the revolution.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, by phrasing his appeal for class unity in terms of what he saw as the futility of feminism, Pritchard delegitimized the activities of women like Helen Armstrong which were directed towards a more inclusive socialist movement.<sup>139</sup>

What Pritchard, and OBU writers in general, could not tolerate was the suggestion that working women's oppression was not reducible to class relations. In the third instalment of his series entitled "Evolution," Frank Woodward drew upon the work of Lewis Morgan, much as Engels had done in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, to challenge what he saw as feminist idealism. Woodward informed his readers that "every man evolved from his ape-like ancestors with no moral qualms as to sex relations" and without any concept of property rights, citing the Iroquois as an example. With the beginnings of "patriarchal society," marriage became a "permanent bond" and moral restrictions were placed on sexual relations between parents and children, and between siblings. Lest his readers misunderstand the cause of this transformation, Woodward emphasized that this change to the "marriage relationship" came "purely from a desire in the male to secure for himself the labor of the woman and her offspring." In short, it was "the material basis of society — the ownership of property," and not "morality," which was the foundation of "patriarchal society." For Woodward, "this was undoubtedly the turning point in the social development of woman, and from a social equal with man, started her upon that road to subjection which future history

<sup>136</sup>*Western Clarion*, September 1918.

<sup>137</sup>Deborah Gorham describes the National Council of Women as "the ladies' auxiliary of the class that controlled Canada." Quoted in John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto 1988), 74. For an assessment of first-wave feminism, see Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred? The Ideas of English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918* (Toronto 1983). The OBU viewed issues such as birth control in terms of bourgeois social control. See Angus McLaren, "'What Has This to Do with Working Class Women?': Birth Control and the Canadian Left, 1900-1939," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 28 (1981), 435-54.

<sup>138</sup>"Pie in the sky when you die" is a line from Joe Hill's "The Preacher and the Slave." See Joyce Kornbluh, ed., *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor 1964), 133.

<sup>139</sup>This rejection of feminism was, as Janice Newton observes, shared by some female socialists. See *Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left*, 25-7.

had in store for her."<sup>140</sup> With its emphasis on property relations as the singular cause of "patriarchal society," this appears to be a standard Marxist account of the history of women's oppression. However, upon closer examination, we see that Woodward depicted this "material" transformation as emanating "purely from a *desire* in the male." If we are to believe Woodward, the social system of private property, the foundation for wage labour, originated in the patriarchal longings of men, since Woodward provided no other reason but male psychology for the creation of private property. While he was careful to locate this historic change in property relations rather than morality, he failed to explain why men would have such a "desire" in the first place. In this text, class society had its origins in male desires for power, which led men to control women and children through private property relations and the heterosexual family.

The *desire* which, according to OBU activists, led men to create patriarchal society could also be seen in propaganda celebrating the collective radicalism of working men during the strike wave. This was perhaps most starkly conveyed in the article, "The Spectre of Industrial Unionism," which OBU organizer Carl Berg took from the *International Socialist Review*.<sup>141</sup> "The Spectre of Industrial Unionism" was the kind of article which set off waves of panic among the bourgeoisie, for it proclaimed revolution to be imminent. The "message of industrial unionism," the article explained, "is [first] heard, first understood by the despised bum, hobo, tramp, stiff, for he is nearest the source from which it comes. But its message of hope for an enslaved working class is wafting upwards and is affecting the entire soul of the great labor army." This message of sheer class hatred promised a dark future for those who opposed the socialist movement: "Capitalists, priests, politicians, press hirelings, thugs, sluggers, policemen and all creeping and crawling things that suck the blood of the common working man [will] die of starvation."<sup>142</sup> Class conflict thus was represented as a battle between two opposing armies of men. Women, it seems, were excluded from an active role because victory required the manly quality of strength: "Right never did prevail and never will without the aid of might. Existence is a perpetual struggle; the weak go to the wall. It isn't the *few* who go to the wall but the *weak*." Women were included in this social vision through a familial frame, as the writer suggested that "we ought to be damned if we don't look after our own dear wives and dear little ones." Indeed, the theme of

<sup>140</sup> *OBU Bulletin*, 17 January 1920.

<sup>141</sup> While this piece was condemned as "IWW sabotage philosophy" by some members of the SPC, others chose to print it in pro-OBU papers across Canada. For the controversy, see PAM, MG 10 A3, One Big Union Correspondence, Carl Berg to Victor Midgley, 1 May 1919; R.B. Russell Papers, Part One, Box 3, File 11, Carl Berg to William Kollings, 2 May 1919, 9 May 1919; PAM, RG 4 A3, Manitoba Court Records — King's Bench, "The King vs. R.B. Russell" Partial Transcript of Trial, 1159-61.

<sup>142</sup> Mark Leier has explored the idea of class rage in "Portrait of a Labour Spy: The Case of Robert Raglan Gosden, 1882-1961," *Labour/Le Travail*, 42 (Fall 1998), 55-84.

female dependence was crucially important to the production of revolutionary desire, which would allow proletarian men to escape their subordinate position under capitalist relations of production:

Bowed and humiliated as you are, be you despised ever so much, your mothers, wives and sisters forced to lives of shame, your children stunted and starved, you hold in these two hands of yours the power to save not only yourself, your mothers, wives and sisters, and your children, but the whole human race. The world lies in the hollow of your dirty, blacked and horny [sic] right hand — save it!<sup>143</sup>

In passages such as these, the revolutionary movement was centred around working men, who alone possessed the “might” to realize a socialist society. “The Spectre of Industrial Unionism” was perhaps the closest the practices of radical manhood came to being a consciously articulated program of male dominance through union power and familial control.<sup>144</sup> That this desire, in particular the abject portrayal of the “things that suck the blood of the common working man,” led some men to threaten women who scabbed with sexual violence indicates the darker undercurrents of revolutionary politics in 1919.<sup>145</sup> And while the movement for radical industrial unionism was not reducible to the patriarchal desires of working men, it

<sup>143</sup> PAM, MG 14 A 18, Winnipeg Strike, 1919, *Manitoba One Big Union Bulletin*, 1 May 1919. Emphasis in original.

<sup>144</sup> According to Janice Newton, “the SPC’s socialist future would reverse the effects of capitalism on family life, return women to the home and re-establish the male wage earner’s position as head of the household.” Newton, *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left*, 155.

<sup>145</sup> Steven Maynard has reported such a case in “Sex, Court Records, and Labour History,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 33 (1994), 190–191. Margaret Sweatman has suggested a somewhat different linking of socialism and sexual desire in the speech of Bonnie, a saleswoman at Eaton’s and casual prostitute, in *Fox*:

You want to know what I think? You asking me? Everybody here, every single son of a bitch here, got a place in the sun. Brotherhood. Tell me about it. I got Brothers lining up night after night and every one of them putting a dollar in the collections box, right? Brotherhood.

I go to church. Me and my friend Aileen. She says, Come on Bonnie we’re going to the new church. So I go.

It ain’t no new church, not to me it ain’t. Most ways, it’s worse, like they tossed some more coal on the old fire, it burns hotter, but me it still leaves cold. Like they’d tie me up and toast me for kindling, their righteous old fire.

But the funny thing about this, me and Aileen are sitting proper and the minister or whatchacallim kind of saying the world’s gonna go up in smoke and some kind of new one come and I wanna laugh cause every word he’s saying I could whisper to some john in bed and it’d finish the job quick as a dime.

Sweatman, *Fox*, 66.

is nonetheless important, both historically and politically, for us to recognize its existence and its power during the labour revolt and within the One Big Union.<sup>146</sup>

By viewing OBU men as gendered, we gain a better understanding of how gender relations, in this case the practices of radical manhood, were inseparable from class politics. This is not to suggest that 1919 was really about gender instead of class or that every Marxist tradition was saturated with gender identities in the same way.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, the OBU's vision of radical manhood in 1919 differed in many ways from the gender politics of, for example, the Knights of Labor and the Great Upheaval of the 1880s or the Relief Camp Workers' Union and the On-To-Ottawa Trek of the 1930s.<sup>148</sup> Instead, the very pervasiveness of radical manhood in the OBU points, I think, to the daily and immediate importance of gender relations in the lives of these working men. It is also important to recognize that the process of organizing the OBU according to the particular gender practices of socialist men was not a foregone conclusion. Nor was it invisible to all union members. Rather, the process of forging a social movement around radical manhood was contested at several key moments, beginning with Helen Armstrong's assessment of the OBU program at the Western Labor Conference. The social movement which coalesced around the OBU was rooted in a particular vision about the power of working men once freed from the fetters of capitalism. OBU men took old ideas and inchoate feelings and knit them together with new collective practices to produce an oppositional movement. For these men to make a claim about class was also, usually in a subtle fashion, to deploy working-class masculinities in a political manner. The One Big Union, then, was a Marxist movement caught up in the patriarchal politics of gender and sexuality. To look at the struggle for the OBU in this manner is to come closer to understanding the struggles that divided Canadian society in the period following World War One.

<sup>146</sup>For an interesting assessment of how patriarchal politics shaped Marx's work, see Laura Kipnis, "Marx: The Video; A Politics of Revolting Bodies," in *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Minneapolis 1993), 243-93.

<sup>147</sup>For a critique of depictions of a monolithic Left, see Lynne Segal, "Slow Change or No Change?: Feminism, Socialism and the Problem of Men," *Feminist Review*, 31 (1989), 7-14.

<sup>148</sup>See Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of what might be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (Toronto 1987); Karen Dubinsky, "'The Modern Chivalry': Women and the Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1891," MA thesis, Carleton University, 1985; Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost: The Unemployed, the Agitator, and the State* (Montréal 1987); Irene Howard, "The Mothers' Council of Vancouver: Holding the Fort for the Unemployed, 1935-1938," *BC Studies*, 69-70 (1986), 249-97; Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On To Ottawa Trek*, Victor Hoar, ed. (Toronto 1973); and Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto, 1989), 115.



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