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The Struggle against Wage Controls: The Saint John Story, 1975-1976, by George VAIR, St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2006, 136 pp., ISBN-10: 1-8940-0007-2.

Donald Swartz

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of their bosses, gaining time to spend as they wanted, and in some cases running their government. For all the shortcomings, contradictions, and reversals evident in American labour movement's complex political history, Sinyai convincingly argues that this

achievement remains one of its most important legacies for denizens of the century to come.

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The Struggle against Wage Controls: The Saint John Story, 1975-1976, by George VAIR, St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2006, 136 pp., ISBN-10: 1-8940-0007-2.

On October 14, 1976 approximately 1 million Canadian workers walked off their jobs to protest the program of statutory wage and price controls imposed one year earlier by the Liberal government headed by Pierre Trudeau. Despite its billing as a "National Day of Protest" by the Canadian Labour Congress, it was the closest thing to a national general strike in Canadian history. The protest was particularly successful in Saint John, New Brunswick where some 12,000 workers stayed off the job and, despite driving rain as many as 5,000 turned out to demonstrate, effectively shutting down the city by blockading roads and bridges. George Vair was the president of his UAW/CAW local at the time when the controls were imposed, and a key participant in the events leading up to the Day of Protest in the city. Drawing on his experiences during the course of the following year as well as documentary evidence, the book offers a first hand account of how October 14's industrial disputation came about.

The book opens with an examination of the controls program which Vair cogently argues were essentially wage controls. In New Brunswick, where workers were attempting to take advantage of a construction boom to close the wage gap between themselves and their counterparts in central Canada, the controls hit particularly hard. The anger this created was exacerbated by the seemingly arbitrary nature of their

implementation which is illustrated through an examination of the impact of the controls on specific workplaces and industries. The book then turns to how opposition to the controls was developed. Here the text focuses on the activities of the St. John Labour Council (where much of the existing leadership was replaced by young activists including Vair who became president), particularly those of its "Wage Control Committee". But it also covers the efforts of activists like Vair to push the labour movement generally into taking a stronger stance against the controls, tracing the CLC's halting steps towards the National Day of Protest, with particular attention to the 1976 CLC Convention where the CLC leadership reluctantly agreed to call a general strike "if and when necessary". In the event, the CLC called for a National Day of Protest on October 14. The book provides a compelling depiction of the events that transpired on this day in Saint John. In concluding, Vair argues that while at the time he had expected the mass protests to continue, the main reason that they hadn't was that the labour movement had effectively defeated the controls by then—partly by mitigating their impact through creative bargaining practices, and more generally by making them so unpopular that the government abandoned any plans to make them more than "temporary measures". Moreover, he contends that the protest strengthened the labour

movement, enabling it to better resist the pressures for concessions in the 80s.

A particular strength of the book is Vair's account of the organizing efforts of local activists in Saint John. He describes in detail the various activities and events used to develop opposition and convincingly demonstrates that the successful protest in Saint John did not happen of its own accord but was the result of an enormous commitment of time, energy and careful planning by local activists. The book also deepens our understanding of the differences that existed within the labour movement on how to oppose the controls, frequently drawing on personal conversations with various key figures with telling effect. Moreover, the author tells the story in a charming and principled manner, with limited "editorializing" on the positions of others. He forthrightly acknowledging his own mishaps and misjudgements. That said, the book would have been strengthened by giving more attention to the debates among local activists over how to proceed and some reflection on the merits of various activities undertaken.

The most questionable aspect of Vair's account concerns the conclusions he draws. While there is some evidence that unions were able to circumvent the controls (Vair cites a study by the UAW/CAW to this effect), there is also much indication, including, that provided in the book, to suggest otherwise. Indeed, the scale of the October 14 protest is hard to imagine if the controls weren't

having a real impact on workers. And as for the controls being temporary, it is so often the case that "c'est seulement le provisoire qui dure". The wage and price controls were not the first measure temporarily suspending workers' trade union rights in Canada; nor, more importantly, were they the last. The list here is lengthy but to cite one example, just days after the end of the controls the federal government passed legislation temporarily suspending CUPW's right to strike, and abridged the freedom of speech of its president Jean-Claude Parrot—ordering him to instruct his members to return to work (and jailing him for his hesitancy to act on this instruction).

This is not to say that Vair is wrong to suggest that the labour movement was strengthened in some respects by the struggle against controls. Were this not the case, various federal and provincial governments might not have found it necessary to suppress their rights so frequently in the subsequent years. Strength, however, is a relational term that has to do with the balance of social forces. The labour movement has not found the means to successfully resist assaults on its rights; a state-of-affairs that has contributed to organized labour's diminished influence. Far reaching changes in the consciousness and practices of the labour movement will be necessary to reverse this situation.

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Work in Tumultuous Times: Critical Perspectives,

edited by Vivian SHALLA and Wallace CLEMENT, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, xx + 427 pp., ISBN-10: 0-7735-3141-6 and ISBN-13: 978-0-7735-3141-3.

Neo-liberalism and globalization have shifted the balance of power in favour of employers. The never ending drive of employers for flexibility and profit have resulted in a reduction in the welfare

and living standards of "substantial" numbers of workers in Western style societies, such as Canada. Vivian Shalla, one of the editors to this book of readings, in her introductory chapter