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Review of *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* Edited by Craig Heron

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The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925. Edited by Craig Heron. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. Illustrations, bibliography, index. vi + 382 pp. \$65.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Working-class history is more often than not the calm before the storm. But the storms do come. With striking regularity, the quietude of class relations is shattered as workers mobilize and challenge employers and the state.

A central chapter in this narrative of class struggle is the tumultuous period of 1917-1925, which saw the rise and fall of a particular international "revolt" that, in its Canadian particulars, is admirably explored in this series of essays edited by Craig Heron. Once conceptualized as a western upheaval, the centerpiece of which was the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, the working-class activism of this period is now understood to have unfolded nationally while at the same time following distinct regional paths. As union membership peaked at just under 400,000 in 1919 and the number of strikes climbed to almost 460 in 1920, workers embraced an eclectic amalgam of workplace tactics and experimented with a wide array of political alternatives, the fulcrum of which, according to this collection,

was generally the loosely-structured provincial "independent labor party." The rhetoric of class language bristled with demand: the war lent new urgency, as well as potent logic, to wide-ranging working-class insistence that there be true democracy in the political arena, just as it sustained an assault on autocracy in the workplace, reconfiguring materially the meaning of citizenship.

Heron and his eight collaborators present an invaluable account of this workers' revolt. Most of the country's major regions, from the Maritimes to the British Columbia mining west, receive treatment. These essays detail not only the clash of class forces, but also the changing place of women and immigrants, both drawn into the revolt only to find themselves, yet again, somewhat marginalized. The complexities of the Quebec case, in which Catholic and international unionism posed distinct alternatives to an isolated socialist agitation for the General Strike, bring into focus a series of issues seldom addressed in treatments of the 1917-1925 revolt.

These and many other strengths acknowledged, one still comes away from this volume with the sense that the upheavals preceding and following 1919 have been flattened and fitted to a contemporary "laborist" agenda. But the dynamics of the workers' revolt was more two-sided than this. It was pushed forward in the sometimes contradictory clash of constitutional laborist practice and an evolving politics of revolution. Within the latter camp, the disintegrating ultraleftism of the Socialist Party of Canada fed new streams of extraparliamentary revolutionary activity. The powerful idea of working-class amalgamation promised to unite craftsman and laborer, sustaining the potent mobilizing zeal of One Big Unionism, while the lessons of Soviet October reverberated in the minds of the militant minority. Out of this would come the Marxist program on which Communist Parties were formed in Canada and elsewhere. The defeat of the workers' revolt had in fact been a singular political event in the making of international communism, which then, for all its vigor, found itself

paying a dear price for being born at the very moment that labor was forced into a series of decisive retreats. Early communists nonetheless nurtured the lessons learned in the workers' revolt for generations, and some in the dissident left opposition premised decades of agitation on their schooling in the class struggles of this formative period.

Heron and his colleagues are thus right to see in 1917-1925 a defining moment in working-class history. They are no doubt equally right to remind us that Canadian workers who once "confronted capitalism as a denial of democracy and justice" could do so again. But under what banner will they march? Which program will lead them forward? This book conducts us toward some contemporary variant of laborism, but it also, if read between its lines of political consensus, suggests the need to look elsewhere.

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