

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Fragar, Ruth. *Sweatshop Strife. Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992, xi+300 pp.

At the moment, the key words in the academic lexicon are—not necessarily in order of preference—class, ethnicity/race and gender. Ruth Frager's *Sweatshop Strife* continues themes which have preoccupied her for a number of years, in particular the problems of class, ethnicity and gender as revealed in the Toronto garment trades during the first half of the twentieth century. This volume is an important addition to our understanding of key issues in labour, ethnic, and women's studies and history. It serves as a useful companion, sometimes corrective, to earlier full-length studies by Joan Sangster on women and the Canadian left, Varpu Lindstrom-Best on Finnish domestics, and Strong-Boag on English-Canadian women between 1919 and 1939.

During the first four decades of this century, some ten to thirteen thousand Toronto workers were employed in the men's, women's and children's clothing industry. Women ranged from forty-five to sixty-two percent of those employed, their numbers declining over time. In 1931 Jews accounted for about thirty percent of women and sixty percent of men in the industry. These men and women represented the modern face of Toronto's wage-earning population as it emerged to succeed the Anglo-Celtic community portrayed by Grey Kealey for the nineteenth century. These garment workers have long been recognized for the fierceness of their confrontation with capital, especially during the 1930s, and their contribution to the development of Canadian socialism and communism. Yet, until Frager's investigation of Yiddish as well as English sources, including an

extensive series of interviews with activists, our portrait of these extraordinary women and men has been incomplete, even misleading.

Sweatshop Strife includes an introduction, eight chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 describes the background of Jewish working-class activism in Toronto and includes attention to its European roots. Chapter 2 investigates the community and union character of Jewish radicalism, assessing its socialist nature in particular. Chapter 3 appraises relations among Jewish bosses and workers. Chapter 4 takes up the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish workers, especially during strikes when the latter refused to participate. Chapter 5 focuses on barriers to equality for women in paid employment, unions, and homes. Chapter 6 considers the failure of unionists and middle-class feminists to develop strategies to address the particular situation of Jewish women workers. Chapter 7 profiles a small group of female activists. Chapter 8 investigates political factionalism in the needle trades during the 1920s and 1930s.

The story told in these pages is especially effective in its evocation of the meaning of class and ethnicity. Their powerful confluence in the creation of Jewish idealism, expressed in both socialism and communism, is movingly and revealingly detailed. The Jewish radicalism and utopianism described by Frager provides an influential successor to the Anglo-Celtic dreams of equality and fraternity that found earlier expression in the Knights of Labour. They also helped give shape to the modern Canadian left. A continuing, albeit often marginal, British progressivism was matched by the arrival of another strain of European thought. Toughened by oppression in Europe, anti-semitism in Canada, and the brutal life of the garment trades, Jewish workers strengthened the intellectual life and practical orientation of the Canadian left.

Sweatshop Strife's treatment of the many unions in the clothing industry very usefully clarifies their distinctions and relationships. Similarly, Frager's discussion of socialism and communism in its Jewish manifestations adds considerably to our awareness of the diverse origins of the modern Canadian left, too often distorted by scholars' preoccupation with Anglo-Celtic sources. Her portrait of the transformation of Victorian Toronto into a rich multiplicity of races and creeds, well before the mass arrival of the Italians so well evoked recently by Franca Iacovetta

for the years after World War II, is a further contribution to this volume.

Sweatshop Strife's chief disappointment, at least from this reviewer's perspective, lies in its treatment of gender. To be sure, Frager makes a valuable distinction between feminism and "gender-role elasticity" (pp. 5-6) and concludes that Jewish women activists were examples of the latter. Their ethnic identity, with its acceptance of a public economic role for women and its assumption of male privilege in spiritual life, meant that these women had little sympathy with the Victorian "cult of true womanhood." Yet, if they were not constrained by the need to be "ladylike," the sexism of unions and families which assumed without question that women would both earn less and work a double shift at home and in the wage labour market, meant that female activism, and more especially leadership, was always limited. Unfortunately, the privilege men had in the four decades covered by this book reappears here in their overwhelming predominance in interviews, photographs and sources of every description. While Frager's snapshot of female activists provides compelling evidence of the absence of feminist motivation, much yet seems unexplored. In particular, the relationship of Jewish women to the non-Jewish majority of their sex in the needle trades, needs greater commentary. Too often male activists are permitted to communicate on behalf of both groups of women. More discussion of women's relationship to the synagogue would also have balanced the critical assessment of Jewish radicalism's failure to address patriarchal norms. Finally, since gender encompasses both sexes, Frager might have paid more attention, particularly in her earlier chapters, to how notions of masculinity for working-class Jews played out on the factory floor, in the unions, and in radical politics.

For all such criticism, Frager has written an important book. Her sensitivity to class, ethnicity and race has taken us significantly closer to understanding their complexity. Imperfections in the final portrait she delivers tell us much about the magnitude of the task Ruth Frager set for herself. Except perhaps for its tongue-twister of a title, *Sweatshop Strife* deserves to be widely read and cited.

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