

LARRY SEFTON
MEMORIAL LECTURE

**"THE TRADE UNION
MOVEMENT
IN TODAY'S
CHANGING SOCIETY"**

by
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The Annual Larry Sefton Memorial Lecture was established by Woodsworth College in 1982 using funds donated to the University in the Update Appeal. It honours Larry Sefton, one of the founders of modern trade unionism in Canada. In his trade union, political and community work, Larry Sefton met a standard of good citizenship which serves as an inspiration to all Canadians.

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I want to talk a little bit tonight about the role of the labour movement, both past and present. I feel very honoured to have the opportunity to do this in the name of Larry Sefton, a person who was an outstanding labour leader in this country, not only in building the Steelworkers union but contributing to the total labour movement and to society. I don't intend to spend time talking about Larry, but for those of you who don't know about him, I suggest that you read Lynn Williams' remarks of December, 1982. He talks about Larry and outlines Larry's long and deep roots and the history of this country very well.

I want to spend a few minutes talking a little bit about the past contribution the labour movement has made to Canadian society. I am sure there are a lot of students who are going through the industrial relations course here who have studied some history of the labour movement. I would argue that the history of the labour movement shows that it has been, in fact, one of the greatest vehicles for social change in our country, both in terms of wages and working conditions for millions of Canadians inside and outside organized labour, organized and unorganized workers. The progressives in the labour movement always understood that the labour movement had another role too, and that was the social role-- a role in the legislative field and a political role. We understood what Walter Reuther used to describe best, that we cannot make progress at the expense of the community but can only make progress with the community; that we can't just be concerned about people's worklife and remuneration, as important as those things are, but we must be active politically and agitating to determine the kind of society we are going to have. Is it going to be a

caring society with adequate social programs and the necessary so-called safety nets that have to be in place for people who are disadvantaged? Or is it going to be a society in which, as the elephant said as he danced amongst the chickens, "Everyone for themselves"?

I think that, if you check the record, you will find that a lot of the basic benefits that Canadians now take for granted in our society, which are in effect by legislation today, the idea or seed so to speak of those structures, in many cases, came from the collective bargaining process. Then the trade union movement, along with others in society including our friends in the social democratic movement, worked closely together and tried to move onto the political front to get similar benefits--not just for the union members who were represented at the bargaining table, but for many more.

If you look at some of the things that we take for granted today, like minimum wages, maximum allowable hours of work, adequate health care, vacations with pay, paid maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, pensions, some remuneration when you're ill, anti-discrimination clauses on the basis of sex, race or national origin, you can trace their roots back to some collective bargaining table. Then we move on to things like paid education leave, health and safety provisions of course, and the list goes on and on. In most of those issues where we had to break new ground there was usually a group of workers who had to make a financial sacrifice, who had to participate in some form of industrial action to make those breakthroughs.

Then we didn't stop at the bargaining table. We joined with others in society and campaigned vigorously to get similar legislation to move those kinds of benefits to the rest of society. Yes, we argue today that the benefits are not enough, in the area of pensions, the whole question on the attack on welfare--there is no doubt where the labour unions were in trying to spread those kinds of benefits throughout a broad section of our society. It still goes on. In the last four or five years in Ontario we

have had the whole question of legislation dealing with what happens to workers in a plant closing, with severance pay and pension benefits. Now we have some legislation on the books. Yes, I would argue that it's not as good as we would like, but it really got its origination from a decision that was taken by my union when we occupied a couple of plants, one being the Houdaille plant in Oshawa. Here workers with large amounts of seniority were being thrown out on the streets without regard to pension benefits, severance pay and things of that kind. That Houdaille occupation focused attention on the issue because the workers there conducted themselves in such a fashion that it created a political climate in which we could agitate for change. Now we have legislation in Ontario that benefits thousands of other workers facing the same kind of difficulties.

In most cases these breakthroughs were done when the labour movement was facing strong opposition from employers. It is still happening in several sections of society. If you don't believe me, just go down to the Labour Relations Board and watch certification petitions, certification applications and the opposition by employers. In many cases there is strong opposition by a powerful political structure as well.

I think that it is important when you are taking a look at the labour movement today to check labour's active political support on other important issues: on civil liberties and civil rights in terms of where they were on questions of fighting for legislative change; where they were in Quebec when the rights of the Quebec workers to negotiate and work in their own language when a majority of them spoke French and the bosses were all speaking English; where they were when debating publicly in convention the right of Quebec to be masters in their own house.

Or check even more recently the comments of people like myself on the whole question of the French language issue in Manitoba. The debate was going on between

the Pawley government and what was happening out there. Let me just take a minute to read something of what I said to our leadership at a meeting of the Canadian UAW Council on that issue. You have to understand that these are auto workers and agricultural implement workers and aerospace workers based mainly in Ontario who were at this council. I said, "I've been very disappointed by what is going on in Manitoba these days in relation to the French language issue. Premier Pawley, who I believe to be one of the most decent persons in Canadian politics today, has been slaughtered in Manitoba because he tried to put into legislation some basic French language rights for what is a very significant French-speaking population in that province. Sterling Lyon, the former Conservative premier in Manitoba latched onto this issue along with some others and really whipped up the population into a frenzy. The result was that Pawley was compromised significantly and even his reduced proposal is being opposed by the Tories."

I said, in short, that our society really stays together because of certain laws but equally important is the respect the majority of the population must have for minorities as individuals and as part of the human family. What we are seeing in Manitoba today is, in my opinion, the breaking down of that respect. When used by so-called political leaders like Sterling Lyon it becomes bigotry at its worst. This kind of political leadership should have no place in our society because of the long-term damage that it does in building any type of consensus.

So you have a union like mine and others in the labour movement who watched the issues in Manitoba and even when we had very few members there, we felt we ought to speak out on that important issue. Check where we were, along with a few other people, on the War Measures Act for people in Quebec who were jailed without regard to whether or not they were charged or guilty.

You will find that unions like the UAW are standing with a few New Democrats in the House of Commons and some in Ontario and are speaking out against that legislation. I would argue that almost every piece of important social legislation in this country from group pensions to people's access to education all have had the labour movement's support.

We haven't let it stop at our borders. We have a major concern about world events. I remember the voices of some of the labour leadership in this country on Vietnam; voices on the cruise missile, our voice also supporting the free trade movement in Poland, Solidarnosc, or on the crushing of the trade union movement in Chile, our voices against the Korean jetliner incident and the US invasion of Grenada. Maybe you'll see that the labour movement has had something to say about these issues and usually has been on the side of the people of those particular countries.

Now, we're active and are concerned about dialogue around the world between the superpowers. We're trying to become more active and more aware and more involved in the peace movements. I hope that those of you in the industrial relations classes will just see the labour movement's role not as a narrow perspective, but as a much broader perspective in society and with a much broader contribution.

I am the first to admit that I am not talking about the entire labour movement. We are not monolithic. All of the labour leaders don't speak the same, don't have the same concerns nor do students and nor does any community you go into. You wouldn't expect us to be monolithic and all going down the same road and speaking on the same issues. What I've talked about is really the broad-based policies that the labour movement has followed in this country because the progressives have really had their voice and really been able to direct the policies that have been adopted. Most of those policies are debated and discussed and adopted at open conventions. The Canadian Labour Congress is a unique organization, probably one of the only central labour

bodies around the world that allows rank and file delegates to gather in large numbers and it's one of the few institutions that debates publicly the questions that we've had to face in the last few years.

And what do we face today? Well, I would argue that in the recent past and still today the labour movement and workers in many areas are still under attack in this country. In 1976 we got wage controls from a Prime Minister who ran on a platform in opposition to them. They started to take away the free collective bargaining process. Those wage controls were sold to the Canadian people on the basis that that would solve all our competitive problems. We would just have three years of controls and everything would be rosy and we would move on to greater heights. Coming out of those controls we started to have rising unemployment. It really started us into one of the deepest recessions since the '30s.

In the past three years in this country the governments have been practising the economic and fiscal policies of monetarism, the use of high interest rates, tight monetary policies and, yes, its deliberate creation of unemployment to do what's known as draining the inflation out of the economy, to participate and enforce a so-called restructuring of our society, to wipe out the "inefficiencies" people talk about. The inefficiencies were the plants and offices employing a lot of working people in this country. The monetarists believe you've got to concentrate the power in fewer corporate hands, and it's happening. Their policy is to believe in absolutely free trade and that multinational corporations have a right to determine in what country they are going to put the jobs around the world. And then we're sold this on the basis that we have to all pull together and it's the equality of sacrifice.

All that I can say is that I am glad that the labour movement in this country did not try to sell that to the membership because I want to tell you, if you talk to a Chrysler worker today, you would not think that he had an equality of sacrifice with

Lee Iacocca who stands to gain between five and six million dollars in the next three or four years. The facts are that the workers in this country who are unemployed are losing their homes because of high interest rates because they couldn't keep their payments up, or farmers who are losing their farms—there are many speculators moving in behind them, speculating on future markets and the money speculators are making millions of dollars out of the deep recession we were in.

Hand-in-hand with that policy of monetarism goes the policy that we have to turn the labour movement back. It is sold on the basis that labour has become too powerful, that workers are taking an unfair share of the economic pie. Of course nothing could be farther from the truth, but it retards labour's progress. It does something else to our society: it discourages people who normally advocate new and important social programs; it discourages those kinds of activities from taking place because the whole thrust is supposedly that we can't afford what we've got and we have to cut back on our social programs. We should be lucky to have a job; we should not be talking about improving our standard of living. So it is designed to turn the clock back on labour. You have to ask yourself, well, if you look around the world, was it successful? If your sole goal is doing something about inflation I guess you can argue that it was successful. We wrestled inflation to the ground and got the unemployed lined up so far they are walking all over us and we couldn't get back up again. If you look at the United Kingdom, if you look at the United States, if you look at Canada today, I think it is fair to say that that turned out to be a very, very costly move for our society in terms of lost production, in terms of social services, etc.

And then you look at the public sector unions. You look at how government conducted themselves as employers, as the example to other employers. They sat down at the bargaining table to bargain wages and benefits. The public sector workers signed collective agreements in good faith, and then when it became

politically opportune and somebody said we have to do something, and the power structure said: "Well, the easiest thing to do and the popular thing to do is to attack the public sector workers and really legislate those collective agreements out of existence."

Then you have the private sector employers who have lectured us for years on the sanctity of collective agreements. We were told that once we signed an agreement for a three-year period, if we had problems through the life of that agreement we had to take those problems to arbitration. We couldn't expect to trot in here in another year from now and say, "By the way, we forgot something, we would like to open up our agreement." And the employer would say, "It doesn't work like that." Then all of a sudden we had employers who were saying to us, "we had a great recession and we're losing money. The situation's changed since we signed the collective agreement. You must now open up your collective agreement and let us take back some of what we agreed to give you." And we said, "we don't understand it that way. That's not the way we've worked over all these years and if you've got an argument with us you have to take it to arbitration." Then they said, "If you don't open up your agreement we are going to take your work and we are going to put it in some other location." We said we didn't think that was a good idea and the editorials started saying, "What's the matter with the labour leadership? Why don't they listen to these employers if they want to open up their agreements?"

So what happened was that we started getting into a contest where worker was being pitted against worker. Workers in plant A were being told if you don't open up your agreement and take a wage reduction, or take a pension reduction, or give us back some cost-of-living money, we will take your work and we will move it over to plant B in the same corporation. And the workers in plant B were being told the same thing.

I remember it very simply. It came to my attention by mail. A small group of workers in Cornwall, Ontario, went into the employer who asked them to talk about the problems they had, asked them to open up their agreement and give back some money that was negotiated. They agreed to do that because they were scared, worried about their jobs. The employer said if you make concessions then we will move 150 jobs or whatever into this plant. And they did. The workers didn't realize that those 150 jobs were coming not only from a plant in Quebec but from the same union, a local union of ours in Quebec. It wasn't a question of making jobs or saving jobs in that situation, it was a question of moving jobs from plant A to plant B.

The multinational employers said then, and say now, if you don't play our rules of the game then we will move the work to low wage countries. We won't build products in Canada or the United States. We will build them in Mexico or some other country. And the labour movement's response in Canada (in which I had, I think, some influence) was that we ought to fight back. I saw the labour movement's role in all this not as selling workers the story that they give back wages and benefits, or that the economy is going to turn around and the employers will all survive, and we will all go down this merry road together and share in something well down the road.

I saw it the opposite way. I saw that it was easy to lead the labour movement when there was an abundance to share, when you were talking about going to employers and getting a share of that abundance, and when you were talking about the developing of social programs. Now you have to have some ingenuity at the bargaining table.

If we didn't stand by the working people, the membership of our union, when they were under attack, I didn't think we had a right to lead the labour movement. I wasn't around in the last depression but if you read a little bit about it, you'll see the economy got deeper and deeper into recession because workers were undercutting each

other for jobs. And that's exactly what was happening in our society. I think the labour movement in Canada, after going through that difficult period, took the absolutely correct position.

We were depicted as uncaring, not giving a damn about jobs. There is no greater example of that, of course, than the direction that my union took in Canada vis-a-vis the United States. We had the U.S. section of our union going down the concession road and we in Canada going down a different road, making all the arguments as to why we ought not to do that. I will talk a little about that in a minute, about the relationship within the international union.

In Chrysler there was the situation where the U.S. workers had in fact voted to postpone the negotiations. We were not receptive to doing that. We wanted to go a different route. Then we backed the Canadian nationalists, and some of the editorial writers, who for years had said, "Why are you in international unions?" "Why can't you take independent positions from the U.S. sections of your union?", all of a sudden were saying, "What's the matter with White and the UAW? Are they nuts? Why don't they do what the Americans are doing? Why aren't they going down the same road as those intelligent people in the United States?"

I couldn't rationalize that in my mind. They wanted us to rubber stamp the U.S. settlement. We said, "No, we are part of the international union but we think we have the right to do our own thing. The economics are different, the mood of the labour movement is different and we are a separate country and a different labour movement."

We were reasonably successful in that and I will argue that other unions in Canada are better off because of the position that we took in that difficult period. And yes, the membership was scared. They had an absolute right to be scared. We were talking of workers in plants who were working maybe three or four months of the

year. You talk to them about whether or not they should give up the few cents an hour supposedly to keep their jobs or whether or not they should gamble on no-concessions with the employer saying, "Well, if you don't do it in the plant in Oakville we will do it in the plant in Cleveland." Those are very real ultimatums that we had to face because in the industry that I represent, those kinds of jobs are moved around quite frequently.

I think in doing that it forced the Canadian labour movement to do some restructuring. Certainly, I can tell you in our union it did. We were rolling along reasonably well--when you are the leadership of the labour movement it's easy to get somewhat distant from the rank and file membership. The stewards were doing their jobs, filing grievances and dealing with in-plant problems. In order to deal with this difficulty we had to carry it right down to the shop and office floor. We had to rebuild the communication system within my union.

At the Canadian Labour Congress, for one of the first times, we had meetings of heads of unions to take absolutely firm positions on collective bargaining concessions. We debated this at the convention and came out united. The result of that was some of the smaller organizations in this country that could not stand the test alone drew encouragement from that. What we said to the in-plant representatives was that the days are gone for just dealing with greivances and working conditions. You have to do all of those, but you have to also talk about the broader issues in our society and you have to talk to the workers about the economy or unemployment or interest rates, about trade, about the political issues. I think it's done that and it has forced us to restructure and it is something that we won't turn back again. Now we are moving ahead with broader education in the labour movement to try and get the on-the-job leadership to deal with the broader issues as well as the day-to-day issues that affect working people.

When we take a look at the future--internally in the labour movement we're going to have to do more restructuring. There are today far too many organizations within the Canadian Labour Congress and because of size and structure it is really impossible for them to respond properly to the difficult tasks that face us today in this changing world.

There are some mergers taking place such as the IUE and the Communications Workers. There have to be more of those. They won't come easy. I won't hide my thoughts. The labour movement has its share of bureaucrats as well, so if you try to change the system, you get a little resentment to it.

I suggested to some of the other unions in the metal field that we try something in the metal industry with steel, rubber workers and molders and start a kind of federation, an umbrella organization, to see if we could live together and then move hopefully down the road to something much more structured than that. That would mean that relationships with international unions would change; it would be different from the agreements in the past. I think that will be positive. It doesn't mean we're mad at the American section of the union, it just means we have to take some different roles and establish different relationships.

When I suggest that around the labour movement some people get awfully upset about it because it rocks the boat. It doesn't necessarily fit with keeping things running smoothly but we've got to be able to look at those things and take chances and move on.

Then you look at the public sector unions in this country. They've gone through an enormously troublesome period. They've grown so fast they've been subjected to wage controls in their collective agreements. They have had to keep working and hopefully get their memberships to understand the necessity of political action. I am not just talking about narrow political action because the government took their

collective agreements away and did something to restrict the right to bargain on health and safety. They had to get more on the broader issues, to get the memberships to understand the necessity of political action going hand-in-hand with collective bargaining.

And there is a lot of talk about cooperation between labour and management. Slogans like 'quality of work life.' I sat on the Ontario Quality of Work Life Advisory Committee for about six years. Some of those ideas and projects will be sincere and do something fundamental about the quality of work life of the employees. A great deal of them will not be. A lot of them will be make-work projects for people who've never seen the inside of plants and , if you watched the circuit they have travelled to make these speeches, whose quality of work life has improved a hundred per cent since they found that slogan.

By the same token we should not be so narrow-minded that we reject a slogan because it's a slogan. We will have to be prepared in the labour movement to take a look at working people who for many years have been paid for their labour to show up in the morning and do what somebody tells them to do. But inside that head there is an enormous brain and an enormous talent. We ought to be able to use that; we ought to be able to have input, to have no problem about experimenting and moving ahead in that regard.

It won't replace collective bargaining. Some people say well you want to get quality of working life in--then that's going to do away with unions. I think that most working people who work in the plants and offices in our unions understand that that's not going to take place. The adversary system, I would argue, works pretty well. There is a lot of cooperation that goes on between labour and management when you look at health and safety programs, you look at alcohol and drug abuse programs, look at grievance-solving. It's a myth that we're in constant confrontation. However the

adversary system of collective bargaining is not going to go away because, in most cases, the interests of the worker at some point conflict with the interests of the employer. We're not going to get the Japanese system over here and we're not going to get the Japanese lifestyle over here or the Japanese culture over here. We're not going to have the Japanese system for workers and have executives paid like Americans either, so we have to make sure what we're talking about--workers are not going to be scapegoats for these experiments.

The labour movement of course must continue to broaden the workers' base and broaden the base of the labour movement at the community level. It must reach out to other groups such as peace groups, church groups, the women's groups and anti-poverty groups--all of the organizations that make up the community. We have to reach out and be seen more at the grass roots level and not just be seen in the context of collective bargaining.

The issues we face in the future are going to be enormous. I think that the greatest issue facing us today is the issue of unemployment. When you look at youth unemployment in this country, everybody is talking about a recovery, and in the auto industry there is some recovery. There are people coming back to work but the "recovery" today still has high unemployment. I think it's four times higher than it was in the last recession we had. There's talk about recovery with unemployment at 11.2 per cent--last month's figures were up again--so surely the issue facing us is unemployment.

If we don't solve the problem of unemployment the labour movement will retard its progress in collective bargaining because there will always be a pool of workers the employer will want to draw on who are desperately looking for work. It will retard the progress on social issues because of arguments that we can't get the money. People who argue we can't put money into unemployment because of the deficit never seem to

take into account the large amount of money coming out in unemployment insurance and welfare payments when people could be paying taxes.

Technology is going to be another major issue facing us. I don't think you can stop the technological revolution that is taking place and in many areas it really is a revolution that's coming. It's not the old system where they used to argue in the 60s, well, don't worry about the people who are going to be laid off by the new technology because they will work in places that are building the technology. That's not the kind of technological revolution we are dealing with today. The question really facing us, it seems to me, is, are we going to use the new technology to improve the standard of living of the people in this country, or are we going to use the new technology to continue youth unemployment at 20 per cent? Are we going to use the new technology to make society more fair?

I think one of the issues that has to be talked about is the question of work time. It's not very popular today to talk about working fewer hours, but if you look at where the labour movement's been, and where we got the 40-hour-work-week from, we have to tackle that question. You can't take on the question of new technology unless you tackle the question of work time. It is only one piece of it, but it is a very important piece. Going hand-in-hand with reduced work time are training and a number of other things. Of course trade is an issue. I've been involved within the auto industry. It's an important issue to us. You hear people talking about free trade, and free trade is a nice slogan, but free trade is saying to the multinational corporations, you solve the problems of trade and you tell us in what country you want to put the jobs.

We are arguing in the auto industry for some change in trade with offshore producers. I said to everybody, "Don't worry about General Motors and Ford solving their problems. They will solve their problems. General Motors will join with the

Toyotas, Ford will join with Toyota, Chrysler will join Mitsubishi and they'll move the work around. They'll move into Mexico or Brazil.

In Japan they see the issue facing Canada, not only in the auto industry but in the machine industry and textiles, as what kind of role is Canada going to play? What kind of a share of the international market is Canada going to get? And if you don't have a trade negotiated by government to government, then you have trade determined by the multinational corporations. They say if you can't compete in the free market then you shouldn't be competing at all. "Step aside," they say, "move onto the scrapheap and we'll build somewhere else."

I'd like to talk about a couple of other things before I close. Take a look at labour management relations in this country. In many cases they have improved. I think if there is anything that management has learned as we went through these difficult times it is that we have to share information. We used to go through collective bargaining, we used to demand to see the company's profits, to see their books, but they never agreed. Then when they stopped making money and were losing millions of dollars they wanted to show us their books. We told them we didn't want to see their books. We didn't trust their books.

I think going through that, labour-management has learned a little bit about dialoguing with each other. I tell you in a lot of the plants that I represent today, workers know much more about the company, much more about their competitors, much more about the quality and much more about the ongoing running of the business. That's important to us.

There are still a lot of managements that are archaic in this country. We still have a lot of managements with whom we have an excellent relationship, but if you go and organize their office they'll just go absolutely bananas about it. That includes the auto industry. If you go and organize the GM Oshawa office you'll find out very

quickly what they think of our quality of work life program. You can get small employers in this country who will conduct long intensive campaigns against certifications of unions but we're making some progress in that. Nobody should think that the labour movement in this society has been accepted by the management community because in many areas it has not. There are a lot of people who attempt to take advantage of that. I didn't think that we'd ever see a situation like we see in this country. We really have a program going into place which is designed to retard the labour movement's progress and do away with progressive labour legislation. It's all done in the name of competitiveness. Someone then says, "After all that's happened in B.C., how come the labour movement in BC is so bad. Why can't we have a nice labour relations climate in BC?" Well, is there any wonder? I think we have to continue to make the fights on those kinds of issues because we just can't sit back and let that kind of a thing go on.

Then of course there's the other argument that's presented to people like myself. Don't you get co-opted? You were co-chairperson of an automobile task force in Canada appointed by the Liberal government. Don't you feel co-opted? Well, I don't feel the least bit co-opted. I think the labour leadership in this country can handle these positions well. You have to get involved in those kinds of discussions and you should not feel co-opted. The governments of the day have an absolute obligation to deal with us. There's a lot of talent around the labour movement. I think we ought to participate in those kinds of things as long as the labour movement leadership understands what our base is. The day we forget that and think that we have really become experts on task forces and we're not representing workers on a task force, that's the day you get co-opted, lose your base and become persona non grata to anybody.

We will have to take some risks in the future but I think these are exciting times. The labour movement has an enormous role to play in the future and it's obvious, in terms of our political role, that we have a lot of work to do in educating our membership. There is high unemployment and people are still worried about taking a chance. But the labour movement cannot step back from the task. We should continue to agitate for change both on the economic front and the social front.

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss these things with you and if somebody wants to ask some questions I am prepared to answer them. Thank you very much.