



# UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**University of Calgary**

**PRISM: University of Calgary's Digital Repository**

---

University of Calgary Press

University of Calgary Press Open Access Books

---

2007

## Filming politics: communism and the portrayal of the working class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1946

Khouri, Malek

University of Calgary Press

---

Khouri, M. "Filming politics: communism and the portrayal of the working class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1946". Series: Cinemas off centre series; 1912-3094: No. 1. University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2007.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/49340>

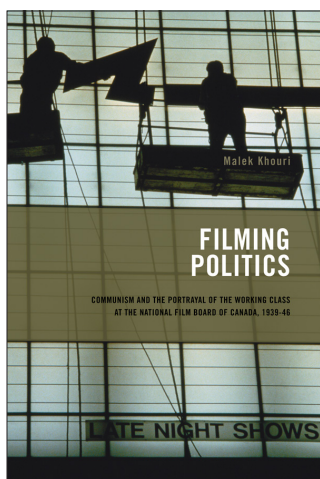
book

---

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 3.0 Unported

Downloaded from PRISM: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>



## FILMING POLITICS: COMMUNISM AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA, 1939-46

by Malek Khouri

ISBN 978-1-55238-670-5

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



### 3 THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WORKING-CLASS COUNTER-HEGEMONIC MOVEMENT: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

The depiction of working-class people within a specific body of film and a precise moment in history is informed by cultural intelligibilities that are drawn from a complex historical process. This process brings together various social, economical, political, and cultural elements. It also constitutes a framework within which certain cultural practices, such as cinema, acquire their ideological significance. Evaluating the ideological and hegemonic significance of the depiction of the working class in the NFB films during World War II requires an appreciation of the political and cultural history within which these films were made. Without assessing this history it is easy to draw conclusions that do not necessarily correspond with the ideological nature of these films and how they impacted the social and political environment within which they operated.

Leftist social and political opposition played a major part in developing the discourse on the working class during the early years of the NFB. By examining elements that have contributed to the development of this discourse, we realize that the NFB's portrayal of the working class largely complemented the views put forward by the Canadian left, particularly through the Communist Party and its Popular Front policy.

There are two major challenges to reading a cultural discourse from a historical setting that is different from ours. On the one hand, there is the temptation to impose a set of ideological assumptions that are products of our own historical time-frame rather than those of the period being addressed. This tendency underestimates the fact that what is ideologically commonsensical in a specific historical moment might not be as such in another. Critical evaluation here becomes burdened by values, norms, criteria and standards that are mostly incompatible with those belonging to the moment in question. The reading in this case is predisposed to inflict ideological input on the subject that belongs to the analyst's own historical setting.

The second inclination does take into consideration the specific and immediate historical setting within which a precise cultural discourse took shape, yet it falls into the trap of underestimating the less-than-immediate setting from which this discourse has emerged. This leads to a reading that is historically static and non-dialectical. Not taking into account that ideological hegemonies are historically responsive, this inclination mystifies the ideological working of a specific discourse, particularly in relation to what preceded it and to its significance as part of a historically grounded dialectic. A corollary to the methodological shortcomings of the above-mentioned tendencies is that they ultimately derail our ability to map the manner in which specific discourses inform, and are informed by, contentions around ideological hegemonies.

The immediate discursive formation that finally embodied the NFB's discourse on the working class crystallized around the mid-1930s when the Communist Party of Canada adopted its Popular Front approach towards working-class politics. The NFB films' discourse on the working class between 1939 and 1946 was itself part of a process that took shape over a period of more than three decades before the creation of the Board.

Since the late nineteenth century, and particularly over the first three decades of the twentieth century, that is to say the period immediately prior to the establishment of the NFB, there had been a major shift in working-class politics in Canada and around the world. As a result of complex internal and external developments, resulting in an increased level of political class militancy and unionization within the working class, a mass counter-hegemonic movement was beginning to emerge in Canada. This movement took shape within a trilateral connection that achieved a zenith by the mid-1930s when it succeeded in incorporating the core of a relatively broad socialist alliance that was largely, but not exclusively, centred around the Communist Party of Canada, with a growing militant working-class movement, and with an emerging group of progressively-oriented organic intellectuals and artists. This Canadian counter-hegemonic historic bloc materialized in what came to be known as the Popular Front.

The policies put forward by this Front constituted a discursive base for the development of a new intellectual formation, which became most influential between the mid-1930s and the early 1940s. Eventually, this helped constitute a loose confederation of intellectuals and critics who had thoroughly analogous objectives, and who developed a body of polemical cultural practices to justify their opinions. It is within this intellectual formation that the NFB's counter-hegemonic discourse on the working class finds its roots.

## THE RADICALIZATION OF THE WORKING CLASS: COMMUNISTS AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Antonio Gramsci's writing became known inside and outside socialist circles in Canada and in North America only in the late 1960s. Yet his ideas – which stipulated an alternate, autonomous, and well-disciplined Marxist political organization with the working class at its centre, and the role of such an organization in bringing together various social forces seeking to change the existing order and to replace it with a new and eventually a socialist order – essentially defined how the working-class-based communist movement in Canada during the 1930s and early 1940s interacted with Canadian social and political culture. This movement exerted an organic political and cultural influence that transcended the immediate realm of the Communist Party and the working class and in many respects functioned in a similar way as a Gramscian *historical bloc*.

The materialization of a broadly based counter-hegemonic bloc by the late 1930s interacted with the earlier formation of a new trilateral connection. This involved the development of an organic link between an increasingly militant and well-organized labour movement, an influential political avant-garde (the socialist movement in general and the Communist Party in particular), and finally, a small but growing number of intellectuals and artists who associated themselves with the working class and with the party.

In the early 1930s, the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) and its militants within the labour movement exerted a very narrow influence among larger sections of Canadian society. The party was not yet capable of exerting a political and intellectual leadership within a wider social and political alliance. The linkage between three elements – the party, the labour movement and left-leaning intellectuals – constituted the critical base for the materialization of a left-wing counter-hegemonic movement in the late 1930s and early 1940s; it also provided the ingredients for developing a wider relationship between the CPC and larger sections of the working class outside of the trade union movement, as well as with other classes and segments of the population. These changes began to take shape shortly after 1935, largely as a direct result of the shift in CPC's policy. However, before I deal with this period in CPC history I will first discuss an earlier critical phase that resulted in solidification and radicalization of the working-class movement itself in Canada. The protracted development of the workers' movement during this period provided the material base for subsequent expansion in the role of the Party and opened the way for the emergence of the Popular Front.

# THE WORKING CLASS, THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE EARLY SOVIET STATE

For the greater part of the twentieth century, labour politics have been influenced largely by the Marxist perspective on the role of the working class in overthrowing capitalism, and in relation to a revolutionary socialist transformation of society. The attempt to apply Marxism to practical revolutionary politics found its first connection in the 1917 Russian Revolution, and in the establishment of the Soviet Union as the “first working-class state in history,” although some consider the 1871 Paris Commune to be the first attempt to establish such a state.

In Canada, Marxist politics finds its roots in home-grown developments associated with the restructuring of industrial capitalism in the early part of the twentieth century. A major event in the history of the development of the Canadian working-class movement, which also contributed to its political radicalization and organizational growth, was the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike. Other elements, such as the upsurge in labour militancy and the consolidation of a broadly based militant trade union movement, the creation of working-class political parties including the Communist Party of Canada in 1921, the Great Depression, and the mobilization to fight against Fascism in Spain, all accelerated the birth and coalescence of the socialist movement in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier organized attempts to create socialist organizations resulted in small formal groups such as the Canadian Socialist League (founded 1901), the Social Democratic Party (founded 1911), and the Socialist Party of Canada (founded 1905).<sup>2</sup> Other groups included the Industrial Workers of the World and the Western Federation Miners, both of which made major impact on the development of working-class culture in Canada in the period before 1914.<sup>3</sup> The early attempts to form what later became the largest self-proclaimed revolutionary Marxist party in Canada occurred in the period between 1917 and 1935, which witnessed one of the twentieth century’s most severe crises of capitalism. According to Ian McKay, there were “scores of revolutionary groups” that mushroomed before the solidification of the CPC, but the “most lasting and memorable monuments to the period came from the Communists especially from *The Worker*, the party’s newspaper, wherein a discourse of heroic revolutionary praxis was richly developed.”<sup>4</sup>

Working-class politics in the first half of the twentieth century were also significantly affected by discussions and contentions about the nature and role of the Soviet Union as a working-class state. As our analysis of the NFB war films will later

show, an important aspect of how these films approached issues relating to labour and the working class also involved evaluating the role played by the Soviet state in world politics, as well as in relation to issues of social, political and economic progress.

Appraising the Soviet Union became the subject of fierce debates within the working class – both in Canada and around the world. As early as 1919, militant Canadian workers from Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal expressed solidarity with the Russian Revolution. In earlier manifestations of this solidarity, workers demanded an end to Canada's involvement in the military intervention by western powers against the newly established Soviet state. During the British Columbia Federation of Labour ninth annual convention, its president, Jack Kavanagh, moved a resolution expressing the Federation's refusal "to assist in the forwarding of the men, money and materials intended for use against the workers of Russia and that the executive committee of the organization carry on a system of propaganda with this in view."<sup>5</sup>

Solidarity between workers and Soviet Russia represented a critical topic in the period prior to the establishment of the NFB. The policy of supporting the Soviet Union attracted positive as well as negative reactions from leading members and organizers of the early Canadian labour movement. To summarize the rationalization of the support for Soviet Russia during the early days of the revolution, I quote a delegate to one of the major labour conventions, which ended up sending messages of solidarity to the Bolsheviks, the Soviet Government and the Spartacists in Germany:

I don't think that we should fail to understand that when the working class over in Russia is being oppressed by the capitalist class of the world, that is our oppression and whatever we can do to assist our fellow workers in those countries it is up to us to do it and to put our ideas into operation, which are identical to those of the workers there and not in our own capitalist class.<sup>6</sup>

During the early years of its creation, the Communist International had a twofold purpose – to bring about socialism in capitalist countries and to defend the Russian Revolution from military and ideological attacks. This policy dominated much of the discourse of the militant working-class movement both internationally and locally. However, as the Soviet state began to recover from the civil war and external intervention by the early 1920s, its government began to encounter numerous internal political and economic difficulties.

The death of Lenin in 1924, compounded with the failure of several revolutionary attempts to create other working-class states in Europe, added to the difficulties facing the Soviet government and presented it with new challenges. Internal schisms

within the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which resulted in the exile of one of the revolution's most senior and respected leaders, Leon Trotsky, also had a major political impact on the unity of communist and labour movements inside and outside the Soviet Union, including in Canada. All these issues variously affected how the world perceived the Soviet Union, its politics and its role in working-class politics. They also meant that support for communist parties, both within and without the working class and the labour movements, could not be taken for granted anymore. In Canada, this resulted in changes in the dynamics of radical working-class politics. It also presented challenges to the Communist Party, forcing it into accommodating pro-Soviet policies that in many cases were hard to defend. Even as early as the 1920s, the emergence of splinter communist groups sympathetic to Leon Trotsky, for example, affected and weakened the support the party enjoyed within the labour and working-class movement. In hindsight, however, the Communist Party was largely able to weather these early political storms and move into the 1930s with relative strength and confidence.

The development of the labour and the unemployed movements during the years of the Depression helped create sympathy for working-class-based socialist politics in Canada from the late 1920 to the mid-1930s. Later, the role played by the communist movement in Canada and in Europe in supporting the Republicans' side in Spain and in creating the anti-fascist Popular Front, the image of the Soviet Union as an ally during World War II, all helped forge the working-class counter-hegemonic discourse in Canada in the early to mid-1930s.

## THE GREAT DEPRESSION

With the market crash of 1929 a long period of deep economic crisis dominated the world capitalist economy. Capitalist crises of overproduction have always been accompanied by high unemployment, and consequently, a tremendous drop in the standard of living for the working class. The acute crisis of relative overproduction was at the heart of the layoffs of hundreds of thousands of workers around the world, and in particular in advanced capitalist countries in Europe and in North America. The ferocity of the situation was reflected in some of the social statistics about the period. While unemployment figures were not kept before World War II, economist A.E. Safarian estimates that about one-fifth of the work force in Canada was unemployed in 1933 when the crisis reached its worse point.<sup>7</sup> By that year, personal disposable



income was almost half that of 1929. In turn, agricultural recovery was painfully slow. Since the overwhelming majority of the workers had no alternative source of income, a large portion of the domestic market all but ceased to exist, thus exacerbating and then prolonging the crisis. In 1937, the personal disposable income still remained substantially below the 1929 level.<sup>8</sup>

The worsening economic situation resulted in widespread poverty and even frequent cases of starvation. For many families this also meant the humiliation of going on the welfare lines and of depending on charity to make ends meet. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed workers had no idea when, where, or how they and their families would eat their next meal or whether they would continue to have a roof over their heads. The Depression forced as many as one million people onto the welfare rolls, and in most cases deprived them of most of their personal possessions. Seizure of people's goods, evictions, and foreclosure of mortgages on farms and homes became common and widespread practices during the Depression. With this crisis at hand, an intensified series of social and political upheavals began to rock most advanced capitalist countries, including Canada. Those upheavals resulted in an increased militancy and political consciousness among people of working-class backgrounds. It also led the government to react in an increasingly violent manner to working-class resistance. As we will see later, NFB films looked at this period as an example of how old and chaotic economic management could lead to major social upheavals. The films would also promote increasing the role of the government in economic and social planning as the only reasonable alternative that could help build a prosperous future for all Canadians.<sup>9</sup>

A two-pronged strategy characterized the work of the militant elements of the labour movement, particularly those connected with the Communist Party during the Depression. On the one hand, they launched a massive effort to organize the unemployed through campaigns demanding jobs and decent wages. They also organized solidarity and relief groups with those forced into poverty by the crisis. The other aspect in the strategy of labour militants was to launch major campaigns to organize industrial workers and to defend their interests against company policies.<sup>10</sup>

A major event took place during this period. In January 1930, as the economic and social situation worsened and labour actions and strikes intensified, communist militants within the trade union movement forged a new labour body: the Workers' Unity League (WUL). The League's stated goal was to persuade less militant unions of the need to set up industrial unions based on class-struggle policies:

The aim was to win the membership to militant policies. Communists in these unions had to struggle for trade union democracy, against the expulsion of militants and for the development of unity from below around specific issues. Their function was to fight for the immediate demands of the workers, expose the class collaborationism of the reformist leadership and contest union election on a program of workers' demands.<sup>11</sup>

As a trade union centre basing itself on the idea of class struggle, the WUL set for itself the task of organizing the unorganized – particularly in mass-production industries.

The WUL undertook the task of organizing militant and mass-based industrial unions under rank-and-file control. As such, it advocated creating unions capable of mobilizing the workers for the defence and improvement of their living and working conditions and ultimately for the overthrow of the capitalist system.<sup>12</sup> On another level the WUL initiated a new strategy in labour organization. The WUL's constitution entrenched the concept of accepting as members all wage workers "regardless of race, creed, color, sex, craft or political affiliations."<sup>13</sup> As we will see later, the emphasis on the equal role and rights of workers of all national backgrounds and the role of women in the work force would become a critical component in the discourse of NFB films during the war.

Six years into the Great Depression the crisis was reaching another high point. Among the most significant developments during this period was the grassroots effort to demand work for the unemployed and higher wages for workers. The campaign would later become known as the On-to-Ottawa Trek. Responding to increased social and political tensions across the country, the federal government, headed at the time by Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, proposed a plan to force single unemployed men into relief camps under military control and in isolated locations throughout the country. The unemployed were to be interned, and to observe military rules. They were also to receive twenty cents a day for their work in the camps. The actual implementation of the plan resulted in exploding strife inside the relief camps themselves.<sup>14</sup> In reality, these camps also became the focus for militant action and organization around the country. The level of militant activity grew within the camps and so did the demonstrations organized by the unemployed in areas outside the camps. The mobilization for the On-to-Ottawa Trek sought to bring together working people from across the country to take trains to Ottawa to place their demands before the Federal Government. Maurice Rush, a witness and one of the participants in the mobilization for the Trek, describes the organization of the campaign:

Recognizing the need for organization and united action, the Workers Unity League (WUL), the Canadian trade union centre led by communists, decided to establish the Relief Camp Workers Union (RCWU). Subsequently, RCWU branches were set up in every camp. Between the time the relief camps were established in 1932 and the On-to-Ottawa Trek of 1935, the RCWU led many struggles for the unemployed, often coming into cities and towns to stage protests.<sup>15</sup>

The role played by the Communist-led WUL was expanding. Even though the League membership did not exceed that of the less-militant trade union federations, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) or the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL), the WUL quickly became the most influential Canadian trade union centre. Whereas the other two centres lost tens of thousands of members during the early half of the decade, the League reached a membership of forty thousand in its first four years of existence. Between 1933 and 1936 the WUL initiated and led 90 per cent of labour strikes in Canada, and in 1933 alone “it led 181 of the 233 strikes which took place. Of this number, 111 were won.”<sup>16</sup>

On another front, while most farmers were involved in bitter fights to save their farms, and workers were struggling to save their jobs and lessen the impact of the Depression on their lives, hundreds of thousands of others had neither farms nor jobs. In 1930, the Unemployed Councils, created earlier by the Communist Party, merged with the National Unemployed Workers’ Association. Later those councils officially declared their affiliation with the WUL.<sup>17</sup> The mobilization of the unemployed and the workers during the On-to-Ottawa Trek campaign in 1935 epitomized the Communist Party’s coming of age. It demonstrated the ability of the party to initiate, organize and lead mass working-class-based actions.

The Trek met a violent end in Regina on July 1, 1935 after an attack by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The events shocked the country and moved Canadians to support the demand for legislation of an official act to guarantee social security. While some CPC supporters claim direct linkage between today’s system of employment insurance and several other social reforms and the fight associated with the Trek events, what is more certain is that the demands put forward by an increasingly powerful and well-organized WUL in support of alternative work policies, ideas about guaranteed wages and farm income became very popular among a wide cross-sections of workers, farmers and the unemployed. Such ideas helped mobilize a protest movement that surpassed any other previous working-class protest in Canada in its popularity and the clarity of its demands.<sup>18</sup>

The protest actions, strikes and activities led by the WUL, including the On-to-Ottawa Trek, became symbols of a widespread rejection of Prime Minister Bennett's response to the country's social and economic crisis. This sentiment played a major part in bringing about the resounding defeat of the Bennett government in the 1935 general election. Under the leadership of William Lyon Mackenzie King the Liberals gained 132 more seats than the Conservatives.

One of King's main campaign policies was his promise to abolish the Relief Camps, which were finally closed in June 1936. The role played by the WUL, the Communists, and the newly established social democratic party known as the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in mobilizing action against the relief camps widened the political base and the respect for the labour-based socialist movement in Canada. Another manifestation of the new atmosphere was one of the points in King's election platform, which promised to repeal Section 98, a law under which communists were detained and imprisoned on the charge of advocating the violent overthrow of the government. The law was also used by the government to suppress attempts to organize workers and trade unions.<sup>19</sup>

Equally important, the new successes of labour enhanced support for a new approach in dealing with the issue of unemployment. It particularly promoted government intervention as an alternative. Later, the two earliest NFB films, *The Case of Charlie Gordon* and *Youth is Tomorrow* – officially produced in 1939 under the auspices of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau – would stress social collective planning and government coordination as the preferred framework for dealing with the problem of unemployment.

## **THE EMERGENCE OF WORKING-CLASS CULTURAL PRACTICE**

Various influences affected the cultural discourse on the working class prior to the establishment of the NFB. They include international as well as Canadian-based cultural practices, both of which helped set the paradigm for political and formal approaches that became widely associated with alternative labour and working-class culture.

## INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES IN THE PERIOD OF *CLASS-AGAINST-CLASS* POLICY

Between 1929 and 1934 the policy of the Communist International emphasized militant class struggle as the main component of its political strategy. Communist parties advocated direct class struggle in their propaganda and agitation work. For communists, the outbreak of the Depression made the goal of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism seem more feasible than ever before:

During the depression, when the workers of the capitalist countries were rapidly organizing and becoming increasingly class conscious, and when the differences between crisis-ridden capitalist economies and socialist construction were all too obvious, socialism seemed just around the corner. The truth scarcely needs to be explained, although it certainly bore repetition. The working class – and its cultural leaders – could well afford to scorn the bourgeoisie and everything associated with it. The working class was able, for a time at least, to ignore its potential allies.<sup>20</sup>

The Canadian Communist Party's policy towards intellectuals was almost one-sided. It based itself solely on gaining their support for the working class in the revolutionary effort to overthrow of capitalism. What in fact was being advocated was a class-against-class approach in which the role of the intellectual would be to help raise class-consciousness among workers in favour of revolutionary socialism. The question of what was in the revolution for the intellectuals themselves seemed almost irrelevant.

Nevertheless, on the international level there was a clear growth of interest among intellectuals and artists in expressing solidarity with working-class and socialist politics. This directly complemented earlier efforts in support of the new Soviet state. Establishing the Workers' International Relief organization (WIR) represented one important example of these efforts.

The WIR was originally created at Lenin's instigation in Berlin in 1921 to help in the effort of famine relief in the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Civil War. With the end of the famine crisis, the WIR, which had numerous branches in several countries, became an international support force for strikers and workers and their families around the world, providing them with food, clothing and shelter. The leader of the German section of the WIR, Willi Muenzenberg, was also interested in the role of cultural propaganda, particularly the role of cinema.

Muenzenberg, who was also the representative of the Communist International in the WIR, proposed that communists change their dismissive and often patronizing

attitude towards film and cultural struggle in general. He declared that “in the main, labour organizations and even Communist Parties and groups have left this most effective means of propaganda and agitation [i.e., film] in the hands of their enemy.” He then argued that the urgent task facing communists at this point was to re-conquer “this supremely important propaganda weapon” which at this point was under the monopoly of the ruling class.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the WIR extended its activity into several mass-media and cultural practices. By the early 1930s, groups of intellectuals and artists who expressed support for labour and socialist ideas began to function in several countries including Germany, the Soviet Union, Britain, France, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, the Netherlands, and Japan.<sup>22</sup>

In the United States the history of working-class cinema goes back to the early days of filmmaking. In his study on silent cinema and its effect in shaping working-class culture in America, Steven Ross illustrates how movies and the working class became intertwined for “nearly two decades after the first nickelodeon opened in 1905.” Ross identifies three elements that characterized the link between early cinema and workers: workers became the industry’s main audience; they also became “the frequent subjects of films;” and finally, workers themselves became makers of movies not only as studio labourers but as independent producers. The emerging industry included a wide range of producers including the American Federation of Labor, the Ford Motor Company, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Women’s Political Union, and the National Child Labor Committee. Among those, “working-class filmmakers were the most ambitious and persistent.”<sup>23</sup> American working-class filmmakers produced films that reflected new ideologically counter-hegemonic alternative to dominant bourgeois values:

As early as 1907, workers, radicals, and labour organizations were making movies that challenged the dominant ideology of individualism and portrayed collective action – whether in the form of unionism or socialist politics – as the most effective way to improve the lives of citizens. Over the next two decades, labour and the left forged an oppositional cinema that used film as a medium of hope to educate, entertain, and mobilize millions of Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Among other means of communication, cinema in America clearly became the most effective political tool for workers to publicize their views and unite their effort. Pre-Hollywood cinema (i.e., mainly before the early 1920s) became the poor man’s amusement. As Ross suggests, this cinema turned the previously hidden and “private realm of factories, mines, and fields into highly visible parts of public culture.”<sup>25</sup> By

the early 1920s, however, the growth of American film production “signalled the rise of a new type of film industry and the birth of ‘Hollywood’ as a metaphor to describe it.”<sup>26</sup> As we saw earlier in our survey of the same period in Canadian cinematic culture, among the issues stressed by private film producers in Canada was finding ways to fight against the dangers of Bolshevik intrusion into the ranks of the working class.

The second wave of working-class cinema in the United States occurred after several WIR sections became increasingly involved in areas of cultural agitation and propaganda. In the early 1930s the WIR organized revolutionary drama groups, dance groups, symphony and mandolin orchestras, bands, choirs and art workshops. Brian Neve’s book *Politics and Film in America* presents a detailed account of the creative ferment that enlivened both the theatre and the left-wing political milieu in New York during the 1930s. The innovative work of collective enterprises such as the Group Theatre, the Worker’s Laboratory Theatre, the Red Dancers, The Living Newspaper, and the Yiddish Artef shaped the political consciousness of many future Hollywood luminaries and created a cultural climate that was generally sympathetic to socialist ideas and to working-class politics.

Among the more active elements within the working-class cultural movement in the U.S. was The Workers’ Film and Photo League (known after 1933 as the Film and Photo League). The league became part of a broad movement sponsored by the WIR and was active in providing visual coverage of working-class events and concerns for the left-wing press.<sup>27</sup> On another level, socialist-oriented filmmakers in the United States established Frontier Films, a collective that sought to balance ideological ties with the Communist Party with the interest in the material produced by Soviet film and theatre artists such as Stanislavsky, Pudovkin, Vertov, and Eisenstein.<sup>28</sup>

## **CANADIAN INFLUENCES AND *CLASS-AGAINST-CLASS* POLICY**

Before the Russian Revolution and before the outbreak of the Great Depression, the role of the intellectual as a socialist activist or critic was largely unheard of in Canada. Aside from periodic and dispersed intellectual activism associated in Quebec, for example, with the Catholic Church, or in English Canada with the Mechanics Institutes or the Knights of Labour, Canada had few sites of organized working-class cultural practices.

According to Michiel Horn, “few intellectuals questioned the institution of private property, the dominance of capital over labour, or the benefits of a market economy.”<sup>29</sup>

He suggests that “probably the great majority of [intellectuals] shared the prevailing ideas and beliefs without thinking much about them. It was the safe, sensible, natural course.”<sup>30</sup> However, the advent of the Russian revolution provided an incentive for the organizational and ideological enhancement of a working-class-based culture.

In 1921, the Communist Party initiated an organization called the Canadian Friends of Soviet Russia, which soon joined the previously mentioned World International Relief (WIR). The Canadian branch was headed by prominent party leader Florence Custance.<sup>31</sup> No documented evidence points directly to the link between the Canadian branch of the WIR and the development of local progressive cultural organizations or with the successive emergence of what later became the most active communist-related cultural groups, the Progressive Arts Clubs. The official platform of the two groups, however, as well as their goals, activities, and the manner in which they were both led by Communist Party members all offer indications as to a consolidation of an active circle of Canadian artists and intellectuals with close ties to the working-class and with socialist ideas and politics.

It is important to note here that the early communist movement in Canada included very few intellectuals within its ranks. Since its very foundation in 1921 the Party’s membership and leadership had come overwhelmingly from people of working-class background – a healthy indication for a self-proclaimed working-class party, but not as healthy for a movement that was also interested in building alliances with other sections of society, including intellectuals. According to the Party’s own organizational reports, of a total party membership of 4,500 in 1925, “800 were miners, 800 lumber workers, 400 railroad workers, 800 to 1,000 farmers, most of whom also worked in the mines or the lumber camps, and most of the remainder were city workers employed in the needle, leather and metal trades.”<sup>32</sup> During the first ten years of its establishment the party gave low priority to recruiting writers, artists, professionals, university graduates, or students. However, when the party began to experience substantial growth in the 1930s, it also became more willing to accept a greater variety of members. As noted earlier, by the early 1930s radical socialists, particularly communists, were beginning to build links with the more active and militant sections of the Canadian working class. But the party was also beginning to create a nucleus of support among other segments of the population.<sup>33</sup>

The new radicalism was finally beginning to take root among a small but nevertheless growing number of intellectuals. While it never rose to prominence in the early years of the Great Depression, the transported genres of proletarian literature and socialist realism – including poetry, novels and other art forms, some of which were brought from abroad by Russian, Jewish and Eastern European socialist and communist



working-class activists – all became familiar features among working-class people as well as a growing number of intellectuals. More and more radical artists and writers were expressing pronounced and bold sympathy for the plight of the underprivileged and their own anger against prospering capitalists.<sup>34</sup> In 1932, Canadian communists initiated organizations that became active in the fields of arts and culture and in support of several working-class causes. According to Ivan Avakumovic:

To begin with, there emerged a nucleus of young intellectuals who identified themselves publicly with the CPC.... Those intellectuals who were not wholly involved in the party apparatus or the Communist-led trade unions were active in the Progressive Arts Club... Communist influence among intellectuals also increased when the CPC made a determined effort to gain the sympathy of a broad spectrum of non-Communists who were disturbed by certain developments at home and abroad.<sup>35</sup>

Further, Avakumovic points out that “attempts to curtail the civil rights of communists in Toronto... brought party members into contact with Protestant clergymen, professors at the University of Toronto and pacifists grouped around the Fellowship of Reconciliation.” This broadening group of intellectuals became involved in mass public events that supported all kinds of activities by striking workers and the unemployed, and opposed the actions of the government against workers. Later, those intellectuals also “provided a nucleus of intellectuals who were prepared to join forces, or sympathize with the communists when party members organized a Canadian congress against War and Fascism in Toronto in October 1934.”<sup>36</sup> With some of its roots found in the cultural activities and meetings in the home of Abraham Nisnevitz – an immigrant poet who wrote both in Yiddish and English and whose house became the centre of a variety of cultural activities and events that were deeply committed to supporting working-class causes – socialist oriented intellectuals were slowly coming to the fore of a Canadian progressive artistic movement.

In 1932 a group of thirty-five people comprised of mainly blue-collar workers and a few students was established in Toronto as the Progressive Arts Club (PAC). The club was divided into subgroups of writers, artists, and theatre workers. Later, new sections were created in Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver as well as smaller industrial communities in Ontario. The club printed its own journal, *Masses*, which published members’ articles, poems, and short stories. They also published material in *Always Ready*, a magazine dedicated to children; in the Communist Party newspaper *The Worker*; and in *The Labour Defender*, the organ of the Canadian Labour Defence

League. Among the writers contributing to these journals were Maurice Granite, Oscar Ryan, E. Cecil-Smith (who later commanded the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion fighting on the side of the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War), Dorothy Livesay and Stanley Ryerson.<sup>37</sup> The group also included several artists:

Among the artists were the sculptors Helen Nelson and Sam Dagan, who made busts of workers and Party members, and the cartoonists Avrom Yanovsky and "RIC" (Richard Taylor, who later became a cartoonist for the *New Yorker*). The pictures and cartoons in *Masses* were all done by the painstaking process of linoleum block printing. It was considered a proletarian medium because of its cheapness and accessibility. Moreover any printing house which offered to do engraving for *Masses* was subject to police raids. The artists' group also designed, drew and printed posters and handbills for numerous demonstrations and rallies, all of which had to be done in complete secrecy.<sup>38</sup>

In its effort to drum up further support for proletarian culture *Masses* became one of the more important journals read by progressive intellectuals around the country. The journal published full scripts of agitation and propaganda plays, order slips for workers' songbooks, commentaries and publicity material on progressive art exhibitions, theatre productions, and other PAC, labour and socialist public events and activities. Between April 1932 and April 1934 the journal published twelve issues.

*Masses* concentrated on Canadian events concerning workers such as strikes, police brutality, arrests of workers and the struggle against the implementation of repressive government legislation. In an effort to stress the goal of international communism, *Masses* regularly drew parallels "between the character and actions of both local and international capitalists, fascists and workers."<sup>39</sup> The journal also covered developments in the Soviet Union and expressed its solidarity with it. As we will see later, an important feature in the NFB films' discourse about a new role for workers and farmers in the political and administrative leadership of Canada was similarly based in pointing out the achievements of workers in the Soviet Union.

The radicalization of the working-class cultural movement in Canada was also manifest in the rise in influence of a number of women artists and writers. In his study on the role of women in the communist culture of the early 1930s, Douglas Parker draws attention to what he considers a watershed in the development of the radical women's movement and its contribution to Canadian culture in general and to socialist political discourse in particular.

Parker suggests that the increased participation of women in left-wing groups shifted the focus away from a “rigidly defined proletarian literature,” and towards a literary and artistic aesthetic that incorporated broader and more gender inclusive themes and concerns.<sup>40</sup> Within the same context, other progressive artists were becoming part of Canadian artistic scene. Paraskeva Clark added a new dimension to the circle of painters in Toronto during the 1930s and later in the 1940s. Her paintings, largely influenced by cubism and her years of training in the Soviet Free Studios between 1917 and 1921, offered an alternative perspective to the influential Group of Seven and helped instigate new artistic movement that emphasized organic links with the social and political struggles of the day.

In theatre, it is suggested that the first Canadian example that deserves consideration in the discussion of documentary theatre emerged out of the tradition of the Agitprop Theatre, and particularly the production of the Communist-Party-inspired play *Eight Men Speak* in 1933.<sup>41</sup> The Agitprop was originally created in the 1920s by workers’ theatres in Britain and the United States. It derived from the revolutionary theatres of Germany and the Soviet Union. The Agitprop presented polemical statements on political developments and depicted the ideological significance of events rather than the events themselves. *Eight Men Speak* indirectly dealt with an event that became the subject of a widespread protest movement in Canada.

In August 1931 the RCMP raided the offices of the Communist Party and the homes of party leaders. The authorities arrested eight communist leaders, including its general secretary Tim Buck and Tom McEwen, the leader of the Workers’ Unity League. This was done under the authority of Section 98 of the Criminal Code which was used to link the Communist Party to professing violent overthrow of government. The trial of the eight Communist leaders and the attempted murder of Tim Buck in the Kingston Penitentiary prison inspired the production of *Eight Men Speak*.

The campaign launched in solidarity with the leaders of the CPC and the WUL and other communist and labour leaders during their internment was of critical importance. By November 1933 the campaign became the subject of a petition that was later officially presented to Prime Minister Bennett. The petition, which bore 450,000 signatures, demanded the release of the eight prisoners, an investigation into the attempted murder of Tim Buck and a repeal of Section 98. The welcome rally later organized to celebrate the freeing of the communist and labour leaders in the Maple Leaf Gardens in 1934 was attended by 17,000 people, while 8,000 others had to be turned away for lack of space.<sup>42</sup>

By the time the play *Eight Men Speak* was staged, the wide support for the political cause that it advocated was already largely established. The launching of the play,

however, did not only reflect this grassroots support but also contributed to building the campaign to free labour and communist leaders from jail and to repeal Section 98 of the Criminal Code. This was indicative of the way the influence of a working-class cultural discourse was beginning to transcend the confines of an intellectual avant-garde to assume an influential position in creating a new form of popular culture.

The four authors of *Eight Men Speak*, Oscar Ryan, E. Cecil-Smith, Frank Love and Mildred Goldberg, took care to disguise any details that could lead to libel suits. The day after the resounding success of the first performance of the play, which attracted a capacity crowd of 1,500 people, the police threatened to revoke the theatre's license. The virtual outlawing of the play spurred the left-wing cultural movement to launch a political campaign in defence of working-class culture.<sup>43</sup> The play's success in attracting the attention of the general public also signalled the emergence of a new kind of a cultural current. This current organically linked between the organized socialist movement, the grassroots working-class movement, and an emerging group of intellectuals. This took place as the labour movement was strengthening its own organizational base, and in conjunction with the solidification of the role played by socialist militant elements within this movement.

The emergence of a working-class-based cultural practice in Canada in the 1930s owed a great deal to the way communist intellectual activists saw and stressed their own role as part of a broad movement for social and political change. These intellectuals sought ways through which their artistic production became relevant to the struggles that were taking place around the country and the world. Consequently, they saw a need to be accessible – both formally and in terms of content – to wider sections of the population and particularly to their intended working-class audience, and they consciously attempted to do so without patronizing. As such, many of these intellectuals became popular and celebrated figures among workers. Despite their idealistic, hyperbolic, and in many cases erroneous evaluation of Soviet achievements, and their disregard of the critiques of abuses that were beginning to take place in this “worker's state,” these intellectuals' contribution to Canadian cultural and political life was mainly innovative, genuine and more importantly, effective. Their input also translated in a qualitatively dramatic shift from the elitism that characterized the work of many other artists and intellectuals of the same and earlier periods.

In many cases, such as that of *Eight Men Speak*, the successes of these intellectuals in building direct links with workers and grassroots sections of Canadian society became a major element in the development of the socialist and the working-class movement itself. Equally as important, they provided solid grounds for the subsequent production and dissemination of a broader based working-class cultural and artistic practice that

went beyond the immediate circles of this class and its supporting intellectuals, to become part of an emerging counter-hegemonic discourse.

As the Communist Party shifted away from its isolationist class-against-class approach to the more inclusive Popular Front strategy, the already-built alliances with the working-class movement and a core of organic intellectuals formed a nucleus for even wider cultural and political connections. The integration of three major components of working-class political culture – the militant labour movement, the Communist Party, and supporting organic intellectuals – comprised the base for the further labouring<sup>44</sup> of Canadian cultural discourse. NFB films constituted an important example of how this discourse became manifest in various areas of Canadian cultural practice.

For communist militants, advocating unity in the fight against Fascism gradually provided the link between the short and long-term objectives of the working-class movement. The struggle for democracy and social justice was considered as a prerequisite for the subsequent struggle for socialist transformation. In this context, the Communist Party was essentially engaging in a protracted struggle against bourgeois ideological hegemony, a *war of position* of sorts, to cite Gramsci's famous analogy. Within this prolonged struggle, the left would forward its own common sense ideas and philosophy.

## FROM CLASS-AGAINST-CLASS TO THE POPULAR FRONT

A critical moment in the development of the socialist movement in Canada in the mid-1930s relates to the formation of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). Although originally intended as a federation, the CCF eventually became a membership organization based on clubs. Many workers flocked to join the new social democratic party that broadly declared itself in favour of a new social order. Clearly, communists were faced with the task of defining their relationship to this new player on the Canadian left-wing scene. The predominant view at the time within the Communist International was that social democracy was equivalent to “social fascism” and therefore “would have to be rejected and ultimately defeated if socialism were [*sic*] to win out over fascism.”<sup>45</sup> In Canada, as well as in other countries, this attitude towards social democracy isolated communists from wide segments of the non-Marxist left. It also contributed to depriving the working-class movement of the potential of becoming a leading element within a historical bloc

capable of incorporating larger sections of the population, let alone an effective transformational force in politics.

Faced with the dangerous rise of fascist movements in Europe, particularly in Spain, Italy and Germany, the 1935 Seventh Congress of the Communist International (CI) denounced its earlier position toward social democracy. The CI called for the unity of the two movements in the goal of defeating fascism and preventing war. It also advocated the creation of united fronts in defence of democracy. These fronts were to include ideologically diverse workers' organizations, middle-class groups and even anti-fascist capitalists. A statement by Georgi Dimitrov the leaders of the CI declared:

Joint actions by the parties of both [Communist and Socialist] Internationals against fascism, however, would not be confined to influence their present adherents, the Communists and Social-Democrats; it would also exert a powerful influences on the ranks of the Catholic, anarchist and unorganized workers; even on those who had temporarily become the victims of fascist demagogy. Moreover, a powerful united front of the proletariat would exert tremendous influence on all other strata of the intelligentsia. A united front would inspire the wavering groups with faith in the strength of the working class.<sup>46</sup>

Dimitrov characterized fascism as “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital.”<sup>47</sup> The new policy argued that while fascism was a capitalist-based ideology, capitalism itself does not necessarily equate fascism.

NFB films during World War II would later present a synonymous interpretation of the need to ally Canada's and western fighting resources with those of the Soviet Union. Some of those films would also clearly argue for the creation of a common front between anti-fascists of different ideological and social backgrounds. For example, the films dealing with the Chinese resistance against the Japanese invasion would explicitly emphasize the United Front between Chinese communists and nationalists as an example of the effective way of fighting fascism. A similar approach would be taken vis-à-vis the communist-led resistance movement against the Nazis in the Balkans and Greece, which also included in its ranks a wide range of political and social ingredients.

As communist parties continued to support short- and long-term working-class demands including the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, they were persuaded that the effective struggle against fascism necessitated linking their work with broad-based social and political movements. The United Front policy (the term *United Front*

was used interchangeably with the term *Popular Front* by CI Marxists at the time) resulted in a qualitative change in the political stature of communist parties. The new policy created parameters for an innovative relationship between, on the one hand, working-class and labour militants, communist parties and socialist intellectuals, and on the other, non-Marxist socialists and progressives, and even liberal minded intellectuals – both within the rank and file of the working classes as well as among other classes and sections of society.

Popular Front policy also offered revamped interpretations of the involvement of communists in the fight for democracy. This played an important role in the left's subsequent expansion of influence. The struggle for democracy and social justice was proposed as synonymous with – and even a prerequisite to – the struggle for socialism.

On August 4, 1943, two Communist Party members, J.B. Salsberg and A.A. MacLeod, were elected from Toronto ridings to the Ontario Legislative Assembly. Successes at the provincial level were quickly followed by other accomplishments in municipal elections across the country. During the same year the Labour Progressive Party (the party under which the CPC operated at the time) elected its first and, up to today, only member of Parliament. The party's candidate, Fred Rose, won a by-election in the Montreal working-class federal riding of Cartier. Rose became the only Communist Party member ever to be elected in a federal election in the United States or Canada. In one of his speeches a few years later in the House of Commons, Rose summarized how his party reconciled democracy as a constituent element in the fight for socialism:

The issue to-day is not what these [anti-Communist] people call free enterprise versus socialism; the issue is democratic progress versus chaos and insecurity. Our party, the Labour Progressive Party, stands for socialism, but we are realistic enough to know and to understand that the vast majority of Canadians are to-day not yet ready for it. We consider that at this time the fight for social progress is a fight in which the people will learn, through their own experience, whether or not they want socialism. The essence of socialism is democracy, and it will not come until the majority of Canadians learn through their own experience that socialism is the system they need.<sup>48</sup>

Rose's discourse exemplified how communists rationalized their Popular Front policy. It also reflected how communists at the time looked at the struggle against capitalism as a protracted battle rather than as a revolutionary overthrow of government.

The new CPC approach provided vital enhancement to labour and communist action around the country, and helped the party reach out successfully to wider segments of Canadian society throughout the war period. The Front's interpretation of the struggle for democracy became central in the NFB films' discourse on the fight against fascism as well as its approximation of Canada's post-war future. The issues of struggle for social and economic justice, equal opportunity, collective participation in the political process and for workers' equal share in managing the workplace, all became synonymous with these films' interpretation of the struggle for a democratic future.

## UNITY WITHIN THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

The adoption of Popular Front policy in 1935 was accompanied by closer cooperation between the communist-led Workers Unity League and other labour unions. Earlier, the labour movement was marred by passionate inner fights that resulted in major divisions, splits and reorganizations. The Popular Front approach promoted by the Canadian CP after 1935 ultimately helped the party strengthen its position in the rank and file and leadership of the Canadian trade union movement.

By the mid-1930s the Workers Unity League was the centre of most major union organizing campaigns, particularly within larger labour unions and the natural-resources-based industries. WUL and communist activists became the principal and most active organizers in the major industries of Canadian forestry, mining, steelworkers and fishing industries, as well as among workers in construction and building, painting and carpentry, garment and clothing factories, and electrical and machine industries.<sup>49</sup> As communists increasingly focused on new United Front policies, the WUL advocated support for a united Canadian trade union centre. The proposal was positively received by most sections of the less militant TLC (Trades and Labour Congress) and the ACCL (All-Canadian Congress of Labour). A year after the WUL made its official appeal for "full organization [labour] unity" the constituent unions of the WUL finally merged with their TLC counterparts.<sup>50</sup> The merger increased the membership of the Canadian trade union movement by 30 per cent between 1936 and 1937 and allowed communists to play a leading role in both the grassroots and leadership levels of the labour movement.<sup>51</sup>

The merger between the WUL and TLC also had a significant effect in developing an organizational and political link between Canadian and American labour unions. Although it was considered a regrettable development by some Canadian



labour historians (Irving Abella's *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour* characterizes it as symptomatic of the Americanization of the Canadian labour movement), the majority of Canadian union members "saw the American connection as both necessary and beneficial."<sup>52</sup> In this regard the merger also complemented the left-wing anti-nationalist perspective within the movement. The left's position on the issue of nationalism was later echoed by John Grierson and in NFB films.

Considering our earlier discussion on the views on nationalism within the circles of Canadian cinematic culture, the left's position clearly contrasted with that of the Canadian National Council on Education and the National Film Society prior to the establishment of the NFB. Indeed, the view in favour of international solidarity later constituted a critical component in the discourse of NFB war films. Support for this solidarity would also be demonstrated in these films' emphasis on the need for internationalist labour unity. Furthermore, the activities of the Board would involve producing films in cooperation with American labour unions, such as 1943's *Coal Face, Canada* (Robert Edmonds).

The shift in the position of the communists and their labour supporters towards a more accommodating relationship with their social democratic rivals was not without its negative effects. The WUL advocated a grassroots-based structure and emphasized recruiting on a shop-focused basis, in contrast to the craft-dominated approach of the traditional trade union centres at the time. This allowed for a wider involvement by workers in the affairs of the unions. It also allowed for the more active involvement of women workers, at least within the industries that represented a major section of the work force. In her study of the work of the Communist Party within the Industrial Union of Needle Trades Workers (IUNTW), Mercedes Steedman suggests that as the WUL merged into other union centres, several aspects of the earlier progressive features of the union organizing receded. Steedman argues that the changes in the union structures might have contributed later to the gradual re-marginalizing of women within labour.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these setbacks, the WUL policy of labour unity contributed in the long run to the development of a less divided and more inclusive trade union movement. Later during the war the unity of the movement would play a more major role in building stronger links with other segments of society including women, racial minorities and intellectuals from different social classes. It would also enhance a less sectarian discourse and practice on labour and working-class issues, including on the role of working-class women. As I note later, the depiction of women in NFB war films would reflect a higher level of sensitivity in connection with the role and rights of working women as well as those of racial minorities.

## THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR AND THE EXPANSION OF THE ROLE OF PROGRESSIVE INTELLECTUALS

A significant expansion in the organic role of militant working-class activists and intellectuals after 1935 took place in the context of supporting the Republican's cause in the Spanish Civil War. The fascist revolt against the newly elected left-wing government in Spain led to a major international campaign of solidarity with its loyalist supporters. By the end of the war in 1939 the campaign involved around 60,000 volunteer participants from 53 countries who served in the International Brigades of the Republican Army.<sup>54</sup> The campaign had a major impact on the realm of cultural discourse and practice in Canada and around the world. New links were created among local and international grassroots labour activists and with a considerably larger number of artists and intellectuals. Some of the artists involved in the campaign would later constitute a large section of the filmmakers and technicians of the NFB during its early years.

Internationally, many intellectuals who were unwilling to accept Marxism or militant working-class politics were, on the other hand, vehemently opposed to fascism and war. From the outset, many professionals and artists eagerly joined hands with an increasingly better organized and united working-class movement. Leftist and labour-oriented activists reached out to anti-fascist writers, poets, artists and theatre groups. Leading and influential intellectuals such as George Orwell, Stephen Spender, Arthur Koestler, André Malraux, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Lillian Hellman, Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, and John Dos Passos; artists such as Pablo Picasso, Man Ray and Diego Rivera; and filmmakers such as Luis Buñuel, Jean Renoir, Jean Cocteau, and Alberto Cavalcanti, among many others, were drawn to support a cause widely seen as a front-line struggle to prevent fascism from spreading and endangering world peace.

In Canada, the communist-led League Against Fascism and War was comprised of more than 250,000 Canadians by 1937.<sup>55</sup> The movement in support of the Spanish Republicans stressed short and long-term links between the interests of working-class Canadians and the fight against fascism, and sought to forge a new alliance between this and other classes and sections of Canadian society, as well as with groups of intellectuals and artists.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936 members of the Communist Party of Canada, with the help of leading trade unionists, were already involved in activities in support of peace and against the rise of fascism in Europe. In its

mobilization in support of the left-wing Republican government in Spain, the CPC launched the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion (MPB). The group included a wide cross-section of socialists and a significant number of labour activists, independent leftists and anti-fascists. As it grew, the Battalion began to enlist scores of office workers, students, professionals, intellectuals and artists. Most supporters of the MPB made their decision to join based on political solidarity, not necessarily or only on the imperatives of working-class or socialist politics. All in all Canada sent 1,200 men and women volunteers to Spain to fight against fascism at a time when the Canadian government “did everything in its power to stop the volunteers from going.”<sup>56</sup>

The anti-fascist movement gained currency throughout left-wing and liberal Canadian political circles. Merrily Weisbord gives a moving account of the atmosphere within which a significant number of intellectuals committed themselves to the fight against fascism in Spain:

Embattled Spain had become the symbol of world freedom, and young people from many countries set out to fight for the Republicans. They were housed for several weeks in a center in Paris, then taken in covered trucks to the Spanish border, where they crossed the treacherous Pyrenees on foot.... It was as if the future of the world was decided on the barricades in Spain. “Madrid will be the tomb of fascism! Shouted the Republicans. “They shall not pass! No pasaran! A “Lettre du Front” from members of the Mac-Pap Battalion, published in the Canadian communist paper *Clarte*, May 1937, read: “We can already see that the cause of democratic Spain is the cause of humanity. If the fascism is victorious here, there will be a generalized attack against the democracies of Europe.... We call on all Canadians who cherish peace and democracy to launch an appeal to save humanity from the barbarism of fascism.”<sup>57</sup>

The shift in focus from the class-against-class policy towards the more inclusive Popular Front affected the way Canadians from different class backgrounds conceived of the notion of democracy. In other words, questions relating to what democracy implied and what political players it involved became prominent, particularly in light of the rise of fascism in Spain and the political forces that were involved both in supporting it and in fighting against it. The defence of democracy, for that matter, was now being associated with defending a democratically elected left-wing government. The pronounced neutrality and silence of several western governments in relation to what was taking place in Spain, and the explicit determination of some, including the Canadian government, to try to derail the grassroots efforts to support the legitimate

elected Spanish government, threw into doubt the sincerity of their commitment to democratic values and to peace. For Canadians such as doctor Norman Bethune, Spain became the place where “the real issues of our time [were] fought out” and where “democracy [would] either die or survive.”<sup>58</sup> A new political and cultural movement was clearly taking shape, and a growing number of Canadians were becoming involved in it.

On the one hand, Canadian intellectuals who supported the anti-fascist cause in Spain became the focus of a mass movement that galvanized major sections of the working class and a sizable segment of the middle class. On the other hand, involvement in support of this cause also helped raise the stature of numerous intellectuals and professionals. People like Norman Bethune, painter Fred Taylor, and scientist Raymond Boyer and other middle-class teachers, scientists, and professionals “worked tirelessly as fund-raisers and as committed leaders of the broad-based, united-front organizations, such as the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, the Civil Liberties Union, and the League Against Fascism and War.”<sup>59</sup> Over a relatively short period of time, groups led by these individuals became well-entrenched influential organic intellectual features within Canadian society:

Specific interest groups organized by these individuals reached further into the community; the Artists’ Group; the New Theatre Group; and Norman Bethune’s group for the Security of the People’s Health – an organization of doctors, nurses, and social workers of various political leanings who addressed the problems of health-care for the poor and the unemployed, studied health-care systems in other countries, and made concrete proposals to the government and professional associations for more equal distribution of medical services. Fred Taylor would become an officer in the Federation of Canadian Artists, and Raymond Boyer would become president of the Canadian Association of Scientific Workers.<sup>60</sup>

The organic role played by these intellectuals and groups enhanced the organizational and ideological emergence and solidification of the counter-hegemonic formation and its discourse. This discourse would particularly stress the interrelationships between fighting fascism and the struggle for democracy, social justice and labour rights. NFB war films would incorporate a largely analogous approach in their analysis and outlook on the events of World War II and working-class related topics.

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW HISTORICAL BLOC

By 1921, women were highly visible participants in the Canadian labour market. Half of all single women in Ontario, for example, were employed outside their homes, and women in Toronto comprised close to one-third of the work force. Even in Ontario's industrial manufacturing plants that were not typically associated with female labour, women held one position in every five.<sup>61</sup> Despite the overwhelmingly sexist and patriarchal atmosphere of the early twentieth century, women made major contributions to the development of the Canadian labour movement as well as to the building of working-class political and cultural consciousness. Women also played major roles in the actual development of Canadian socialist and communist organizations.

Several leading labour and communist organizers between the 1920s and 1940s were women. Among those were Florence Custance, the first secretary of the Canadian Friends of Soviet Russia; Bea Colle, the secretary (leader) of the Friends of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion; Beckie Buhay, the editor of the early Communist Party press and a leading member of the party; Florence Theodore, leader of the Party in Saskatchewan; Jeanne Corbin, an organizer of bush-workers and miners in Northeastern Ontario and Quebec; Lea Robak and Madeleine Parent, both leading Quebec organizers in the needle trade and the electrical industries; and Annie Buller, an organizer for both the Industrial Union of Needle Trades and the Workers' Unity League, and leader in the Estevan miners' strike of 1929. These leaders were among the first Canadian women ever to gain prominence in the arena of Canadian politics, let alone among the largely male-dominated industrial sectors of the working class. With the federal elections of 1940, Dorise W. Nielsen, a candidate for the Labour Progressive Party in Saskatchewan running under the banner of a leftist coalition, became the first communist-supported candidate to be elected to the House of Commons and the only woman to be voted in during those elections.

However, the large role played by women within the Communist Party and within the labour movement as a whole was by no means indicative of an incorporation of a women's agenda per se in left-wing politics. Many current feminist historians would even claim that, if anything, such involvement by women in labour politics might even have inadvertently helped rationalize or even legitimize marginalizing women's issues in leftist politics during this period.<sup>62</sup> In any case, it is impossible to imagine how the role played by these pioneer working-class women activists could have enhanced anything but a major challenge to patriarchal attitudes towards women during this

masculinized era in Canadian history. If anything, these women, in multiple ways, helped open the way for a better understanding of the interactivity between different types of oppression that affect society, including those based in gender. What is also certain is that the participation of women in socialist and working-class politics in the late 1920s and early 1930s also informed their subsequent partaking in and their major role in materializing counter-hegemonic Canadian cultural practices in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the words of Douglas Parker:

Not only did women artists and writers involved with the cultural left in Canada significantly affect the representation of women, but they also left a profound effect on Canadian culture as a whole. They were, in fact, more successful practitioners of social commentary on the 1930s than were men. Few contemporary novels capture the plight of the unemployed worker in Canada during the Depression better than Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* (1939). Dorothy Livesay's award-winning *Day and Night* and *The Outrider* are still considered the quintessential, and most technically successful, poems of social protest from the Depression era. Anne Marriott's *The Wind Our Enemy* characterizes the hopeless optimism of the prairie farmers; Michiel Horn referred to it in his introduction to *The Dirty Thirties*. Significantly, the front cover of Bryan Palmer's *Working Class* features Paraskeva Clark's *Petroushka*, a painting done in 1937 and part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada.<sup>63</sup>

The communist-based cultural journal *New Frontier*, which succeeded *Masses*, reflected the emergence of new and more inclusive Canadian progressive politics. Of specific importance was the new journal's conscious effort to encourage and "pursue the examination of women's special oppression under patriarchy."<sup>64</sup> *New Frontier* exemplified an important episode in the history of the participation of women in Canadian cultural discourse:

The brainchild of Jean "Jim" Watts, who invested her inheritance to finance the journal, *New Frontier* served as a model of equity between the sexes. At the administrative level, Jocelyn Moore served as the business manager, while the four chief editors included social worker Margaret Gould and social worker/poet Dorothy Livesay along with Leo Kennedy and J.F. White. Watt's husband, William Lawson, was given the job of managing editor. During its short life, from April 1936 to 1937, no other magazine in Canada published as many articles, poems, short stories and plays written by women, not even *Chatelaine*.<sup>65</sup>

The publishing of *New Frontier* represented a qualitatively critical development in the history of Canadian women's cultural practice. Equally important, it provided new perspectives on the role of women in society. While much of the earlier liberal-oriented discourse tended to de-politicize and de-class the struggle for women's liberation and equality, the new discourse injected a vigorously polemicized outlook on the interactivity between women's liberation, social change, fighting fascism, and democracy.

Popular Front policies enhanced the creation of a social movement that challenged fundamental aspects of hegemonic political and cultural discourse in Canada. In this context these policies provided viable discursive mechanisms for building a counter-hegemonic historical bloc in Canada. They also became part of an organic intellectual practice, which enhanced the emergence of a counter-hegemonic cultural discourse. Building on vibrant connections with the working class since the 1920s, labour and socialist activists in the mid- to late 1930s sought to make art more relevant to the major political issues of the day. With the help of favourable domestic and international political conditions, the Popular Front and its political and organizational outlook on Canadian and international politics helped reshape the cultural dynamics of Canadian society. Many writers, poets, theatre workers and actors, as well as workers in other fields of culture, became convinced of the need for an alternative stance on politics and culture. In turn, the movement enhanced the development of a new cinematic culture which itself remains a unique feature in Canadian film history. The films produced by the NFB in the early years of its creation interacted with this movement's counter-hegemonic and working-class-based ideological, aesthetic, and political outlook.

The next chapter locates the third source of the emerging counter-hegemonic discourse in the NFB's own working context: the formation of a group of organic intellectuals within the National Film Board of Canada itself. While there are very few indications or evidence of direct organizational linkages between the Communist Party – or any Popular Front organizational affiliates for that matter – and specific workers and filmmakers of the Board during the early years of its establishment (no doubt, this would be an important subject for future investigation), the body of film produced by the NFB had the undeniable signature of an intellectual group collective that was clearly informed by the views put forward by the Popular Front – particularly in connection with the role of the working class in Canadian society.

