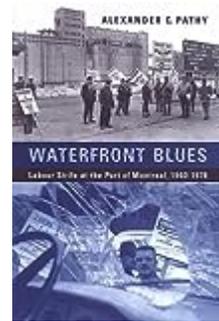


Alexander C. Pathy. *Waterfront Blues: Labour Strife at the Port of Montreal, 1960-1978.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. ix + 328 pp. \$53.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-8980-9.



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The View From Above

About halfway through Alexander Pathy's book there is a picture of the upper harbor of the Port of Montreal. In the foreground are warehouses, docks, and ships; in the background, the city rises up from the waterfront, its architectural landscape dominated by the bold outline of the Montreal Stock Exchange Tower. There, on the 38th floor, the author had his office. Part of a family with a long history in shipping, Pathy, a lawyer, became deeply involved in labor relations at the port between 1960 and 1978, a period of intense conflict between waterfront employers and longshoremen. He served the Shipping Federation, an umbrella organization of shipping and stevedoring interests, in a variety of capacities, and helped to create its successor, the Maritime Employers' Association (MEA), in 1969. He was the first chair of the MEA's board of directors, a position he held for two years. In twelve narrowly focused and densely written chapters, Pathy reflects on the contract negotiations, government inquiries, and strikes that took place in the 1960s and 70s as employers sought to modernize the port through technological change and labor market reform.

Historically, the Montreal waterfront, like water-

fronts around the world, was characterized by a casual labor market. Job opportunities for longshoremen ebbed and flowed with the arrival and departure of vessels; they were hired to load and unload a given cargo, often at the ship's side, then let go once the task was completed. Competition for work—hard, physical, repetitious work—was intense; employer power was raw; and many, if not most, longshoremen found it nearly impossible to make a living based on waterfront work alone. (In Montreal, walking the waterfront to hunt for work was referred to as doing “la seine.”) In this context, not surprisingly, labor relations were rarely quiescent. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, longshoremen were at the forefront of unionization and labor militancy in North America and Western Europe, a pattern of activism that attracted the attention of myriad academics and reformers interested in casualism and its relationship to labor unrest. Casualism, however, was not synonymous with chaos. In Montreal, employees and employers alike adopted strategies to bring some order to a labor market that could involve thousands of men and dozens of ships on a given day. The former specialized in a specific cargo, organized themselves into gangs, and

sought the protection of unions, while the latter cultivated favorites by promising regular work, demanding kickbacks, or accepting bribes.

Casualism remained a defining feature of waterfront work in many ports, including Montreal, well after World War II. Yet by the 1960s, Pathy writes, the system, “which had worked well enough to keep everyone relatively prosperous and satisfied,” was “incompatible with more mechanized operations.” Thus, “the waterfront had to be ‘decasualized’” (p.13). Between 1960 and 1978, waterfront employers and the port’s unionized workforce, members of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), Local 375, battled in the board room and on the picket line over how to reform or eliminate day-to-day practices that emerged from, and in some ways helped to perpetuate, “archaic methods of work” (p. 187). Of particular concern to waterfront employers were longshoremen’s attachment to the gang system, the right to refuse work, and “featherbedding”—a bundle of formal and informal arrangements, from restrictions on the weight of cargo to “paid absenteeism,” that ILA members used to control the pace of work (p. 9). Pathy recounts these intense debates, emphasizing not only the yawning divide that separated capital from labor, but the deep divisions within the ranks of the waterfront employers as well. During this lengthy period of nearly continuous negotiation, conciliation, and arbitration, the waterfront was rocked by numerous strikes—some of them legal, many of them not. In the end, Pathy observes, it was Local 375’s enormous power that prompted waterfront employers to set aside their internal differences and professionalize their labor relations department. Once it was reorganized, the Maritime Employers’ Association, with the help of the federal government, was able to play “hard ball” with the ILA, pushing the union to accept decasualization and the wider “efficiency-oriented system” of which it was a part (p. 188). By the late 1970s, the waterfront’s “industrial revolution” was at hand.[1]

Written in clear, sturdy prose, *Waterfront Blues* opens a window into the internal dynamics of collective bargaining. And as an insider, Pathy has more than a few anecdotes about the people who came together, and often combusted, as successive contracts were either hammered out or imposed by parliament. The portraits of Jean-Marc St. Onge, the “fiercely determined” and “fiery” leader of Local 375, Arnie Masters, the “tough-minded” leader of the Maritime Employers Association, Brian Mulroney, the young, “flamboyant” management-side labor lawyer, and Judge Alan Gold, the “straight shooting” arbitrator are particularly detailed (pp. xiv, 29, 96). This

assessment of the inner life of industrial relations is balanced by an appreciation of the “external pressures” that shape the outcome of the bargaining process, especially the “environment of laws and regulations” within which it takes place (p. 277). Indeed, as Pathy’s narrative makes clear, the state played a pivotal role in bringing about the decasualization of the Montreal waterfront: it dispatched police when rank-and-file agitation flared; set up conciliation and arbitration boards when talks between the MEA and ILA broke off; and passed back-to-work legislation when all else failed. This blend of coercion and consent—these are not Pathy’s words—is illustrated well by the actions of Judge Alan Gold, who actively cultivated the respect and trust of the longshoremen while simultaneously threatening Local 375 with trusteeship.[2] “I kept that hanging over their heads all the time,” he recalled (p. 99).

Ultimately for this reader, however, *Waterfront Blues* is marred by the author’s problematic treatment of one of the book’s core themes: the militancy of Local 375. Throughout the book, Pathy details the numerous occasions when Montreal’s longshoremen refused to ratify proposals approved by the union executive, embarked on wildcat strikes, or walked off the job in sympathy with other workers. He does not, however, provide a clear explanation of this activity, save for consistently emphasizing the importance of St. Onge’s leadership: “To the longshoremen, he made everything seem possible” (p. 29). Indeed, little is made of the youth of many new union members, who were, quite clearly, pushing the older union officials in more aggressive directions. The wider context of Quebec nationalism—which, as one historian has observed, “braced old class grievances with fresh vocabularies of possibility”—is touched on, but not developed.[3] The historical significance of language, religion, and culture on the waterfront—tantalizingly present in a picture of dozens of waterfront workers gathered at Saint-Paul and Jacques Cartier Square in Montreal in 1963—is ignored. As a consequence, rank-and-file longshoremen’s response to technological change appears simple-minded, almost spasmodic—a judgment that many of the author’s colleagues, who, in contrast, come off as more sophisticated and forward thinking, no doubt shared. There is a rich, international literature on the life and labor of longshoremen; the author has not consulted any of it.[4]

The point I wish to emphasize is not that Pathy should have written a different book, a labor history as opposed to a business history. It is, simply, that he understands the politics of the MEA and collective bargaining far bet-

ter than he does the origins of rank-and-file militancy, the source of Montreal's "waterfront blues." To understand that phenomenon, one which impinged on the bargaining process at every turn during these raucous years, one must write history from below, not above—a task no doubt difficult to undertake from the heights of the Montreal Stock Exchange Tower, high above the docks.

Notes

[1]. The decasualization of the Montreal waterfront is placed in a comparative perspective by John Bellamy Foster in "On the Waterfront: Longshoring in Canada," in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, eds. Heron and Storey (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986), pp. 281-308.

[2]. This was no idle threat. In 1963, the federal government took over the Seafarers' International Union (SIU), which was then under the leadership of gangster Hal Banks. The SIU came to Canada from the United States during the early years of the Cold War after the Trades and Labour Congress, one of two national organizations representing unionized workers in Canada, suspended the Communist-led Canadian Seamen's Union in 1949. That action cleared the way for the Banks-led SIU

to organize seafarers in Canada, which it did with the approval and assistance of ship owners and the federal government. See William Kaplan, *Everything that floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Seamen's Unions of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

[3]. Bryan D. Palmer, "System Failure: The Break-Down of the Post-War Settlement and the Politics of Labour in Our Time," at <www.canadiandimension.mb.ca/extra/d0609bp.htm>, accessed 25 July 2005.

[4]. For a good introduction to the debates see Raymond Charles Miller, "The Dockworker Subculture and Some Problems in Cross-Cultural and Cross-Time Generalizations," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11 (1969): pp. 302-314. Howard Kimeldorf provides a thought-provoking analysis of waterfront politics on the east and west coast in *Reds or Rackets?: The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). The global perspective is detailed in Sam Davies, et al., *Dock Workers: International Explorations in Comparative Labour History, 1790-1970* 2 vols. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

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