

A workingman watches

Tabernacle! Finally they're gone. Pity the poor caretaker! I've had to wait for these windbags to finish their speeches almost every night for six weeks before I could close up the Parliament Building. So, night after night, I've sat waiting and listening. Grab that broom and give me a hand to clean up all their mess, and I'll tell you about what's been going on.

So many speeches, hour after hour. All about trying to pull together the colonies to make a new country, a "new nationality," as some of them like to call it. I must admit that a few of them really know how to pitch an idea. That D'Arcy McGee can win a few hearts. But most of them didn't make much impact on this workingman. It's pretty clear that they don't care about those of us who earn our bread by the sweat of our brow anyway. Not one of them talked about how working people would benefit from this new "Confederation."

Oh, sure, lots of them wanted to convince the others that the economy would be in better shape if Confederation came to pass. More trade between the colonies, it seems, and maybe some new mines and logging camps in places pretty far from here. So I guess that will mean more jobs for the likes of us. That smooth-talker from Kingston, John A. Macdonald, talked about how this new deal will sweep away "the evils which retarded our prosperity," and that Scottish guy from Toronto, George Brown, had a lot to say about the great economic advantages of the colonies joining together. This union of the colonies "will give us control of a market of four millions of peoples," he claimed. It will be a "great gain to our farmers and manufacturers." I'm not sure what he thinks has been so bad up to now. Oh, to be sure, lots of our families have been migrating to the States to look for work. If the politicians are right, maybe my cousin Jean-François will find work here in Quebec and can return from Lewiston. But the reciprocity deal we signed

BY CRAIG HERON

Craig Heron is a professor of history at York University. He is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935*; *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History*; *Booze: A Distilled History*; *The Workers' Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada*; and *Lunch-Bucket Lives: Remaking the Workers' City*. He has been vice-chair of the Ontario Heritage Foundation, co-chair of the Workers' Arts and Heritage Centre, and president of the Canadian Historical Association.

[E]very week I see
hundreds of
workingmen and their
families getting off the
boats down on the
waterfront, ready to
get jobs in industry.

with the United States back in 1854 has brought us good trade, and there's been lots of work in the British colonies here during that civil war they fought in the States. In fact, we've got new manufactories popping up all across the colonies, and every week I see hundreds of workingmen and their families getting off the boats down on the waterfront, ready to get jobs in industry. There are moulders heading up to Montreal to work in the big foundries and carpenters and masons looking for work in every town along the lakes in Upper Canada. Lots of guys, like my cousins Benoît and Étienne, have been heading off to the lumber camps every winter too. Here in Quebec City, the shipyards and woodworking shops are booming. My niece Joséphine even got a job in one of the new shoe factories. The population has been rising by leaps and

bounds. Now we've got a railway connecting us with Montreal.

Câllice! I've heard a lot about railways here in this chamber over the past few weeks. The speakers on the government side liked to sing the praises of the new line to the maritime colonies, the Intercolonial, as they're calling it. It's part of the deal between the colonies. To be sure, there are men like my cousin Luc who will be glad to have work again as navvies building railways, and lots of towns down east will get a boost as those construction gangs pass through. But this Intercolonial idea sounds like a giant swindle. Who's behind it? Why, as Monsieur Antoine-Aimé Dorion, that smart guy from Montreal, said last week, it's the Grand Trunk Railway. They want the new government to foot the bill for a new line to the east that will boost the business of the Grand Trunk. He said that company's investors got assurances of "the enhanced value which will be given to their shares and bonds, by the adoption of the Confederation scheme and the construction of the Intercolonial." M. Dorion also thinks that the Hudson's Bay Company is behind that project, because they would like a line heading westward as well. As I look around that chamber over the past few weeks, I saw so many men with business interests that would benefit from Confederation. Take that James Ferrier in the Legislative Council, who everybody knows is a director of the Grand Trunk. He got up and declared: "We want the road at the present moment for the business of the country." And, of course, there's that fat cat George-Étienne Cartier, with all his connections to the banks and railways. This is what politics has become in our part of the world. The men who employ us have easy access to government and all the goodies that can flow their way. As I listened night after night to these guys, it sounded like they were working out a

A workingman watches, page 28

A workingman watches continued from page 27

big business deal to make everything easier for themselves and their friends.

As far as I could tell from all the speechifying, we workers will fall into the category of “property rights” in the new constitution, and they’re being left to the new provincial governments. That seems to be a way of saying we’re not too important, since the new national government is set to take on all the really big jobs like promoting the economy and defining criminals. Even policies about sending our kids to school will be left to the provinces.

Did we hear anything in these debates about workers’ rights? No! Actually, nobody seemed to want to talk about rights at all. They spent hours explaining how the new national government and the local provincial governments would get along. But, when it came to matters of political principles, all they talked about was the Queen and the “monarchical element” in government. The queen may be a fine, virtuous woman, but she’s the symbol of all the power and wealth sitting up there at the top of the pyramid. The folks at the top make all the decisions for us at the bottom. These Confederation men said they want to avoid the democracy and republicanism that exists in the United States. They’re afraid of “universal suffrage,” letting everybody vote. So, to keep the rabble in check, they want to create a new upper house in Parliament. It will be more like the House of Lords in England than the Senate down in the States. Everyone in it will be appointed for life, despite the fact that there have been elections for the upper house here in the Province of Canada’s Parliament since 1856. In the British colonies, we don’t have enough wealthy lords living on their country estates who can inherit their seats in Parliament. So I guess that means they’ll fill up the new upper house with rich businessmen and worn-out politicians, who will sit there vetoing what is passed in the lower house of elected representatives. They are just another kind of “aristocrat,” liv-

It’s no wonder that workingmen here in Quebec, and other places, are starting to think that they need to get together to protect their own interests from the likes of these bigwigs.

ing off the sweat of our labours. The governor general and the provincial governors will be appointed too. I wanted to cheer when I heard M. Dorion proclaim that “we shall have the most illiberal Constitution ever heard of in any country where constitutional government prevails.”

And not a word about who will be able to vote for guys who want to sit in the new House of Commons. Here in the Province of Canada, under the election act passed in 1859, you need to own, lease, or occupy property worth at least \$300. I can tell you that that excludes most of us workingmen down in Lower Town. I’ve never been able to vote, and didn’t hear any of those eloquent gentlemen promise to open up the voting to the likes of me and my neighbours. I’ve heard John A. Macdonald argue that only those with property should have a say in government, because otherwise property would be threatened. He believes that those with lots of property should rule the rest of us. He calls that “protecting the minority.” “Classes and property should be represented as well as numbers,” he argued here in these debates. He always seems worried that we poor folk are going to rise up and take over.

They aren’t even going to ask us to vote on whether we like this new Con-

federation. It’s too “complicated,” according to Macdonald. They’re going to whisk it off to London to get the British Parliament to pass it into law, leaving us to just accept what comes back down to us here on the St. Lawrence. There’s a lot about the way the new constitution is set up that seems paternalistic—leaving our betters to decide what’s best for us.

Sacrament! There are a lot of us who have had enough of the kindly, old-fashioned master and the patient, obedient servant. We know our masters have often looked out for our best interests, but we always have to let them decide what those interests are. Too often these days, they seem to be more concerned with their profits and less with taking care of us. I hear that that George Brown, for example, has turned his newspaper in Toronto, the *Globe*, into a roaring capitalist operation, with huge steam printing presses run by less-skilled men, rather than well-trained printers. I hear he’s also been hiring lots of boys and women to do the printers’ work. No respect for the craft.

It’s no wonder that workingmen here in Quebec, and other places, are starting to think that they need to get together to protect their own interests from the likes of these bigwigs. Here in Quebec City, the Ship Labourers’ Benevolent Society has more than a thousand members, and is standing up to the bosses with more guts. Those boys are mostly Irishmen, but now there’s a society for the French dock workers as well. The ship carpenters and sailmakers are well organized, and so are railway workers. The ships’ carpenters are planning to start a co-operative society to build ships on their own without any contractors. The cigar makers here are even hooking up with their brothers in the United States in a new kind of “international unionism.” The printers have been around since 1827, and have their own library. I’ve been to a couple of the lectures they hold. They’re really the intellectuals among us workingmen. They could have brought something

Confederation will be a way to promote business interests and take us for granted. We'll be the available "hands" to work in their companies, presumably doing well in the new markets, but we won't get to have a say in how the new country works.

special to the debates about Confederation. But nobody asked them.

My brother Henri worked for a while up in Hamilton and tells me there's a Trades Assembly that brings together all these groups in that town to work out what they have in common. The problem is that we have to be careful—

unions are illegal under the common law. Only 16 years ago, some shoemakers in Montreal got dragged into court on charges of criminal conspiracy for forming a society for helping each other out with mutual aid and trying to regulate their wages. We need a new law to take away that threat, but I don't

see any of these guys promising to set the workingman free.

So this Confederation will be a way to promote business interests and take us for granted. We'll be the available "hands" to work in their companies, presumably doing well in the new markets, but we won't get to have a say in how the new country works.

Ah, Confederation. *J'men câllice!* Who cares? It has nothing to do with us. Let's head down to the tavern and forget about it. 

NOTE

Quotations in order of citation from the Waite edition: Macdonald, 19; Brown, 44-45; Dorion, 64; Ferrier, 14; Dorion, 66; and Macdonald, 39 (from the longer 1865 edition).

A WIDE ARRAY OF FASCINATING PERSPECTIVES

YORK UNIVERSITY, in conjunction with its partners and co-sponsors the Archives of Ontario, Osgoode Hall Law School, and Seneca College, presents seven distinct but interconnected projects to be held in connection with the upcoming sesquicentennial of Canadian Confederation of 1867 in 2017. These programs will illuminate a wide array of fascinating perspectives about the events of the 1860s in what is now called Canada, and the implications of the events that have since arisen.

150CAN  YORK <http://150canada.info.yorku.ca>