

Jean-Claude Parrot. (2005). *My Union, My Life: Jean-Claude Parrot and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing. 310 pages. (Awarded the 2005 Robert S. Kenny Prize in recognition of a distinguished contribution to Marxist and Labour/Left studies in Canada)

A young reader will be quite astonished by this tale. The audacity and tenacity of Jean-Claude Parrot and his allies during Parrot's 35 years of post office unionism are hard to imagine in this era of union weakness.

But even in those bygone days, when the unemployment rate was low and organized labour much stronger, the seeming impossibility of what Parrot and his sidekicks accomplished within a legislated anti-union straightjacket was a matter for amazement.

When young Parrot, age 17, joined the post office in 1954, the mail service was a department of government and its workforce a male preserve loaded with World War II veterans. They were civil servants wearing shirts and ties, but they were sorting mail by hand and their pay, dictated by government fiat, was slipping in the worker pecking order.

Four decades later Parrot gave up the presidency of CUPW, by then one big postal union and, in typical fashion, used popular support at a convention to become a vice-president in labour's senate, the Canadian Labour Congress, against the will of the labour establishment.

He left behind Canada Post, a large and mechanized crown corporation employing many thousands of female full-time workers with pay equal to men. Postal management was the reluctant signatory to a very worker-friendly collective agreement policed by the most democratic and combative union in the country.

Parrot says, in this deception-by-deception chronology of many unlikely events, that his union achievements were a matter of hard work, long hours, a dedication to social justice, and a willingness to trust the membership in struggle. All true, but there should be a warning label for earnest readers. Don't expect yourself or anyone to achieve such triumphs of the will unless your workplace shares the economic characteristics of the post office.

Parrot's relentless brand of syndicalism achieved large results, but only under peculiar conditions to which he gives scant acknowledgement. The employer must enjoy a quasi-monopoly over a vital product or service for which there is no practical substitute. The union must be devoted entirely to the administration and improvement of a single collective agreement; and it's all much easier if there are no big pay differentials to divide the union members from each other.

The Parrot/CUPW story is a special case – as if a local union was playing on a national stage – but what a study it is. *My Union, My Life* illuminates many dark nooks and crannies of a highly bureaucratized federal labour law because,

wherever they found a hole in that legal envelope, or even a wall, CUPW tried to push through. Parrot describes the cumulative effect:

This process led to complex collective agreements. Because of restrictions on what demands were (legally) negotiable or non-negotiable, we often had to make a roundabout series of demands in order to achieve a relatively simple ends (and this) led to problems in resolving grievances. Because conciliation efforts often sidestepped the rulings of the Public Service Staff Relations Board in this regard, after a few rounds of negotiations one could argue that a large part of our collective agreement was illegal because it contained provisions that were deemed to be non-negotiable under the law[...] This was a real nightmare for arbitrators [...] Denying the grievance would confirm that the employer had negotiated in bad faith... and agreed to the contract without intending to abide by it.

As the passage suggests, an effective CUPW leader needed to be lawyer, assiduous bureaucrat, and daring but patient politician all rolled into one. In that respect Jean-Claude Parrot had no equal.

There are large questions which this book ducks or obscures. Perhaps the most difficult is how, politically, the desire of unionized public sector workers for ever-better pay and conditions can finally be squared with the lesser pay and conditions of vast numbers of worker/taxpayers exposed to the harsh winds of competition and free trade. The repeated assertion that it's all a matter of social justice for postal workers – what we bargain for ourselves we wish for all – wears thin.

One would also like to know really why Parrot's former comrades in Montreal tried so hard in the mid-1980s to destroy his presidency on silly pretexts. Was this part of the campaign for Quebec independence? But why quibble? Generally union leaders reveal very little of themselves, and few have as much of interest to report as Jean-Claude Parrot.

By 1970 he and other far-seeing Montreal CUPW leaders were seized with concern for the impending impact of mechanization in the large mail sortation plants. National postal union leaders seemed paralyzed by the technology and cheap labour challenge. Rank-and-file letter carriers and most postal clerks outside the big cities felt immune to the threat.

That disjuncture was resolved, largely on Montreal CUPW terms, during the ensuing decade of postal chaos which included tens of thousands of grievances, sporadic local strikes, and national CUPW strikes in 1974, 1975 and 1978 – all featuring Parrot as chief negotiator, and the last resulting in his imprisonment for contempt of court.

The postal showdown began to take shape in 1971 with the election of the shy and unilingual Parrot and a Scots foundry graduate, Joe Davidson of Toronto, to the CUPW national office. They had to contend with what was later revealed to be a one billion dollar postal mechanization program and

management's plan to staff the new system with cheaper female and part-time labour.

By 1974, the Montreal CUPW was booting part-time and casual workers out of the main post office on a daily basis until, eventually, management hit back with a raft of indefinite suspensions and criminal charges. Davidson and Parrot together took charge of the CUPW national office and instigated a national illegal strike. Their imperative was to preserve the national union as a fighting force by saving the Montreal local, and to bargain a better wage for the new postal work. Would a female postal code machine operator get \$2.94 per hour as management intended, or \$3.69 per hour like a male postal clerk?

Normally such a walk on the wild side would be folly, but it was 1974. Pierre Trudeau's Liberal minority government in Ottawa was clinging to office with NDP support and preparing for an election. The CUPW in that rare moment had extra leverage.

Two weeks into the illegal adventure, with letter carrier support expected to collapse within hours, the Post Office offered, through a special mediator, to rescind all strike-related discipline, including the Montreal criminal charges, and arbitrate the pay scale for postal coders.

Parrot, the rookie negotiator, responded with a dangerous gamble. To block a government double-cross, he demanded, in addition, a signed letter from the Minister of Justice confirming withdrawal of the Montreal criminal charges. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Davidson pleaded. Parrot claimed he did "but deep inside I wondered whether I had pushed my luck too much."

Parrot won his bet, humbling the government of Canada. The Minister of Justice, wakened from his bed, told his agent to sign the postal agreement. Down came the picket lines and, not long afterward, an arbitrator awarded female postal coders the same wages as male postal clerks.

Parrot's daring in his first big test won CUPW the lasting enmity of the Liberal Party of Canada - but it also created confidence and inspired loyalty in hundreds of CUPW activists in postal workplaces across Canada. This set the conditions for many future confrontations.

Late in 1975, Parrot and Davidson led a six week legal postal strike which clearly delineated the collective bargaining balance in the post office. As a group CUPW workers were willing and able to live without pay longer than Canadian society was willing and able to live without mail.

The 1975 dispute concluded with comprehensive promises of job security and protection of full-time positions, but these proved illusory. Management undertakings were not honoured, and the mail system was soon awash in unprecedented thousands of grievances accompanied by wildcats, slowdowns, and backed-up mail.

Parrot, now president and chief negotiator, maneuvered the union into legal strike position in late 1978 only to see the Trudeau government pass back-to-work legislation on the first day of the national walkout. The strike lasted a week, with 23,000 inside workers returning to their jobs at Parrot's instruction to

avoid automatic mass dismissals and a selective wipeout of the local CUPW leadership.

Parrot himself was publicly denounced by Dennis McDermott, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, for giving labour a “bad image.” He was charged with contempt of Parliament, labelled a stubborn zealot, and convicted. He spent two unrepentant months in an Ottawa jail.

The effect was not at all what the government intended. Parrot emerged from prison a hero to frustrated trade union activists all over Canada, campaigned across the country in 1979 against Liberal attacks on free collective bargaining, and contributed to the defeat of the Trudeau government. Parrot reached the convention of the Canadian Labour Congress in 1980 with enough strength to command a unanimous resolution of support for postal workers.

With a chastened Dennis McDermott at his side to witness the conduct of postal management and government negotiators, Parrot went on to bargain a shorter work week with no reduction in pay without recourse to strike action.

In 1981 the CUPW and government renewed hostilities. Parrot led a 42 day strike in which media focused, not on mail chaos, but on the Trudeau government’s unwillingness to grant paid maternity leave at a cost of 3 cents per hour. Motherhood prevailed.

Furthermore, Pierre Elliot Trudeau had finally lost patience with mandarin miscalculations of postal worker determination and behavior. In October, 1981 his government adopted the Canada Post Corporation Act, finally releasing the post office and its workers from the confines of federal civil service labour law, policy and regulation.

In 1985, Parrot concluded an agreement without a strike, this time finding satisfaction through the conciliation efforts of Stanley Hartt, trusted advisor to recently elected Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. In 1987, Parrot bowed quickly to back to work legislation after a 15-day strike without defying the law. He was always an aggressive negotiator but “never suicidal.”

Canada Post’s final gambit to conquer CUPW and Parrot was a labour board vote to consolidate the postal unions. Perhaps a less combative outfit, the Letter Carriers Union of Canada, would prevail in a democratic vote of postal employees. Instead, in Parrot’s crowning moment, CUPW won the right to represent all 46,000 members of the two postal unions. Parrot had accomplished all he ever imagined for postal workers, and more.

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