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## **JAILED HEROES AND KITCHEN HEROINES**

*Class, Gender, and the Medalta Potteries Strike in Postwar Alberta*

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IN OCTOBER 1947 a packed courtroom in Medicine Hat, Alberta, received “with silent shock” the sentencing of seven male workers from the local pottery factory to thirty days of hard labour in the Lethbridge “gaol” for picket line violence.<sup>1</sup> The men, together with eight women, had been involved in two separate picket line incidents at the Medalta Potteries factory, which was a major employer in the small Alberta city of nearly 13,000. The more serious incident, a “mauling,” sent one man to hospital with minor injuries; the other resulted in a smashed load of pottery. All of the men and women had pleaded guilty to a charge of intimidation. One man also pleaded guilty to assault. The eight women, however, received only suspended sentences. Local Magistrate T. O’B. Gore-Hickman said he “hesitated to send young women to jail” where they would be fingerprinted and their criminal files started. The defence lawyer also asked for the leniency of the court “in the case of the female workers, the majority being 17 or 18 years of age.” Neither party expressed

such solicitude on behalf of any of the men—the youngest man was eighteen.<sup>3</sup>

Outraged by the men's harsh sentences, the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (hereafter Mine Mill), which represented Medalta workers, appealed to Medicine Hat City Council to lobby provincial and federal governments for a reduction in the men's sentence. At a regular council meeting, before the request could be debated, Mayor William Rae accused the union's international representative, who led the delegation, of being an agent of Moscow whose "sinister purpose" was "a calculated plan designed to make capital out of human misery." Calling William Longridge "an individual with a deformed brain, a misfit, who admits receiving the gold of Moscow," Rae urged council not to be deceived by "this dastardly scheme" and to intercede in the "political chicanery." Rae was careful to distinguish between the union's leader, who was the target of his attack, and rank-and-file workers, who were "misguided individuals" placed in an "unfortunate position."<sup>4</sup> Two days after the virulent attack the strike collapsed, ending seventy-two days of successful picketing that had kept pottery production at the factory to a minimum. Workers returned to their jobs without a contract and with no guarantee that the company would take back all striking workers.

Within the larger framework of Alberta labour history, the Medalta Potteries strike marks a crucial turning point in public attitudes toward organized labour that placed workers on the defensive in the postwar era. The strength of government responses to the Medalta strike—as measured by political rhetoric and court decisions alone—suggests there was significant grassroots support for organized labour and a fair wage among ordinary Alberta men and women in the immediate postwar years. Initial public support for worker militancy quickly evaporated in the overheated atmosphere of anti-communist hysteria fostered by the Cold War. Profoundly gendered treatment of workers by the courts, the press, politicians, and the union intensified public ambivalence toward male workers who, increasingly, were perceived as dangerous, yet naïve. Women workers' activism was largely ignored or downplayed. When women's actions pushed them onto the public stage they tended to be seen as innocent victims of

either industrialists or organized labour, depending on the context. The union's masculinist culture and militant stance contributed to these perceptions, as did some of the beliefs and attitudes of rank-and-file workers, both male and female. Women workers were proud of the often heavy physical labour they performed and many resented the low wages it returned. Yet the Medalta strike demonstrates how traditional notions about respectable femininity helped put women workers back in the kitchen during the postwar years.

Differential treatment of women's labour activism stemmed largely from conflict between dominant middle-class notions of gender difference and the reality of inadequate and insecure working-class wages, which made women's role essential in the "male" domain of paid work. This conflict generated an expectation that women would not be militant, which limited the public impact of their personal strength, solidarity, and effectiveness in job actions. The emphasis on gender difference also served to reinforce, rather than challenge, women's inferior status as wage earners. Finally, an emphasis on male ignorance and female innocence made Medalta workers an easy target for allegations of insidious communist influence. These allegations cultivated a political climate hostile to organized labour, which helped make possible "draconian" revisions to Alberta's labour laws in the months following the Medalta strike.<sup>5</sup> For all of these reasons the Medalta strike sheds light on a crucial, formative period in Alberta labour history, an era that established the legal and ideological framework for labour relations that endures in the province today.<sup>6</sup>

This study examines how the interplay of class, gender, and notions about whiteness shaped the pottery workforce and the organization of work and wages, as well as the course of the Medalta Potteries strike. Viewed through the prism of class and gender, public portrayals of worker militancy are seen more clearly as a major factor in the erosion of broad-based support for worker activism. A public offended by the apparently brutish behaviour of male workers and unwilling to examine the implications of women workers' involvement more easily dismissed reasonable demands for higher wages.

Contemporary accounts of the Medalta strike, as well as the only scholarly study to date, portray it as an event manufactured primarily by union leaders from outside the community who manipulated the pottery workers.<sup>7</sup> The involvement of women workers is virtually ignored. This current study is based on interviews I conducted from 2000 to 2001 with eight former Medalta workers, six of whom were women, as well as my examination of photographs, company, union, court, and press records. Although it is based on a small sample of workers who are not representative of the workforce—all of them were young at the time of the strike; six were teenagers—their narratives offer insight into the class and gender politics of the strike. Collectively these sources suggest there was a substantial core of militant workers at the pottery. They also reveal that women, who constituted 42 per cent of the workforce, were well represented within this militant core and played an important role on the picket line and at union events.<sup>8</sup>

The Medalta strike was part of a wave of labour unrest that swept the country in 1946 and 1947.<sup>9</sup> Canadian workers, buoyed by a new sense of entitlement stemming from wartime sacrifices, fought to hold onto the gains made possible by wartime labour shortages and postwar economic expansion. PC1003, a federal labour law that was Canada's equivalent to the American Wagner Act, was passed during the war in response to the growing strength of the trade union movement. It gave Canadian workers the right to organize and to bargain collectively.<sup>10</sup> Rapidly rising inflation and fears of postwar unemployment intensified the efforts of many workers to improve their position through union membership and job action.

The determination of unions and workers to ensure that they cornered a share of Alberta's burgeoning wealth was matched by the right-wing provincial government's resolve to suppress labour unrest after the war. Premier Ernest Manning's belief in the values of individualism, self-sufficiency, and free enterprise, rooted in his faith as an evangelical Christian, made him suspicious of any form of collectivism.<sup>11</sup> His antipathy toward organized labour intensified after the Leduc oil strike in February 1947. The explosion of economic development triggered by this major oil

discovery aggravated the existing labour shortage and threatened to strengthen the hand of organized labour in the province.<sup>12</sup> Eager to reassure American oil investors of its ability to maintain labour peace and keep wages low in the province, Manning's government became even less sympathetic to the concerns of workers.

A national meatpacking strike that coincided with the Medalta strike, shutting down major plants throughout the province, exacerbated Premier Manning's anxieties about worker unrest. The result was shrill government denunciations of labour that had seismic effects for the pottery workers.<sup>13</sup> On 18 October, five days after publicly urging all workers to cross picket lines, Manning told a large audience that industrial production in Canada was "being deliberately sabotaged by industrial and distributing combines and by those who deliberately are fomenting industrial unrest in furtherance of those philosophies which make capital of distress."<sup>14</sup> Alberta Public Works Minister W.A. Fallow built on the conspiracy theory by describing rank-and-file union members as "helpless men and women browbeaten by a few."<sup>15</sup>

It was within this climate of anti-communist hysteria and intense suspicion that Medicine Hat Mayor William Rae attacked the union leadership's appeal for support, drawing on the same kind of rhetoric. The mayor's virulent attack, which was splashed across the local newspaper, marked a crucial turning point in the strike.<sup>16</sup> It seems likely that union leaders recognized a sea-change in the public's perception of workers and the strike. Within two days they ended the strike and workers began returning to their jobs on the company's terms.<sup>17</sup> Three weeks later a slate of labour candidates, which included one of the jailed Medalta workers, was defeated in a municipal election that attracted a record voter turnout. Although not a complete rout—the labour candidate for mayor garnered 40 per cent of the votes cast—labour's lack of success in the municipal election represented a major shift in the mood of the community from the first days of the strike.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Mine Mill's ability to maintain enough support among Medalta workers to survive the devastating 1947 strike despite this shift in public opinion demonstrates strong grassroots labour activism in the factory during the immediate

postwar years. The union was still advocating on behalf of workers a year after the company went bankrupt in September 1954.<sup>19</sup>

Medicine Hat was a provincial hot spot for labour unrest in 1947.<sup>20</sup> Six of the thirteen strikes that occurred in Alberta that year erupted in and around the city, which was the fourth largest in the province.<sup>21</sup> The city had an extensive and diverse industrial base, and women were well represented in the city's manufacturing sector, accounting for 23 per cent of manufacturing wage earners provincially, compared to the provincial average of 12 per cent.<sup>22</sup> The pottery factory, which had produced sturdy, affordable crocks and everyday dishes since 1912, was a major player in the local economy.<sup>23</sup> Workers struck over wages while struggling to sign a first contract several months after being organized by the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers.<sup>24</sup> Mine Mill had a proud history as a militant and progressive union that dated back to the turn of the century when miners on both sides of the 49th parallel fought to improve workers' lives.<sup>25</sup> Mine Mill embraced industrial unionism long before this concept became popular within the mainstream labour movement in the late 1930s.<sup>26</sup> The union also had a history of organizing more diverse and disadvantaged workforces.<sup>27</sup> In the 1940s it was one of the few unions in Alberta to attempt to organize workplaces that employed women.

Medicine Hat was targeted by Mine Mill and other industrial unions because of its status as a low-wage area of the province.<sup>28</sup> The collapse of the region's agricultural economy in the 1920s and '30s because of intense drought had forced those families that did not abandon their farms to eke out a marginal existence by relying on wage work in Medicine Hat.<sup>29</sup> This generated a large pool of cheap labour for local factories. A wage freeze during World War II had kept wages low at the pottery, despite labour shortages generated by government contracts and military enlistments.<sup>30</sup> In 1947 it was difficult for even a skilled senior male worker to support a family on his wages. Employee lists at the time of the strike reveal that within a workforce of 250 people, thirty-eight families had more than one person working at the pottery. As former worker Christine Pocsik explained, "Families worked there. Let's [look at] the Sticks—Chris Stickel the Dad, he was the foreman, and the son and the daughter

worked there so there was three of them bringing home money, bringing home their cheques, and I'm sure that was probably a good living then... There were a lot of young kids working there whose dad worked there. That's how a family survived."<sup>31</sup>

Average wages in Medicine Hat were lower than in any other major Alberta city. Within Medicine Hat, Medalta Potteries was notorious for its low wage levels. The average weekly wage in the Canadian clay products industry in 1947 was \$34.91, and in Canadian manufacturing industries it was \$35.66.<sup>32</sup> Information available is insufficient to determine an average wage rate at the factory in 1947; however, management figures released during the strike set the top wage rate at \$33.60 per week for males and \$21 per week for females paid on an hourly basis.<sup>33</sup> During the strike, management and the union disagreed about the proportion of workers whose earnings approached the top end of the rate schedule, but it is clear that Medalta wages were well below the industry average.<sup>34</sup> Medalta had a high incidence of minimum wage violations throughout its history, particularly in the case of female workers.<sup>35</sup>

Working conditions at the pottery were harsh. The main stages of the manufacturing process were clay preparation and jiggering or slip casting to produce the pottery shapes, then decorating, glazing, kiln firing, and finally checking and packing the finished ware for shipping. Many of these stages involved heavy lifting and constant exposure to temperature extremes, choking dust, and chemical fumes. Back injuries, respiratory problems, and one woman's sensational partial scalping by a conveyor belt pulley demonstrated the high physical price paid by many workers.<sup>36</sup> There was no job security, split shifts operated without a wage differential, and when sales orders were strong a regular work week was the maximum set by law—forty-eight hours in 1947. Government inspectors often found that work conditions at the factory did not meet legislated standards.<sup>37</sup>

Many young, unmarried daughters from farm families were among those seeking paid work in Medicine Hat because sons, rather than daughters, usually inherited the family farm. It was also assumed that women's activities on the farm were limited to domestic work and farm

chores such as milking cows and feeding the chickens. As Christine Pocsik explained, it was her brother who began running the farm when her father left periodically to take paid work: “because I was a girl I wasn’t mechanical wise or anything. I couldn’t go out and fix things if they broke down.”<sup>38</sup> These class-based understandings of masculinity and femininity helped re-shape attitudes toward workers during the strike. They have been traced to industrialization and the middle-class notion of the male breadwinner as someone able to support and control his family and household. Within the new industrial order, middle-class womanhood was characterized by economic dependence, fragility, passivity, and social subordination.<sup>39</sup>

Working-class women developed distinctive notions of femininity that departed from the middle-class ideal. Several of the women who had worked at Medalta expressed pride in their ability to perform heavy lifting and maintain a high pace of work. Yet they spoke with distaste of the dirt and dust associated with clay, and they had no desire to become a jiggerman, the most highly paid job and filled exclusively by males because it involved immersing your hands in clay all day. Engilena Kessler was relieved to move from the trimming department, where her hands were constantly dry and cracked from sponging the clay pieces, to decorating, where she painted finished product. All of the women interviewed, even those who saw it as just a job, felt proud of their ability to support themselves, even if it meant sharing a one-bedroom apartment with several women and sleeping on a couch in the kitchen.<sup>40</sup> What they did resent was management’s lack of concern that they performed back-breaking work for such low wages. Asked how women coped during the war when they performed one of the heaviest jobs, moving pottery in and out of the kiln using cement containers, Engilena Kessler said, “those saggars, they were heavy. I don’t think girls should have been lifting those. Yeah, I thought that was asking a lot of staff.”<sup>41</sup>

Like working-class women in other historical contexts, the women workers at Medalta held a concept of working-class femininity that embraced hard physical labour and economic independence, yet they often accepted middle-class strictures for respectable behaviour.<sup>42</sup> As a result, women

workers tended to view their interests as continuous with men's on the assumption that in the future they would marry and leave the paid workforce for the domestic sphere. Engilena Kessler, who was dating her future husband—one of the strike leaders—at the time of the strike, felt male workers were more entitled to higher wages than were women workers. She remembered feeling critical of some women workers' hostile attitude toward management during the strike: "There were some women who were very intense. Yes, very...I could relate to the men's situation more so because there was no room for advancement or for, you know, they were being underpaid...because they were trying to establish homes. Women in those days did not make up homes for themselves as they do today. Women...relied more on their husbands to be the wage earner."<sup>43</sup> Ironically, Kessler, like most of the women interviewed, continued to work throughout her marriage, including the years when her two children were young.<sup>44</sup> The influence of late twentieth-century feminism and a lifetime of experience can be seen in the distinction Kessler drew between the situation of women in 1947 and in 2000. Through the lens of time, Kessler still saw women's interests as continuous with men's in 1947, but she felt this was no longer the case.

Although Canadian working-class families had never had the luxury of a "breadwinner wage," this middle-class ideal became compelling for male workers following World War II when the right to organize and to bargain collectively brought it within reach for the first time for many male workers. The new legislation was framed by notions of rights and freedoms that implicitly excluded women workers, who were viewed as economically dependent temporary workers and were largely unorganized.<sup>45</sup> Yet the proportion of women in the paid labour force, particularly married women, had increased dramatically to meet first wartime production demands, then the needs of a booming postwar economy.<sup>46</sup> This posed a serious threat to men's privileged access to paid work, particularly the ideal of a male breadwinner. As a result the postwar era was a reactionary period during which patriarchal gender roles were reinscribed more firmly in the media and ambivalence toward women workers intensified.<sup>47</sup>

In the conservative postwar social climate, the traditional nuclear family with a stay-at-home wife and mother was glorified and became the template for social mores and social policy. Federal daycare nurseries were closed. Federal income tax policy that had been changed during the war to accommodate married women who worked was revised.<sup>48</sup> Married women were barred from civil service jobs, and the new unemployment insurance system imposed extra requirements on married women.<sup>49</sup> Gendered minimum wage rates persisted, reflecting the assumption that working women did not support a family while working men did.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, gender-specific lifting and seating regulations designed to protect women's reproductive capabilities reinforced the idea that women were more fragile than men and that their primary role was to bear children, not perform paid labour.<sup>51</sup>

In the Canadian West these class-based gender ideals were racialized by Anglo-Canadians as part of an effort by whites to legitimize their claim to the territory from which they had so recently displaced Aboriginal peoples.<sup>52</sup> Those invested in whiteness cultivated racial and ethnic stereotypes that contrasted the image of fragile, vulnerable Anglo white womanhood with images of aggressive Aboriginal and Amazonian "Galician" womanhood. Distinctions of whiteness were used to assert the superiority and dominance of the Anglo-Saxon elite over Aboriginal peoples and the multitude of diverse immigrant groups that had arrived on the Prairies in the early twentieth century.<sup>53</sup>

These racialized notions of gender difference, which reinforced the middle-class ideal of a male breadwinner, were fostered by ethnic dynamics at the pottery. In 1947 Medalta employed an almost exclusively white workforce of mainly second-generation Northern and East-Central European immigrants.<sup>54</sup> Most of the men and women interviewed were from families that had immigrated from German-speaking parts of Eastern Europe, although one person was born in Hungary and the family of another had immigrated from Norway. Former worker Engilena Kessler estimated that roughly 75 per cent of Medalta workers were from a German-speaking family in the late 1940s when she worked at the factory, and most of them spoke German.<sup>55</sup> Medalta management and artisans

were primarily of English, Scottish, or Anglo-Canadian origin, which were still the predominant ethnicities of the elite in most Alberta communities in the 1940s.

German-speaking immigrants to Alberta, many of whom settled in the Medicine Hat area around the turn of the twentieth century, were easily assimilated because they were white, and they held similar cultural values, including a strong work ethic and patriarchal ideals rooted in notions of gender difference.<sup>56</sup> Public hostility toward Germans during the two world wars accelerated the assimilation process.<sup>57</sup> During the war Medalta workers were forbidden to speak German to the German POWs who worked at the pottery.<sup>58</sup> It is likely that their recent status as “enemy aliens” also intensified the conservatism of Medicine Hat’s German-speaking residents and farmers, making them feel more vulnerable to anti-communist red-baiting in the immediate postwar years.

In a society that privileged people of Anglo-Saxon heritage, the increasing assimilation of German-speaking peoples by 1947 combined with profound conservatism to foster ethnic affinity between workers and management, which obscured class differences and mitigated anti-management hostility.<sup>59</sup> All but one of the workers I interviewed were born in the Medicine Hat area, and they tended to embrace the cultural values and traditions of the British-dominated elite. Former worker Engilena Kessler, who worked in the all-female art department, spoke glowingly of her supervisor, English immigrant Tom Hulme, “the nicest man to work for.” Kessler especially appreciated the English tradition of tea, which Hulme would make and allow the women to drink at their tables while they worked.<sup>60</sup> Even those workers who related bad experiences with particular managers or foremen couched them in terms devoid of ethnic slurs. Sipping tea in the art department may also have reinforced in women workers the notion of inherent female difference that was prized by the middle-class Anglo elite.

Comments by several former Medalta workers demonstrate the process by which non-Anglo white workers reinforced gendered and class-based notions of whiteness. In an interview, a male former pottery worker of Russian-German descent denigrated the tall, strong build of

one of the few Métis women who worked at the pottery during the strike with the comment she “was built like a big squaw.” A response by another former worker who was female, that this Métis woman “would punch you right in the nose for [saying] that,” implicitly contrasted images of aggressive Aboriginal women and passive, diminutive white women.

In the same way, the male worker’s implied criticism of a Ukrainian farmer for not working his “hefty” daughters in the fields reinforced a code of white Anglo middle-class femininity by suggesting that their size and strength made them unfeminine. While working on a threshing crew in the 1940s for the farmer, who had six children, including four daughters, the former Medalta worker said, “The boys were out helping, the daughters stayed and helped Mom cook, milked the cows, did the chores while the men were out working. They weren’t allowed to—well I off and asked my boss that, I said, ‘How come you don’t have any women on this crew?’ and he said, ‘Well they couldn’t stand it,’ and I said, ‘Well there’s some pretty big girls out there.’ They were hefty farm girls, you know.”<sup>61</sup> The Ukrainian farmer’s refusal to acknowledge his daughters’ physical strength can be seen as an effort to demonstrate their conformity to the Anglo elite’s concept of femininity. In this context the former Medalta worker’s comments suggest an attempt to stake a claim to whiteness that was still tenuous for Albertans of Ukrainian heritage in 1947. Their purchase on whiteness was not secure until the 1950s and ’60s, after more than a half-century of virulent nativist attacks by pro-imperialist Anglo-Saxons on the Prairies.<sup>62</sup> His disparaging comments may also demonstrate the need to buttress a claim to whiteness by German-speaking peoples who had only recently been viewed as enemy aliens.

Comments by former workers about Aboriginal males centred on a perceived difference between white and Aboriginal attitudes toward work that helped justify their exclusion from the factory. As one male worker explained, when asked why no Aboriginal or Métis males worked at the pottery, “They were too damn lazy, that’s why.” The notion of the degenerate Indian, who was physically and morally weak, reinforced the social superiority of a white working-class masculinity for which

harsh working conditions have been seen “as a challenge to masculinity, rather than as an expression of the exploitation of capitalist relations of production.”<sup>63</sup>

These class-based gender and racial stereotypes were used to legitimize exclusive white access to more highly paid industrial jobs. During World War II, women of colour gained access to higher paid industrial work for the first time because of widespread labour shortages; however, they tended to be assigned the heaviest and dirtiest types of work.<sup>64</sup> A Métis woman found that her first job at the pottery as a kiln worker required that she lift the heavy cement saggars that held the pottery pieces in the kiln and were often very hot—a job usually performed by men. After the war, she attained a position in the decorating department, which was one of the most congenial areas in which to work.<sup>65</sup> The fact that several former workers could quickly recall one of the few Métis people who worked at Medalta, and no one could remember any other visible minority workers at the plant, suggests that workers assumed a white identity and marginalized those considered racial “others” in the community. Racial or ethnic difference appeared to play a role in shaping the workforce, and it helped obscure class lines between management and workers, but it was not a salient factor in the strike itself, likely because the workforce was almost entirely white.<sup>66</sup>

The pottery industry has a long tradition of employing women workers that is linked to both cultural expectations about femininity and the economic advantages of hiring women who could be paid much less than men.<sup>67</sup> This tradition reinforced notions of gender difference in ways that strengthened class cohesion but limited gender consciousness. At Medalta Potteries the majority of tasks were determined by gender, and most departments were either male or female, although men nearly always supervised. Jobs to which men were given exclusive access involved technical skill, the supervision of men, or were especially heavy or dirty, such as loading pottery pieces into the kiln.<sup>68</sup> Women performed the lighter, purportedly less skilled tasks, such as attaching handles and spouts to cups and teapots, or trimming because their “small and quick hands” were said to be more dexterous than men’s.<sup>69</sup>



During the war women stepped into male jobs out of necessity, but by 1947 pre-war gender segregation had been re-established. In only a few jobs did men and women actually work alongside each other performing the same tasks, such as glazing pottery pieces on the conveyor belt.<sup>70</sup> Women in those jobs earned 68 per cent of the male wage on the eve of the strike.<sup>71</sup>

Women were paid lower wages based on the cultural assumption that they were temporary workers who were economically dependent on a father or husband.<sup>72</sup> Middle-class cultural assumptions about women's inherent domesticity also limited women's job alternatives to domestic work and waitressing, which were not as well paid as factory jobs.<sup>73</sup> These assumptions helped generate a steady supply of women workers and made their employment profitable for Medalta Potteries, particularly during the war when women performed "male" jobs at the female rate. A postwar construction boom combined with strong industrial and farm productivity in and around Medicine Hat to prevent employers from laying off women workers as servicemen returned from the war.<sup>74</sup> Gender-specific wage rates and promotional opportunities meant that there were only two wage categories for women workers at the factory: "inexperienced" and "experienced." A female worker was hired at the "inexperienced" rate and after a certain period of time, usually three to six months, was awarded the "experienced" rate. No further wage increases were structured into the rates for female employees. For males there were three wage categories differentiated by skill and age but not experience. "Juniors and apprentices" earned the lowest rate. Once a male was over twenty-one years of age he was awarded the "unskilled" rate. Only men could be awarded the "skilled" rate for particular jobs.<sup>75</sup> This gender-specific criteria for wage increases reflected management's assumption that male workers were committed to a career because they supported a family, while women were supported by either their father or a husband.

<FIGURE 14. 1: Men were given exclusive access to jobs that involved technical skill, such as Automatic Tunnel Kiln Operator, 1943. [Courtesy of Glenbow Archives M 5827/2]





FIGURE 14.3: Men and women generally sat on opposite sides of the room during union hall meetings. The average age of women in this audience is significantly lower than the average age of men. A Mine Mill union meeting of Medalta Potteries workers at the Moose Hall in Medicine Hat, after the strike, circa late 1940s. [Courtesy of Dorothy Beierbach]

The gendered segregation of work and gendered wage rates tended to foster class solidarity and inhibit gender consciousness within the Medalta Potteries workforce by preventing most women workers from comparing themselves with their male co-workers. The women and men interviewed who worked in a single-sex department accepted with no difficulty the gender-based differential in wages and job opportunities at the time. Young, single women working in a gender-segregated department, who often married a man they met at the factory, supported the strike issue of higher wages, but they did not necessarily see their own best interests served by the ideal of equal pay. Only one woman interviewed did not work in a gender-segregated department, and she expressed the most resentment about the wage discrepancy between men and women workers. Rosetta Brosnikoff, who worked the conveyor belt in the glazing

<FIGURE 14.2: Women worked on the conveyor belt attaching handles and spouts to cups and teapots, or trimming because their “small and quick hands” were said to be more dexterous than men’s. 1943. [Courtesy of Glenbow Archives M.5827/2]

department a few years after the strike, said “That was one of the sore points, because you worked side-by-side with a man and he got more money than you did.”<sup>76</sup>

The combination of young, single women with a large number of middle-aged, married men at the pottery seemed to foster a father-daughter relationship that further enhanced class cohesion but undermined the equal status of women as co-workers.<sup>77</sup> Clarence Sailer, a strike leader, had teenage children and a niece working at the pottery. His niece, Dorothy Beierbach, was the most class-conscious person I interviewed and was one of the eight women who pleaded guilty in connection with the two most serious picket line incidents.<sup>78</sup> Within a conservative community that embraced patriarchal notions of authority and respect, these filial bonds likely strengthened class solidarity.

A comment by a former woman worker about use of the factory washrooms suggests that the combination of young women and men of all ages within the workforce also generated a latent sexual tension in the workplace. The woman said only the women’s washroom was located upstairs, requiring that women workers climb a long flight of stairs located in the open shop: “And of course it overlooked not only the area that we worked in but it overlooked the area where they made crocks, and of course this was all men, so every time you walked up that flight of stairs you knew that the men were looking at you.”<sup>79</sup> The men’s washroom was on the main floor.

The filial tenor of relations between young women and older men did much to preserve the respectability of workers within the factory by neutralizing these sexual undertones to a large extent, but it compromised their status as equal partners in the struggle for better wages and work conditions. Several women interviewed mentioned the helpfulness and kindness of older men with whom they worked. Rosetta Brosnikoff, who was a member of the union executive while still a teenager, remembered with fondness the older men who would ensure her safety by walking her home in the evening after union meetings.<sup>80</sup> Another worker said she enjoyed working with her supervisor, Clarence Sailer, who took on a protective role by helping women workers whenever they needed a hand

with lifting. Engilena Kessler boarded with her foreman, Chris Stickel, and recalled being annoyed by Stickel's insistence on a curfew at night when she was dating her future husband.<sup>81</sup> In a different way, sexual tension between young men and women workers, who often eventually married, likely fostered a perception of young single women workers as potential wives more than co-workers. Three of the six women I interviewed married a man they met at Medalta Potteries.

These complex workplace, family, community, and union dynamics coalesced to generate broad-based grass-roots support for Medalta workers when the strike broke. In a government-supervised vote only months before the strike, 200 of the 222 eligible pottery workers voted in favour of certification under Mine Mill, and no votes were cast against it.<sup>82</sup> In interviews, former workers reported that workers "came out in droves" for union meetings during the months leading up to the strike.<sup>83</sup> Two days before the walk out, in an unsupervised union vote, 98 per cent of workers voted in favour of the job action.<sup>84</sup> When 213 workers walked off the job on 12 August 1947, only eight workers remained on the job.

The mayor and the larger community of Medicine Hat also expressed substantial support for the job action in the belief that low industry wages were hurting local businesses. A spontaneous parade by striking workers through the city's downtown core proceeded without harassment by local police.<sup>85</sup> In the first weeks of the seventy-two-day strike, Mayor William Rae tried to facilitate a settlement by arranging a meeting with the two sides. City council approved a community tag day, which allowed union members to raise \$475.23 by soliciting citizens on city streets.<sup>86</sup> A city alderman also spoke at the union's well-attended strike rally, which raised \$214 in the first weeks of the labour action.<sup>87</sup> Only a handful of people responded to Medalta advertisements for new employees during the first month of the strike.<sup>88</sup>

There was a perceptible shift in attitudes toward the unionized workers, however, as strike events unfolded. An unfounded allegation that the union was not legally certified, harsh court rulings on minor picket line disturbances, and a focus on male pickets helped project an image of workers as unlawful, unreasonable, and violent, yet at the same time

ignorant and naïve. In the first days of the strike Medalta launched a spurious civil action that claimed Mine Mill was not legally certified.<sup>89</sup> This allegation dominated headlines during the strike. When the civil claim was finally dealt with after the strike ended, the court found that the government had used the wrong certification form because of new legislation passed in the spring.<sup>90</sup> This legal manoeuvre put the union on the defensive throughout the remainder of the strike. In particular, Calgary Justice Clinton B. Ford's severe interpretation of an injunction, which made any picketing illegal, together with the allegation that the union was not legally certified, cast workers and their union leaders in the role of senseless outlaws.<sup>91</sup> Gender played an essential role in constructing this image. The middle-class assumption that working-class men are inherently aggressive and that females are passive, vulnerable, and economically dependent shaped the attitudes and actions of all parties involved in the dispute.

The difference in the behaviour of men and women workers was less significant than court charges, convictions, sentences, and press reports would suggest. Indeed, previously unpublished court evidence, oral interviews, and photographs all muddy the stark contrast conveyed in contemporary reports. The number of women workers charged was only slightly less than the number of men; however, there were significant differences in the types of charges laid and in the way they were handled by the press and the courts.<sup>92</sup> Male workers were charged with more numerous and more serious strike-related charges than those laid against female workers. Similarly, while the names of women charged were published in the newspaper, their actions were never described, yet men's were sometimes described in great detail.

There is a remarkable disparity between accounts of strike-related violence that occurred. The impression of lawlessness and violence conveyed by news reports and judicial remarks is at odds with what former rank-and-file workers related in oral history interviews.<sup>93</sup> It is difficult to assess how a filter of more than fifty years affected the memories of workers. A shift in Alberta's political culture to the right, and the community's collective memory of the strike as an "embarrassment," likely compromised the willingness of former workers to acknowledge left-wing views held



FIGURE 14.4: Women workers were well represented in a march through the streets of downtown Medicine Hat on the first day of the Medalta Potteries strike, 12 August 1947.

[Courtesy of Hanna Osborne]

during the turbulent postwar years. The context of other evidence, however, and the consistency of their respective responses gives credence to worker testimony that allegations of violence were exaggerated.<sup>94</sup> Engilena Kessler said workers were stunned by the jail sentences: “It was very shocking... It was like they picked six or seven or eight fellows out of this group of 200 out there and said ‘These are the guys that we’re going... to set an example [with].’ It just blew me right out of the water and still to this day I don’t know what they were trying to prove.”<sup>95</sup> One male worker who was jailed but who refused to be interviewed stated that he was not on the picket line at the time of the incidents.<sup>96</sup> One of the seven women given a suspended sentence said she appeared in court but never learned what she was supposed to have done.

The fact that women were charged in numbers roughly equal to men in the crucial court case suggests that women workers were well represented during these picket line disturbances. It also suggests that manage-

ment, which reported the incidents, saw women's presence as an effective force on the picket line and needed to make an example of them as well as the men. The strength and effectiveness of women's picket line presence is demonstrated in court affidavits, oral interviews, and photographs. Several women interviewed insisted that women participated "equally" on the picket line. Women were well represented in a series of picket line photographs taken by former workers who were interviewed.<sup>97</sup> Court questioning by the company lawyer in unpublished strike documents reveals that management suspected "girls" of using sticks in the mauling incident and that women workers actively helped obstruct individuals and vehicles, including trucks and rail cars. "A bunch of girls" surrounded the plant manager's car and lined up to form a barricade across the road during the mauling incident.<sup>98</sup>

The two most serious picket line incidents, which resulted in jail sentences, involved very different levels of violence, but their handling by the courts and the press conflated them in a way that exaggerated the degree of violence and implicated all of the fifteen individuals involved to a similar degree. Although they occurred about a week apart, newspaper accounts of the two incidents were published at the same time, immediately after the second incident. Despite explicit detail in the press report about the violence alleged, particular actions were not attributed to individuals, so it is impossible to determine from the news reports who did what.

The first incident was a minor case of property damage. It involved obstruction of a truck that had crossed the picket line and was stopped by strikers when it returned from the factory hauling pottery. Part of the load was dumped on the ground and broken.<sup>99</sup> Three men and one woman, Josie Longridge—who was married to the union's international representative, William Longridge—were charged with "watching and besetting" in connection with this incident for leading a group of workers who stopped the truck.<sup>100</sup> The second incident, which involved personal injury, was described by the newspaper as a "mauling." According to press reports, one male strike breaker was "kicked about the body after he was thrown to the ground," and four other male strike breakers were "pummelled

by fists and sticks.” One man went to hospital and was released the next day.<sup>101</sup> It was also reported that strikers tried unsuccessfully to “drag” several “girls” from the back of a manager’s car and called them “abusive and foul names.”<sup>102</sup> Fifteen unionists, seven of whom were women, were charged in the “mauling” incident. One man was charged with assault.<sup>103</sup>

The type of charges laid and press coverage implied that everyone charged was equally involved in the most serious acts of violence, even though only one man was charged with assault. The magistrate’s severe words confirmed this interpretation. According to a press report, Gore-Hickman asserted that “acts of assault committed by groups of persons threw guilt on all taking part, whether they were the actual ones who committed the act or not. Should murder result every member was guilty.”<sup>104</sup>

But the differential treatment of male and female pickets belied the magistrate’s stern words about equal guilt. Josie Longridge was the only woman picket charged in both incidents.<sup>105</sup> Longridge was not a worker; she was married to William Longridge, the prominent communist Mine Mill leader. Significantly, her full name was never published in the newspaper nor recorded in the court ledger; instead, she was always described as “Mrs. William Longridge.” It was through oral interviews that I learned her first name.<sup>106</sup> The authorities’ refusal to use Josie’s first name emphasized her identity as a married woman and made her actions the responsibility of her husband rather than a reflection of her own beliefs and political activism. Her husband’s status as a prominent communist union leader in the province reinforced this emphasis.

The magistrate’s decision to ignore even the actions of a mature woman also reveals the anxieties of male authorities. The magistrate was unable to take women’s militancy seriously, because to do so would have risked emasculating male management and police and could have cast him as a bully in the eyes of the community. Taking a lenient stance instead made the judiciary appear chivalrous and paternalistic, and it reinforced the notion of essential gender differences and patriarchal power on which postwar Canadian society was structured. Gore-Hickman’s comments that he “hesitated to send young women to jail” demonstrated his refusal

to acknowledge that women workers were capable of militant behaviour. Courtroom lenience toward women that is construed in chivalric terms serves the needs of a male judiciary.<sup>107</sup> The distinction between male and female workers, which convinced Gore-Hickman to send the men to jail, also undermined the reality and legitimacy of committed and effective women picketers; this differential treatment also served to underscore that only men were the real workers, buttressing their privileged claim to paid work.

Significantly, defence lawyer A.Y. Spivack also asked for the lenience of the court “in the case of the female workers, the majority being 17 or 18 years of age,” although he did not request lenience for any of the men, one of whom was eighteen.<sup>108</sup> The lawyer’s request reveals a fundamental ambivalence toward women workers within the male union leadership. Mine Mill encouraged women’s involvement in the union and on the picket line, and it strove to address their particular needs. Yet in this instance the union lawyer chose not to promote an image of militant women workers who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their male co-workers in labour activism to secure fair wages and conditions. Instead, he affirmed working women’s respectability according to conventional, primarily middle-class norms of passive and vulnerable femininity.

Pervasive middle-class notions of femininity helped cast women workers’ militancy in a negative light, which undermined their effectiveness during the strike and eroded their claim to equal wages. Militancy jeopardized women workers’ claim to respectability, which hinged on their ability to conform to middle-class gender norms held by the police, the judiciary, and journalists. This factor made some women unwilling to act militantly. Perhaps more importantly, powerful gender norms reduced the effectiveness of female militancy that did occur. As Joy Parr has demonstrated, these norms could bring “neighbourly wrath” upon women workers who were militant.<sup>109</sup> In Medicine Hat, gender norms prompted newspapers, employers, the state, and unions to ignore or downplay the militancy of women workers. In both cases the legitimacy and strength of the labour movement was weakened in the eyes of the public.

Organized labour’s adherence to middle-class gender norms was conflicted, particularly within progressive left-wing unions like Mine Mill,

which upheld democratic and egalitarian ideals. The predominant concern of all industrial unions in the 1940s was to secure unskilled male workers steady work at a wage adequate to support a family—something only skilled craftsmen had been able to attain in the past.<sup>110</sup> The presence of women in a bargaining unit created ambivalence and contradictions as unions tried to improve the situation of women workers within a patriarchal paradigm. Internal struggles over whether or not contractual seniority rights should give women access to male jobs, and pressure exerted by male workers on married women to give up their jobs to men, demonstrate some of the conflicts created by privileging male workers.<sup>111</sup>

Viewed as daughters or potential wives more than workers by their male co-workers and union leaders, women were treated as more fragile and less capable on the picket line than men. Engilena Kessler said women participated equally on the picket line, but only men took the leadership role within teams of pickets: “every group had a leader and it was always the men that were the leader of the group. Maybe it was for protection. I don’t know.”<sup>112</sup> When women workers’ actions forced them into public consciousness, there was an emphasis on their vulnerability, which was clear in the crucial court case. The union also capitalized on perceptions of female vulnerability by giving young women workers a prominent role in its public appeals for support. Two young women workers were appointed to solicit donations during a whirlwind fundraising tour of mining communities in the Crowsnest Pass during the strike. An impassioned speech by a teenage woman worker at the fundraising rally held in the first weeks of the strike elicited strong support within the community. The particular appeal of “girl workers” was also implied in a letter from an official of the United Mine Workers of America based in a small town in the Crowsnest Pass and directed to the striking Medalta workers. Encouraging them to hold a tag day fundraiser in Blairmore, he wrote, “If girl workers were selected for this work I feel sure the result would be worthwhile.”<sup>113</sup> The care with which the two women dressed for the occasion, despite their low wages, suggests that the women did not see themselves as victims but felt a pride in their appearance, grounded in their confidence and self-worth as wage-earners. The image of women workers as vulnerable and in need of male





FIGURE 14.6: A woman picketer holds a sign saying “We Demand No Discrimination, Equal Pay for Equal Work” on the first day of the Medalta Potteries strike, 12 August 1947.

[Courtesy of Hanna Osborne]

protection reinforced the notion that they were economic dependants, which made their needs secondary to men’s. This self-image helps explain their attitude toward the issue of equal pay for equal work, which photographs and news accounts suggest was raised to some extent during the strike. None of the women or men interviewed remembered anything about the issue of equal pay, even though one woman had taken two photographs of women workers holding a picket sign stating “We Demand No Discrimination, Equal Pay for Equal Work.” Given that the workers interviewed were very young at the time of the strike—most were teenagers—attempts to improve women’s wages relative to men’s may not

<FIGURE 14.5: Mabel Cranmer (née Degg) (left) and Dorothy Beierbach (née Sailer) pose during their fund-raising tour of mining communities in the Crowsnest Pass, 29 September 1947. The women’s careful grooming in comparison with their regular work wear (see Figure 14.6) signals a working-class respectability derived from their dignity and self-respect as self-supporting wage-earners. [Courtesy of Dorothy Beierbach]



FIGURE 14.7: This union bulletin was published during the first weeks after Mine Mill was certified at Medalta Potteries. The depiction of women workers as equals with men in the graphics appears to be linked to a recruitment drive targeting women workers.

[Courtesy of University of British Columbia Archives, "Union Bulletin" circa June 1947, Box 128, File 25, Mine Mill, UBC]

have seemed relevant. Such attempts would have appealed most to older women workers, or to those who had some work experience. The union also initially demanded a wage increase of 33 per cent for women and only 21 per cent for men. In its first wage concession during the strike, however, Mine Mill reduced its wage demand to 12 per cent across the board, which effectively widened the gendered wage gap. This evidence suggests that the demand for equal pay for women may have been a

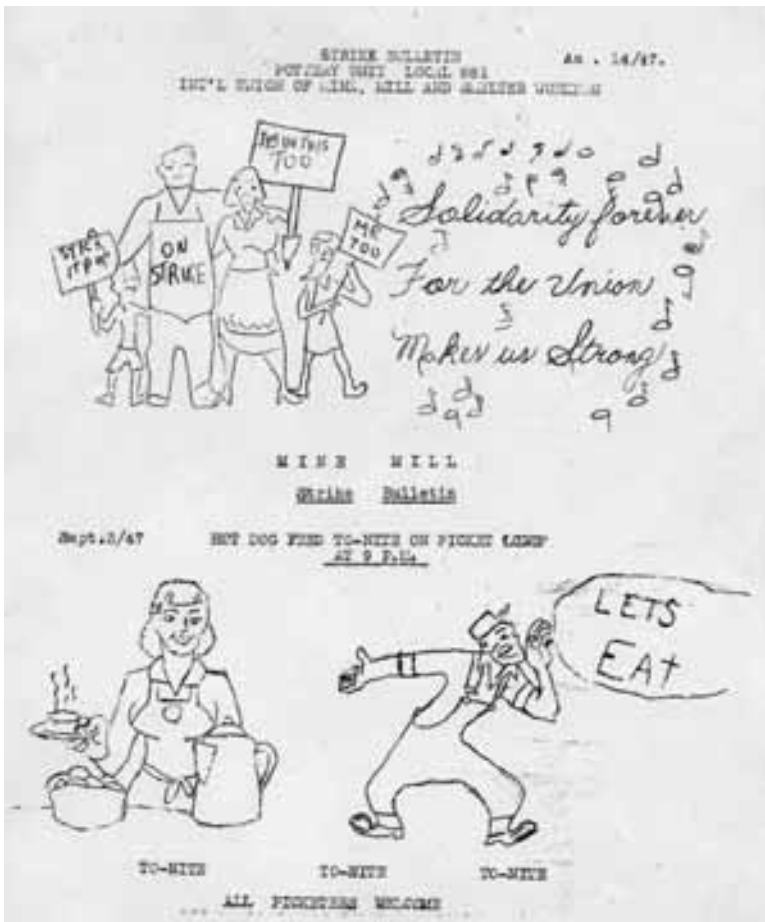


FIGURE 14.8: Graphics in two union bulletins issued during the first weeks of the strike reinforced the notion that workers were male and women's role was primarily domestic.

[Courtesy of University of British Columbia Archives, "Strike Bulletin" 14 August and 3 September 1947, Box 128, File 25, Mine Mill, UBC]

recruitment strategy promoted by union leaders more than a grassroots movement grounded in an egalitarian vision of male and female workers. A union bulletin depicting women workers as the strong, capable equals of men also suggests that the issue of equal pay was primarily a strategic issue raised by the union. The high proportion of women workers at Medalta (42 per cent) would have made equal pay advantageous to men whose jobs could be threatened by lower-paid female workers.<sup>114</sup>

Tabling an offer that sacrificed women's wages tacitly reinforced the belief that male workers' wages were more important than women's. Notwithstanding the recruitment bulletin, an underlying view of women workers as secondary in importance to men dominates the images and rhetoric in union literature. Women were either erased by the assumption that all workers were male or, particularly in strike bulletins, they were portrayed in a domestic role. Combative union rhetoric about "fighting" the boss implicitly excluded women, whose respectability hinged on their ability to conform to conventional norms of femininity that could be jeopardized by militant female behaviour. Similarly, talk of "rights" excluded women workers who were not accorded the same entitlement to paid work and a self-supporting wage that men enjoyed in the immediate postwar years when returning war veterans and male breadwinners had priority in the job market.<sup>115</sup>

A "Welcome Home Reception and Supper" organized by the union for the "Seven Labour Heroes" when they returned from jail after the strike had ended confirmed the differential status of male and female workers. Being sent to jail signaled the men's status as true workers, something that was denied the women who had been charged alongside them. The event was used by the union to counter the image of male workers as lawless and dangerous by portraying them as honest, respectable breadwinners. According to press coverage of the dinner, one jailed worker said defiantly, "We are not ashamed of our crime and punishment." Another speaker commented on the irony of calling Canadians "glorious and free... when men can be confined to jail for defending their rights and their bread and butter livelihood."<sup>116</sup>

The role of women workers, who had been charged in equal numbers and who participated fully on the picket line, was ignored at a reception for "labour heroes" that focused exclusively on the jailed men. Oral interviews and photographs reveal that many women workers, including some of those charged, joined the wives of male workers and union officials in the kitchen to organize and prepare the banquet of home-cooked fare for the reception supper.<sup>117</sup> The local newspaper's extravagant detail about the banquet menu—noting everything from the "celery, olives,



FIGURE 14.9: *Back to the kitchen*—Women workers, as well as the wives of male workers and union officials, prepared the banquet for the seven labour heroes during the Welcome Home Reception and Dinner held at the Moose Hall in Medicine Hat, 6 November 1947. From left to right, Selma Stickel, Josie Longridge (married to union leader William Longridge), Dorothy Beierbach, and Ruth Sandau. The other two women have not been identified.

[Courtesy of Dorothy Beierbach]

relishes, sliced tomatoes, hot rolls, baked ham, mashed potatoes, gravy, peas and carrots mixed” to the “ice cream, assorted cake, tea and coffee”—was the only record of public acknowledgement the women workers received.<sup>118</sup>

Placing women workers at the labour heroes’ table was not an option in 1947—it would have risked casting them as harlots, the most widely understood role for working-class women in public at the time. Their retreat to the kitchen placed them in the conventional and respectable role of dutiful daughters and helpmates. Although theirs was the first

generation of working-class women in Canada to remain employed in significant numbers after marriage, it was not until the 1960s and '70s, when their daughters came of age, that women began to claim a legitimate place as equals in the paid labour force.

The court sentences and the labour heroes' dinner demonstrate a profound ambivalence toward women workers that influenced the outcome of the Medalta strike and the strength of the labour movement in the postwar era. Gendered understandings of male and female workers fostered exaggeration of male workers' behaviour, which compromised their respectability. These understandings also undercut the public impact of women workers' solidarity and militancy. The legitimacy of Medalta workers' reasonable demands for higher wages was more easily dismissed by a public offended at the apparently brutish behaviour of male workers and alarmed by communist allegations. Gendered interpretations of workers' actions helped deal a devastating blow to initially broad-based public support for Medalta workers and created an eerie silence about the activism of women workers, which helped put them back in the kitchen figuratively and, to some extent, literally for two decades.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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#### NOTES

1. Engilena Kessler (née Stappler), interview by author, 1 February 2001, Edmonton, AB.
2. *Medicine Hat Daily News*, 11 October 1947 (hereafter cited as MHDN).
3. Medicine Hat Police Arrest Records, 11 October 1947, M93.1.5, Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery (hereafter cited as MHM).
4. Medicine Hat City Council Minutes, 20 October 1947, M96.6, MHM.
5. The new laws penalized unions for striking illegally and prohibited recruitment on company property without permission. Warren Caragata, *Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1979), 140–41; Alvin Finkel, "The Cold War, Alberta Labour, and the Social Credit Regime," *Labour/Le Travail* 21 (Spring 1988): 123–52.

6. Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–1948* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001).
7. Anne Hayward, *The Alberta Pottery Industry, 1912–1990: A Social and Economic History* (Hull, QC: The Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2001); MHDN, 21 October 1947; *Calgary Herald*, 28 August 1947. Warren Caragata's brief account of the strike is an exception in that he identifies wage demands as the main cause of the walk out. See Caragata, *Alberta Labour*, 140–41.
8. Despite communist leadership within Mine Mill, these workers were not radical. They continued to support the existing political and economic system but felt entitled to a greater share in its rewards. The word *militant* is used here to indicate assertiveness, aggression, or combativeness; it signals workers' rejection of paternalistic relations with their employer. See Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour 1800–1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 41–48.
9. See Gregory S. Kealey with Douglas Cruikshank, "Strikes in Canada, 1891–1950," in *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 407 for a graph that traces the strike wave.
10. PC 1003, passed by the federal government in February 1944, established procedures to certify unions, forced employers to recognize trade unions, defined unfair labour practices, and created an administrative apparatus to enforce the legislation. One peculiarly Canadian aspect of the legislation is that neither the union nor the employer was allowed to hold a strike or lockout during the term of an agreement or before submitting to compulsory conciliation. This feature tended to benefit employers by creating delays. The American Wagner Act, which was passed nearly a decade earlier and influenced PC 1003 significantly, did not contain this provision. Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 279–80.
11. Alvin Finkel, *The Social Credit Phenomenon in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 86, 136–37.
12. John Richards and Larry Pratt, *Prairie Capitalism: Power and Influence in the New West* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979), 160.
13. Alvin Finkel notes the connection between the meatpacking strike and the government's determination to reassure oil investors. *The Social Credit Phenomenon*, 110.
14. *People's Weekly*, 18 October 1947.
15. *People's Weekly*, 18 October 1947.
16. MHDN, 21 October 1947.
17. MHDN, 24 October 1947. Medalta allowed all striking workers to return, even those who had been jailed. This worker "victory" likely resulted from the company's desperate need for workers because of a labour shortage rather than the union's negotiating strength.
18. MHDN, 9 December 1947. Medalta jiggerman Clarence Sailer placed last in the campaign for councillor.
19. After the factory closed, the union continued to negotiate with the local federal unemployment insurance officer to gain benefits for former workers. Letter to J.W. McLane, U.I.C. office, Medicine Hat, from Charles J. Barber, Secretary, and M. Dillon, Business Agent, 5 April 1954, Local 895, Box 128, File 25, International Union of Mine Mill and

- Smelter Workers (hereafter Mine Mill), University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections (hereafter cited as Mine Mill, UBC).
20. The city's industries included flour mills, a porcelain plant, brick yards, a glass factory, Canadian Pacific Railway workers (who were among the first organized workers in the province), and green houses, among others. "Medicine Hat Becomes Unionized," undated Canadian Congress of Labour circular, circa June 1947, Box 127, File 1-1a, Mine Mill, UBC.
  21. Strikes and Lockouts in Canada During 1947, Department of Labour Research and Statistics Branch, Canada, supplement to *The Labour Gazette*, April 1948. According to the 1946 census, the four largest cities in Alberta were Edmonton (population 113,116), Calgary (100,044), Lethbridge (16,522), and Medicine Hat (12,859). *Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1946*, vol. 2.
  22. *Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1946*, vol. 2, Table 15, Gainfully occupied, 14 years of age and over, by industry and sex, for the cities of Lethbridge and Medicine Hat, and Table 19, Gainfully occupied, 14 years of age and over, by industry and sex, showing birthplace and mother tongue, for the province of Alberta.
  23. Jack Forbes, "Manufacturing Process History of the Medalta Potteries National and Provincial Historic Site 1912-1954," Parks Canada, 2000.
  24. The union was demanding a 33 per cent wage increase for women and a 21 per cent increase for men. The company offered 7 per cent across the board. MHDN, 12 August 1947.
  25. Mine Mill was first named the Western Federation of Miners. See Jeremy Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard-Rock Miners, 1895-1903," *Canadian Historical Review* 71, no. 3 (1990): 317-45; John Hinde, *When Coal was King: Ladysmith and the Coal-Mining Industry on Vancouver Island* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suschnigg, and Dieter K. Buse, *Hard Lessons: The Mine Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement* (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1995); Elizabeth Jameson, *All That Glitters: Class, Conflict and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); and Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All* (New York: Quadrangle, 1969).
  26. Industrial unionism is the organization of all workers in an industry, including the unskilled, into a single union. It became successful in the late 1930s, first in the United States and then in Canada, in response to technological changes that created mass production and thus eroded the power of skilled workers who had previously dominated organized labour's craft unions. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 250-54.
  27. James J. Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 20. The movie documents Mine Mill's policy of racial equality and the crucial role workers' wives played in a key strike in New Mexico.
  28. "Present working conditions and wages in this area, stand as a threat to organized workers in other parts of this province and elsewhere. Thus making an intensive organizing campaign a necessity," from "Medicine Hat Becomes Unionized," undated union bulletin, circa 1947, Box 128, File 25, Mine Mill, UBC.

29. David C. Jones, *Empire of Dust: Settling and Abandoning the Prairie Dry Belt* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1987).
30. Government war contracts forced the company into twenty-four-hour production during the war. Ed Gould, *All Hell for a Basement* (Medicine Hat, AB: City of Medicine Hat, 1983).
31. Christine Pocsik (née Steigel), interview by author, 23 September 2000, Medicine Hat, AB.
32. *The Clay Products News and Ceramic Record*, August 1948, 1; *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1983), E41–48.
33. These figures do not include piecework rates that allowed some women and men to earn a top rate of \$35 and \$43, respectively. Unemployment Insurance Commission: Report on Industrial Dispute, 13 September 1947. Completed by company manager Jack Cunliffe, RG 27, vol. 456, Strike 154, Department of Labour, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC).
34. A statement by each party in the dispute concerning wage rates was published in MHDN during the strike. See “Medalta Facts,” 9 October 1947, and “Further Facts Re: Medalta,” 11 October 1947.
35. This fact is particularly striking given that women represented only about 10 per cent of the workforce in the 1920s and appear to have maintained a similar proportion during the 1930s, although few figures are available for those years. Workmen’s Compensation Act (Accident Fund) Alberta, 1925, Medalta Potteries Ltd. Fonds (hereafter cited as MPF), PR69.00235, File 65; government wage summary form, 1927, MPF PR69.00235 File 272, Provincial Archives of Alberta (hereafter cited as PAA).
36. In June 1941 a woman worker was half scalped when her hair caught in a rotating shaft. A Workman’s Compensation Board directive had been issued five months earlier ordering the company to place guards on the moving machinery. Letters between Medalta Potteries and the WCB, May 1941, MPF PR69.00235, File 438, PAA.
37. The factory did not have a lunchroom or the proper number of toilets, and its sanitary conditions were described as “fair.” H. M. Bishop’s Inspector’s Report on Medalta Potteries factory, 15 June 1926, MPF PR69.00235, File 69, PAA.
38. Christine and Alex Pocsik, interview by author, 23 September 2000, Medicine Hat, AB.
39. Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).
40. Hanna Osborne, interview by author, 23 September 2000, Medicine Hat, AB.
41. Engilena Kessler, interview by author, 16 September 2000, Edmonton, AB.
42. See Pamela Sugiman, *Labour’s Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Auto Workers in Canada, 1937–1979* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Julie Guard, “Womanly Innocence and Manly Self-Respect: Gendered Challenges to Labour’s Postwar Compromise,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003*, ed. Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, and Jesse Vorst (Winnipeg, MB/Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 1995): 119–38; Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920–1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).
43. Kessler interview, 1 February 2001.
44. Kessler interview, 1 February 2001.

45. Anne Forrest, "Securing the Male Breadwinner: A Feminist Interpretation of PC 1003," in *Labour Gains*, 139–62.
46. In Canada the number of married women working for wages more than doubled between 1941 and 1951, rising to 11.2 per cent. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945–60," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 3rd ed., ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 380.
47. Scholars generally agree that there was a concerted effort to reinscribe traditional gender roles, but there is debate about the extent to which that goal was achieved. See Ruth Roach Pierson, "*They're Still Women After All*": *The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986); and Jeff Keshen, "Revisiting Canada's Civilian Women During World War II," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 30 (1997): 239–66. For studies of the United States see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988); and Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
48. During the war a wife could earn any amount and still be treated as a full dependant. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Gender and the Unemployment Insurance Debates in Canada, 1934–1940," *Labour/Le Travail* 25 (Spring 1990): 77–103.
49. Ann Porter, "Women and Income Security in the Postwar Period: The Case of Unemployment Insurance, 1945–1962," in *Canadian Women: A Reader*, ed. Alison Prentice et al. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1996), 324–25.
50. In August 1947 the minimum wage for women workers in Alberta was \$18 per week (37.5¢ per hour) and the minimum wage for men was \$25 per week (52¢ per hour) based on a forty-eight hour week. *Alberta Employment Standards Policy Manual*, circa 2000, Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Employment Standards Department.
51. Women were to be provided with seating to rest when not working and were prohibited from heavy lifting. *Alberta Labour and Social Legislation History*, Unpublished report, Alberta Department of Labour, 1970.
52. Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997). See "Introduction: Defining and Redefining Women," 3–47.
53. Howard Palmer, "Strangers and Stereotypes: The Rise of Nativism, 1880–1920," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, 2nd ed., ed. R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1995), 308–34.
54. English was not the first language for 17 per cent of Medicine Hat's population in 1946. Of those individuals, 49 per cent were German-speaking. The next three most common languages in the community were Russian (21 per cent), Polish (4 per cent), and Chinese (3 per cent). *Census of the Prairie Provinces, 1946*, vol. 1, 546–47.
55. Kessler interview, 16 September 2000.
56. Howard Palmer, *Land of the Second Chance: A History of Ethnic Groups in Southern Alberta* (Lethbridge, AB: *The Lethbridge Herald*, 1972), 193, 235, 246.
57. Palmer, "Strangers & Stereotypes," 312–14.
58. Kessler interview, 16 September 2000.

59. In her study of nursing students in Medicine Hat, Florence Melchior found that middle-class women of British origin had the greatest access to placements in the local nursing school. German-speaking and Scandinavian women worked at the potteries doing less prestigious work for lower wages. Florence Melchior, "Nursing Students at Medicine Hat General Hospital, 1894–1920," Unpublished paper, "Unsettled Pasts" Conference, University of Calgary, 2002.
60. Kessler interview, 16 September 2000.
61. I elected not to identify several quotations out of consideration for individuals still living. Although all of the people interviewed were offered anonymity, no one chose to remain anonymous, so the names provided in the study are actual names.
62. Helen Potrebenco, *No Streets of Gold: A Social History of Ukrainians in Alberta* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1977), 26.
63. Thomas Dunk, *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 97, 114.
64. Alison Prentice et al., eds., *Canadian Women: A History*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Canada, 1996), 346. Women of colour had previously been limited to domestic work.
65. Kessler interview, 16 September 2000; Union Minutes, Box 128, File 26, Mine Mill, UBC.
66. Race was never raised as an issue in news reports, union bulletins, company or government records, or by those interviewed.
67. Marc Jeffrey Stern, *The Pottery Industry of Trenton: A Skilled Trade in Transition 1850–1929* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994); Jacqueline Sarsby, "Sexual Segregation in the Pottery Industry," *Feminist Review* 21 (November 1985): 67–93.
68. Only men could hold the job of jiggerman. This was the most skilled position in the factory and involved the use of a jiggering wheel to shape the soft clay into various products. Hayward, *The Alberta Pottery Industry*, 75.
69. In a 1940 letter from Medalta's chief rival, Medicine Hat Potteries, to the government justifying its need to exceed minimum wage regulations by employing more females at the low "apprenticeship" rate, G. B. Armstrong explained: "Our work for these girls is not hard but requires the small and quick hands that are not found in male employees." This claim was common throughout the industry. Letter 8 February 1940, Board of Industrial Relations, GR69.0131, PAA.
70. Rosetta Brosnikoff (née Worrall), interview by author, 23 September 2000, Medicine Hat, AB.
71. See "Medalta Facts," MHDN, 9 October 1947, and "Further Facts Re: Medalta," MHDN, 11 October 1947.
72. The female minimum wage rate was 72 per cent of the male rate in August 1947, but the actual difference between male and female wages in the province was much larger because, according to a 1946 government wage survey, a far greater proportion of women workers than men earned an amount equal to or near the minimum wage. "Survey of Wage Rates Current in Alberta During the Last Half Year 1946" by H. P. Rocke, Chief Inspector, Board of Industrial Relations, 26 December 1946, GR1967.0071, File 470.N, PAA.
73. After years of doing domestic work and child care on the farm, or for neighbouring families on a barter basis, Hanna Osborne said when she finally got a steady paying job

- in the pottery at the age of twenty-three, paying 25 cents an hour, “*that* was a good job, uhuh.” Osborne interview.
74. A number of women interviewed worked at the pottery after they got married. Each reported that few married women worked at the factory in 1947, but married women were not pressured to leave. Dorothy Beierbach, interview by author, 14 December 2000, Medicine Hat, AB; Brosnikoff interview, 23 September 2000; Kessler interview, 16 September 2000.
  75. “Medalta Facts” by Medalta Potteries management, MHDN, 9 October 1947.
  76. Rosetta Brosnikoff, interview by author, 23 September 2000 and 20 May 2001, Medicine Hat, AB.
  77. The age difference is evident in photographs of workers, and in the average age of men and women workers compiled by the union in a 1952 chart through a random sampling to determine average earnings. The average age of women workers was 25, and the average age of men was 32. The oldest woman employed at the pottery was 37, and the oldest man was 67. “Individual Average Earnings, Picked at Random, Over Six-Month Period, January–June, 1952, Inclusive,” 18 October 1952, Box 128, File 125, Mine Mill, UBC.
  78. MHDN, 11 October 47; Beierbach interview.
  79. The worker wished to remain anonymous.
  80. Brosnikoff interview, 20 May 2001.
  81. Kessler interview, 16 September 2000.
  82. It was the first 100 per cent certification vote to be achieved in the province. *Mine Mill Organizer*, May 1947, Local 881, Box 127, File 1, Mine Mill, UBC.
  83. Kessler interview, 1 February 2001.
  84. Jack Cunliffe Examination for Discovery, 3 October 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed 19 August 1947, GR1985.0289, Box S.C. 1318, File S/C44436, PAA. Union leaders probably chose to hold an unsupervised vote to circumvent delays created by new provincial labour legislation modeled on PC 1003 that made conciliation/arbitration mandatory and allowed the employer to prepare for a strike.
  85. The local newspaper emphasized the “illegality” of a parade held without a permit. MHDN was owned by city industrialist, J. H. (Hop) Yuill. His ownership of several local businesses, including Medalta’s main competitor, Medicine Hat Potteries, gave him a vested interest in a strike that threatened to raise local labour rates. Autobiography of Joseph Harlan Yuill, researched and compiled by Kathleen Dirk, “Living in Medicine Hat: The Yuill History 1883–1985.” Unpublished Manuscript, 1985, MHM.
  86. MHDN, 10 September 1947.
  87. MHDN, 29 August 1947.
  88. In a letter to his superiors in Ottawa on 11 September 1947, J.W. McLane, manager of the local National Employment office, wrote: “Less than 1% of the workers of this plant have applied at this office for employment and only a few have made inquiries regarding drawing Unemployment Benefits and on the opposite side of the picture we have made very few referrals on the order placed by the company [for replacement workers].” A labour shortage also kept the number of Unemployment Benefits applications low. It is difficult to determine the extent to which the low number of applicants for pottery jobs

- during the strike reflects strike support. Letter from J.W. McLane to Director of Industrial Relations, Department of Labour, RG 27, vol. 456, Strike 154, PAC.
89. Medalta used this pretext to fire all 213 striking employees less than a week after the strike began and to solicit new job applicants. MHDN, 16 August 1947.
  90. A letter from government officials stated “the majority of the employees had elected the Union as their Bargaining Agent, and...the fault was only a minor one and in most cases would not even be questioned.” Judgement by Justice Hugh John Macdonald, 19 November 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed 19 August 1947, GR1985.0289, Box S.C. 1318, File S/C44436, PAA. Letter from the Department of Trade and Industry to Mine Mill, 1 December 1947, Box 127, File 1, Mine Mill, UBC.
  91. MHDN, 22 August 1947.
  92. Fifty union members were charged in connection with the strike and eighteen of them were women. Women represented 36 per cent of those charged; they comprised 42 per cent of striking workers, based on court reports published throughout the strike in MHDN, August through October 1947. Actual court records for strike-related charges could not be located.
  93. For more strike detail see Cindy Loch-Drake, “Jailed Heroes and Kitchen Heroines: Class, Gender and the Medalta Potteries Strike in Postwar Alberta” (master’s thesis, University of Calgary, 2001).
  94. Some of the workers interviewed did not know each other at the time of the interviews.
  95. Kessler interview, 1 February 2001.
  96. Letter 16 February 2001 in the author’s possession. The worker asked to remain anonymous.
  97. Dorothy Beierbach and Hanna Osborne kindly allowed me to examine and reproduce a number of personal strike photographs they had taken during the strike.
  98. Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 3 October 1947, Medalta Potteries Statement of Claim filed 19 August 1947, GR1985.0289, Box S.C. 1318, File S/C44436, PAA.
  99. The union made restitution for the damaged goods, Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 11 October 1947.
  100. Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 1 October 1947.
  101. Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 29 September 1947.
  102. Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 29 September 1947.
  103. The man charged with assault was Ralph Lattery. Individuals charged with watching and besetting were Matthew Wolfer, Mrs William Longridge, Valentine Stach, Olga Bierbach, Laura Rife, Ralph Lattery, Bertha Heller, Annette Heller, Clarence Sailer, Selma Stickel, Irene Entzminger, Ruby Kessler, Arthur Reiger, Les Bogie, and Albert Pawlowski. Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 29 September 1947.
  104. Alex Pocsik Examination for Discovery, 11 October 1947.
  105. Only one conviction was obtained against Josie Longridge, although two convictions were obtained against Matthew Wolfer, the one man charged in both incidents. 4 October 1947, Ledger of Convictions and Dismissals by Magistrates Under Section 793 of Criminal Code Part XVI, Medicine Hat Courthouse.
  106. I initially speculated that the *s* in *Mrs* was a typo and that newspaper accounts were actually referring to William Longridge.

107. Chivalry is rooted in the notion that women must be protected by men because they are weak and defenceless and are therefore less responsible than men. In her assessment of two Canadian murder cases in which women were acquitted, Carolyn Strange has made explicit the ways in which judicial chivalry has served to obscure and perpetuate injustice outside the courtroom stage. Carolyn Strange, "Wounded Womanhood and Dead Men," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 176. See also Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920–1960* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2001).
108. The ages of the men were more evenly distributed across the age spectrum compared to those of the women: one man was twenty-three, two were twenty-four, and two were thirty-five. Medicine Hat Police Arrest Records, 11 October 1947, M93.1.5, MHM.
109. Joy Parr, *Gender of Breadwinners*; see esp. chap. 5, "Womanly Militance, Neighbourly Wrath," 96–119. Parr's analysis of a bitter strike at the Penmans factory in Paris, Ontario, in 1949 reveals an effort by the United Textile Workers of America to minimize the militancy of women workers. The Penmans workforce had more women workers (56 per cent) and included a larger proportion of older, married women when compared to Medalta. This may in part account for the Penmans workers' greater militancy. Another similarity to the Medalta strike is the attempt by Penmans and the state to discredit the workers' union with allegations of communist influence.
110. Guard, "Womanly Innocence"; and Forrest, "Securing the Male Breadwinner," 119–38.
111. Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 51–57.
112. Kessler interview, 16 September 2000.
113. "Strike Donations," Box 127, Mine Mill, UBC.
114. Postwar U.S. workplaces that employed a large proportion of women tended to garner more male support for equal pay as a way of ensuring that cheaper women workers did not threaten male jobs. Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
115. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out To Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 295–99.
116. MHDN, 7 November 1947.
117. Beierbach interview.
118. MHDN, 7 November 1947.