

Waterfront Blues: Labour Strife in the Port of Montreal, 1960–1978. By Alexander C. Pathy. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. xviii + 328 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN: 0-802-08980-1.

Reviewed by Christopher Armstrong

Top-level corporate managers frequently declare their concerns about the attitudes and morale of their employees to be of the utmost importance in ensuring efficiency and productivity, but in practice they normally seem quite content to entrust such matters to lower-level specialists in human resources and industrial relations. Business historians are equally disinclined to pay detailed attention to this topic; the works of Alfred D. Chandler Jr., for instance, contain little about the corporate workforce. Labor historians, by contrast, approach the subject almost exclusively from the point of view of employees, emphasizing the exploitation and the injustices workers have endured. Alexander C. Pathy's *Waterfront Blues* is, therefore, of unusual interest to business historians, owing to his efforts to explain the viewpoints of both employers and workers on the strife-torn waterfront of Montreal during the 1960s and 1970s.

In many places, the docks have been the scene of fierce contests between labor and management since the late nineteenth century. The flashpoint was the intermittent nature of the relatively unskilled work of loading and unloading cargo. When vessels arrived, shipowners and shippers sought to ensure that they lay idle alongside the wharves for the shortest possible time, hiring as large a workforce as possible, only to let men go as soon as the holds had been emptied and refilled. Facing a precarious livelihood with few barriers to entry, dock workers unionized to try to improve wages and conditions and force employers to use labor from union-run hiring halls. At the same time, the unions attempted to create restrictive practices in order to spread out the work and ensure that all their members earned a living wage.

This situation endured in many ports around the world well into the second half of the twentieth century, and Montreal was no exception. If anything, its labor problems were exacerbated by the seasonal closing of the docks by ice around the end of each calendar year. Upon reopening with the spring thaw, traffic gradually rose, culminating in

a peak period in the late fall as shippers struggled to beat the enforced idleness of the winter freeze. By 1960 there were about 2,500 members of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) employed in the port, alongside an equal number of nonunion workers, who were also scrabbling to make a living. Men who failed to secure work at the union hall or elsewhere on a given day could resort to making the trek along the eleven miles of waterfront, trolling for casual jobs in a practice they called "la seine" (the net). Working in gangs of about twenty in the holds, on the wharves, or in the sheds, ILA members endeavored to impose rules regarding the number of men required for any given task, for who might operate particular machines, and, above all, for the weight of cargo that each sling-load lifted by a crane might contain. The most notorious practice was "spello," in which only half a gang actually worked at a time; thus some longshoremen favored by union timekeepers might even be paid simultaneously for two different jobs.

On the other side stood the shipping lines and stevedoring companies, who seemed to care little if a sizable percentage of their workforce failed to earn a decent annual income. In the 1960s the volume of traffic at Montreal seemed healthy and likely to grow, but there were changes coming that could not be ignored. Mechanization of cargo handling through the use of forklifts and grain-trimming machines in the holds offered opportunities for cost cutting. Looming over everything else was the spread of the use of standard shipping containers made of steel and measuring twenty or forty feet in length, into which between eighteen and thirty-six tons of cargo could be loaded at any point. Containerization offered the possibility of lowering a vessel's turnaround time at dockside from the six to ten days that were required with traditional "break-bulk" cargo in boxes, bales, and barrels to a mere twenty-four or forty-eight hours. Battles seemed inevitable over whether the longshoremen would have the right to "stuff" or "unstuff" goods into containers, and over how they would be loaded aboard trucks or railway cars on the docks.

Alexander Pathy became involved in this volatile situation through his family-owned shipping company. He was made an executive member of the management federation, which later became the Maritime Employers Association (MEA), of which he became the first chair in 1969. He describes how he gradually came to the realization that

if the port of Montreal was to prosper a series of significant changes in labor relations was required. The ILA was determined that its members should be offered pay for a guaranteed number of hours each week of the shipping season, while seeking to maintain gang sizes and restrictive practices like “spello.” Pathy believed that only by offering increased wages and some sort of seasonal income guarantee would the MEA persuade the ILA to loosen its resistance to change in matters like sling-loads and gang sizes. But when he pressed the other employers to create a fund to cover the income guarantee through a royalty on each ton of cargo passing through the docks, he soon encountered differences among the shipping lines, the stevedoring companies, and proponents of containerization. There proved to be no shortage of obstinacy on both sides of the contract bargaining table.

The author also reminds his readers of another fact that business historians are all too prone to disregard: the role of the state in economic life. Shipping and navigation were the responsibility of the federal government, and in this period even the threat of the closure of the port of Montreal was sufficient to spook politicians and bureaucrats in Ottawa. A violent strike in 1966 quickly generated rumors of a shortage of feed grain that might starve Quebec livestock, as well as the fear that many countries might withdraw from the Expo '67, the world's fair to celebrate Canada's centennial, because they could not be certain of the arrival of exhibits. Throughout this period, a string of mediators, conciliators, and arbitrators was appointed by the federal Labour Department to achieve peace on the docks. One of these, Judge Alan Gold, was involved so frequently that in 1975, when the MEA and the ILA failed to reach an agreement, he took it upon himself to write a complete collective contract for them, which was subsequently enacted into law by the Parliament. Moreover, the Montreal Port Authority, which was created by the government in 1971, owned and controlled the docks, and Alexander Pathy was appointed one of its founding directors. Thus labor relations in this sector, as in many others, such as railroads, airlines, coal mining or steel production, could entail far more than just the search for a bipartisan deal hammered out between private parties.

Pathy thus has a fascinating story to tell from his vantage point at the center of events, supplemented by many interviews with a wide range of players collected over the years after he entered academic life. For instance, few analysts might place so much

emphasis on the significance of the dissension within the MEA, made all the more acute by the fear of default on the bank loans that the association had taken out to fund wage guarantees for the longshoremen. This danger also left the government facing the grim prospect of having to take over the debt if the employers' organization lurched into bankruptcy. My only wish is that the author had systematically supplied a broader historical perspective concerning the volume and nature of the freight handled in the port of Montreal in the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps with a postscript on its fate in the age of containerization, when destinations like Halifax, a thousand miles closer to the open ocean, have undertaken a strong commitment to the new technologies. However, overall, *Waterfront Blues* is a highly commendable addition to the history of industrial relations in Canada, and it contains much that will interest business historians.

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