“Nervous nellys and nay-sayers”: Social movements and Canada-United States free trade

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Abstract

Free trade is part of neo-liberal economics, which is centred on the free market principles of limited government regulation and private sector competition. Free trade focuses on the elimination of trade barriers and tariffs. In Canada, the movement toward free trade began in 1985 with the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, which encouraged free trade between the United States and Canada, and concluded with the 1988 federal election that sealed Canada's fate within economic union with the United States. This article will combine a Neo-Marxist and Political Process Theory framework to address how during the period from 1985 to 1988, Canadian social movements adopted innovative tactics and mobilized against free trade to gain greater influence over trade policy.

Keywords: free trade; social movements; Canada; United States; Auto Pact; United Steel Workers; Canadian Auto Workers, National Action Committee on the Status of Women; Council of Canadians; Macdonald Commission

“A hundred years from now what will be remembered is that it was done. The naysayers will be forgotten.”

-Brian Mulroney, 2007

Introduction

The Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement, or CUFTA, was a hugely significant agreement in Canadian history. The establishment of CUFTA engineered a shift in the political acceptability of free trade in Canada. Free trade with the United States created a political environment favouring further North American integration as well as agreements with Israel, Jordan, Chile, and Costa Rica, among others (Hart 2007). The current Conservative federal government has continued this legacy by concluding a free trade deal with Honduras, pursuing the Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement with the European Union, and most recently entering into free trade talks with Japan (Chase 2011; The Canadian Press 2013). Though today free trade deals are signed without serious extra-parliamentary resistance, free trade was once an issue which roused the Canadian public to action through social movements. Past discussion on free trade has centered on the parliamentary political process and understandably so, as it was the focal point of the 1988 federal election. However, there is another side of the story of Canada-United State free trade: the story of how Canadians mobilized to confront Brian Mulroney and the Progressive Conservatives on the issue of

Canada-United States free trade. Social movement mobilization against free trade, though unsuccessful in the fight against CUFTA, played an important role in shaping the political terrain on which CUFTA was negotiated.

This article is informally divided into three sections: labour issues, the women's movement, and social movements' influence on the political process. First, this article will discuss how groups like the Canadian Auto Workers and the Council of Canadians, a social justice and economic nationalist group founded in 1985, galvanized public opinion against free trade by framing the Auto Pact as an imperiled symbol of national economic interests. Second, this article will discuss how the United Steel Workers and the Canadian Auto Workers transformed class lines within the factory into political lines, creating working class solidarity against free trade. Third, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women's efforts at linking women's issues with the socio-economic issues of free trade will be discussed. Last, the massive coalition of organized labour, farmers' groups, church groups, women's groups and others known as the Pro-Canada Network as well as allied groups will be discussed in terms of their agitation through the formal parliamentary political process against CUFTA.

Historiography

The historical work utilized in this paper relates to the period between the 1985 release of the Royal Commission on

Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, or the Macdonald Commission, and the 1988 federal election. Most historical works focus on a particular social movement, or a particular issue pertaining to free trade. For example, Dimitry Anastakis focuses on the political uses of the Auto Pact during the debate over free trade (Anastakis 2005). Gerald P. Glyde discusses the labour movement in Canada in terms of wanting concessions more than the destruction of the agreement as well as asserting that Canada's workers' movement lacked international solidarity (Glyde 1993). Robert Storey's "Making Steel Under Free Trade?" discusses conflict between workers and management in the context of the deal, a topic which surfaces frequently in literature on CUFTA (Storey 1993). Many authors have investigated the struggle against CUFTA as a moment of dramatic change for the women's movement. Sylvia Bashevkin discusses the significant nature of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, or NAC's struggle against free trade (Bashevkin 1994). Jeffery M. Ayres, unlike Gerald P. Glyde, suggests that the anti-CUFTA mobilization of the late 1980s was a pre-cursor to continental mobilization and the emergence of the anti-globalization movement (Ayres 1996). What the aforesaid perspectives have in common and the perspective that this article will advance is that mobilization against CUFTA was a moment in which social movements collaborated and experimented with new tactics to greater influence trade policy.

Theoretical Approach

In terms of theoretical approaches, the historiography of CUFTA typically approaches the topic through a resource mobilization or political opportunity standpoint (Ayres 1996). Other historians, such as Charles Tilley, have proposed a symbolic interactionist perspective, which stresses breakdowns in constructed systems of meaning as being the primary factor behind the rise of social movements (Staggenborg 2008). This perspective detracts from the structurally entrenched interests of Canadians opposed to free trade and, in some respects, denies them agency. Ayres describes his political opportunity and resource mobilization theoretical approach to anti-CUFTA social movements as follows: "...well organized portions of a population possessing the resources necessary to exploit favourable political opportunities" (Ayres 1996: 475). A similar approach to Ayres' will be integrated herein. This article will further examine the defensive character of anti-CUFTA social movements as representing socially patterned class interests. Though political opportunity was important to anti-CUFTA social movements, there is something to be said for the fact that, by definition, they existed independently of the political process. Extra-parliamentary activism will provide the context for this paper.

The Auto Pact

One of the tactical successes of social movements opposing Canada-United States free trade was the use of the Auto Pact as a symbol of national economic development. It is important to understand the Auto Pact in its historical context so that its symbolic usage can be better understood. By the 1960s, Canada had become a branch plant economy dependent on United States' parts and high tariffs (Anastakis 2005). By 1964, tariffs imposed on the United States in the auto industry threatened to trigger a trade war, leading Lester B. Pearson and Lyndon B. Johnson to sign the Canada U.S. Automotive Products Trade Agreement, or the Auto Pact (Anastakis 2005). Though the Auto Pact was formally ended by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 2001, the symbolic importance of the Auto Pact was an exploitable resource in the framing process (Anastakis 2005). In Article I of the pact, its stated purpose was trade liberalization (Beigie 1970). Ironically, in the political context of the late 1980s, with the prominence of neoliberal economic policy in the United States, Canada and Britain, the Auto Pact appeared a vital element of national economic interests (Anastakis 2005). Fuelling anti-CUFTA rhetoric were important protections, such as production quotas for Canadian content and state initiatives ensuring company commitment to a vehicle assembly growth to sales ratio (Beigie 1970). Canadian negotiators such as Simon Reisman claimed to be supportive of the Auto Pact, but used vague language and refused to clarify their positions. This provided the Canadian Auto Workers, or CAW, with material that was skillfully exploited to cause doubts amongst Canadians in the framing process.

The CAW used information issued from trade negotiators and the rhetoric of CUFTA supporters to encourage Canadians to doubt the safety of the Auto Pact. The former Liberal Finance Minister and Macdonald Commission Chairman, Donald Macdonald, was one CUFTA supporter whose rhetoric was used by the CAW to cause doubts. Macdonald urged the government to put the Auto Pact on the table, stating that overcapacity would weaken Canada's future bargaining position (Mayers 1987). As Macdonald's commission provided the framework for Canada-United States free trade, the CAW used his opinions to justify their claims (Inwood 2005). His publications and rhetoric were used by Canadian Auto Workers President Bob White to generate concern about the vulnerability of the automotive sector under free trade and to warn against a "false sense of security" regarding the Auto Pact (The Canadian Press 1986; White 1986). The Council of Canadians reinforced the doubts raised by the CAW, stating that Macdonald's rhetoric was placing Canada in a weak bargaining position, vulnerable to the "hard demands" of American negotiators. (Critics... 1987).

Even Brian Mulroney admits in his memoirs that the political terrain in Canada during the late 1980s became hostile to bringing the Auto Pact into free trade negotiations:

“That would not fly politically in Canada, even though, in economic terms, it would give a strong competitive advantage to our manufacturing sector” (Mulroney 2007: 570). Through the use of the press, social movements opposed to CUFTA used their platforms to create a climate of suspicion regarding free trade with the United States.

Organized Labour and Class Tensions

By urging their members to oppose CUFTA, the United Steelworkers (USW) and the CAW transformed class tensions within the workplace into political tensions. In the book *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, author John Porter asserts that in a liberal society with no legal class distinctions to provide concrete criteria for defining class, class must necessarily be defined in an abstract manner (Porter 1965). Porter defines a key aspect of Canadian society that is used in the place of socio-economic definitions to understand class: hierarchy (Porter 1965). Hierarchy is particularly important in understanding class in the context of a workplace with a rigid Fordist hierarchy (Porter 1965). Such is the nature of the workplaces in which the labour movement mobilized workers along class lines against free trade. Already, debate existed in Canada over the nature of the Fordist industrial workplace model and the effects of hierarchy on productivity. Mulroney stressed a paternalistic and individualistic view, stressing humane management and blaming workers' unhappiness for lower production (Mulroney 1983). On the contrary, the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto blamed worker alienation from control over production and “irrational layers of authority” in their submission to the Macdonald Commission (SPCMT 1985: 15). These contradicting views reveal the divided nature of Canadian workplaces in class terms, ripe for mobilization on a political fault line.

This fault line became a front in the anti-CUFTA struggle as unions mobilized workers along class lines against management. Union activists and officials told workers that free trade, despite management promotion, was not in their interests. At Stelco in Hamilton, President Fred Telmer had letters sent to 12,500 workers promoting free trade and triggering a fierce struggle on the shop floor that pitted workers against management (Van Alphen 1998). Ontario Director of the USW Leo Gerard retaliated telling workers that the move was an attempt by management at intimidation, using a “subtle scare tactic” (Van Alphen 1988: B1). Gerard Docquier, Canadian Director of the USW, warned steel workers that free trade would mean the loss of well paid, full time, and permanent work in favour of profits (Steelworkers...1985). This language was well suited for causing further angst among steel workers as market competition was already causing anxiety with Stelco streamlining measures (Steelworkers...1985).

The response of steel workers themselves is most telling about the success of the USW in building class solidarity in the workplace. Workers' reactions to company efforts at

building support for free trade were deeply suspicious and distrustful. Dofasco pipe fitter Bob Zych in the Hamilton steel industry, for example, stated on the topic of free trade: “We don't need it, and I'm against the Americans. I don't like being sold out” (Deverell 1988: 46). Steel workers at the Vienna Tavern across from the Dofasco Steel Works in Hamilton also described free trade in hostile terms with a rolling worker from the nearby Stelco plant stating: “I don't see free trade doing anything for me” (Ferguson 1988: E8). Even the press noted a very clear political divide drawn between workers and management with Ottawa Citizen columnist John Ferguson noting that amongst workers “...the anti-free-trade argument [was] clearly in the majority” (Ferguson 1988: E8).

The USW connected struggles on the shop floor and on the picket lines to struggles in other industries. At the Inglis automatic washing machine plant, the company attempted to implement a three year wage freeze, eliminate cost of living indexing and to increase production by 20%, all in preparation for free trade (Masse 1986). Inglis workers took strike action and the USW Local 2900 used the opportunity to connect the strike to the struggle against free trade. USW Local 2900's Mike Hersh told striking workers that American workers making a dollar less was threatening their jobs (Masse 1986). This connected the lived experiences of workers with free trade.

Even the language used to describe efforts of employers to convince steel workers to support free trade was loaded with suggestions of class conflict. For example, Roger Hamel, President of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce commented that never before had he seen corporations “...let their heads come above the trenches” (Masse 1986: A17). Additionally, Toronto Star journalist Tony Van Alphen described the shop floor as a “battleground,” and further described the pro-CUFTA business community as the “corporate front” (Van Alphen 1988: B1). The framing success of the USW and the fact that press reports alluded to conflicting political opinions between workers and management indicates that class lines turned into political lines during CUFTA negotiations.

CAW's strategy was well adapted to workplaces that were unionized. Auto production facilities featured tense management worker relations, with management attempting to speed up production lines and to discipline workers (NFB 2008). The efforts of the CAW to galvanize worker opposition to free trade seem to have been effective as at public forums on the topic of free trade and the auto industry, “a clear line was drawn between big business in favor of the deal and labour opposed” (Walker 1987: D5).

The Women's Movement: A Radical Turn

The women's movement was one of the most innovative social movements opposing CUFTA. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women, or NAC, contributed a

comparatively forceful contribution to the struggle against free trade and placed the gendered impact of CUFTA within mainstream political discourse. NAC also experienced a radical shift in its political orientation combining forces with organized labour in the Pro-Canada Network. The emergence of a common front containing both the labour movement and the women's movement was a product of upheaval in and of itself. During the mid-1980s, several factors destabilized the liberal leadership of NAC. Concerns caused by limitations associated with being a government-funded group such as limited protest activity, as well as the emergence of the right wing anti-feminist group known as REAL Women gave rise to a new style of organization (Bashevkin 1994). Socialist and radical feminists favouring a more grassroots approach gained power and expanded the scope of NAC into, as future NAC President Judy Rebick would describe it, "...more militant and radical politics" (NAC's... 1993: 7).

From the very beginning of the free trade debate in Canada, NAC made decisive moves to link women's employment and equality prospects with unionized and secure employment in their "Future Employment Initiatives" brief to the Macdonald Commission (NAC 1985). NAC continued to agitate early in the process, four criticisms of free trade on September 4th, 1985, before the report of the Macdonald Commission had even been released (Bashevkin 1994). By 1987-1988, NAC had created an Employment and Economy Committee with a budget of \$16,000, which was substantial in its symbolic value (Greaves 1991). NAC drew attention to such issues as the systemic inequality in income, drawing attention to the fact that, in 1981, women working outside the home earned an average of \$9,383 in comparison to male workers working outside the home who earned \$25,000 or more (Greaves 1991). This placed socio-economic developments front and centre in the women's movement and laid the intellectual groundwork for linking negative effects of free trade on the industries in which women disproportionately worked, and the unions protecting female workers.

Women's issues were also taken up by economic nationalist groups such as the Council of Canadians. Maude Barlow, Chair of the Council of Canadians, used her prominence as a public figure to further the primacy of women's issues in Canadian political discourse. On November 17th, 1987, Barlow addressed an audience at Queen's University warning about the effects of free trade on women, especially those in the service sector (Corelli 1987). Barlow brought attention to the threats posed by U.S. business as the service sector, which consisted of a workforce which was 80% women, would face job cuts and lower wages (Corelli 1987). The Pro-Canada Network, more broadly, put women's issues front and centre in their pamphlet "What's the Big Deal?," of which 2.2 million copies were printed (Inwood 2005). The pamphlet put emphasis on the costs of Canada-United States free trade, not only to the public sector that was composed largely of a female workforce, but also to the private service sector, which the Pro-Canada Network claimed would experience

mass job losses to the United States (PCN 1988). What is significant about the efforts of Maude Barlow, the Council of Canadians, the Pro-Canada Network and NAC is their collaboration to bring women's issues into the limelight and integrate their critique into a broader socio-economic framework.

Social Movements and the Political Process

Anti-CUFTA social movements also made immense efforts not only to shift public opinion, but also to influence the political process to obstruct CUFTA. One such example was the effort of anti-CUFTA social movements to pressure the Premier of Ontario, David Peterson, to take a stronger stance against CUFTA. As provincial governments had a constitutionally defensible ability to refrain from implementing treaties if they can prove that it fell within their jurisdiction, winning over premiers like David Peterson was central to social movement political strategy (Government of Canada 1988). Organized labour, for example, took to the streets to make their case known directly to David Peterson. In September of 1987, 2,000 brewery workers walked off the job in protest against David Peterson's unwillingness to take a strong stance against free trade (Deverell 1987). Labatt's workers in Toronto, London, and Waterloo, Molson's workers in Toronto and Barrie and Carling workers rallied in Queen's Park (Deverell 1987). Buzz Hargrove, representative for Molson workers in Barrie urged Peterson to "stop waffling" on the issue of free trade (Deverell 1987: A1). Provincial NDP leader Bob Rae addressed the rally and rally leaders and urged workers to vote against Peterson to deny him a majority on the basis that they did not consider him trustworthy (Deverell 1987).

Peterson responded to the pressures of organized labour and social movements opposing Canada-United States Free Trade since in October 1987 he attempted to build a coalition of premiers opposed to the free trade deal (Christie 1987). Indeed, even aides to the Peterson government by October of 1987 stated: "...it's fair to say the premier's views have hardened" (Christie 1987: A1). Peterson's rhetoric and opinions were matched with an increasing willingness to openly challenge CUFTA. In 1988, Peterson went so far as to threaten to take the federal government to court over jurisdictional issues related to free trade (Government of Canada 1988). Though Peterson's increasingly resistant perspective and anti-CUFTA actions can only circumstantially be linked to social movements, the immense effort put forward by organized labour in Ontario and the political sway they held likely contributed to Peterson's political actions.

Another substantial success of social movements opposing Canada-United States free trade that is often overlooked is the role of social movements in the calling of the 1988 federal election. In most treatments of the topic of Canada-United States free trade, the 1988 federal election is

accredited to the Liberal Party, which used the Senate to block the passing of CUFTA, thus forcing an election (Morton 2007). Focusing on the functions of the Liberal-dominated Senate, however, does not do justice to the relentless work of Canadian social movements to mobilize Canadians to demand a federal election on the issue of free trade.

Tactically speaking, one of the central goals of the Pro-Canada Network and other anti-CUFTA social movements was to force an election on the issue of free trade (Ayres 1996). The Ontario Federation of Labour, or OFL, launched a media campaign to “shame” the Progressive Conservative government into holding a federal election on the issue (OFL...1987). The OFL spent \$400,000 dollars on television programs, radio commercials, and other forms of media in an effort that the Windsor Star described as the most forceful Ontario offensive launched by labour “short of a revolution (OFL...1987: A2). At Massey Hall in November of 1987, the Coalition Against Free Trade hosted a rally of 35 organizations featuring Canadian cultural icons including Margaret Atwood and Farley Mowat who called on Brian Mulroney’s Progressive Conservative government to hold a general election on the issue of free trade (Quill 1987). Anti-CUFTA organizations also escalated their tactics to public protests. On January 12th, 1988, 2,000 people blocked the Queenston–Lewiston Bridge in Niagara for half an hour (Thousands...1988). The Niagara protest was one of seven protests at border crossings nation-wide (Thousands...1988). Though organized by the Pro-Canada Network, Canadian Auto Workers and other union representatives and members were present at the protest (Thousands...1988). In a second display of public protest, the Council of Canadians organized a demonstration of 150 people at Nathan Phillips Square to express support for a federal election over the issue. Though Liberal Senators made the election possible, social movements opposed to Canada-United States free trade applied relentless pressure to Canadian politicians to hold an election on the issue of free trade.

Conclusion

Social movements opposing free trade, though unsuccessful in halting the agreement, altered the political terrain on which the topic was negotiated in their favour. The CAW, through extensive political work and use of Bob White as a public figure, were able to transform the Auto Pact into a symbol of national economic interests. The Canadian labour movement also altered the terrain on which the Progressive Conservatives negotiated free trade by convincing the public of their lack of commitment to the defence of the Auto Pact. The United Steel Workers and Canadian Auto Workers used pre-existing class tensions and divisions in their work places to frame the issue of free trade in class terms building working class solidarity. The National Action Committee on the Status of Women altered their entire framework of activism to confront free trade and to

form alliances with organized labour and civil society organizations. NAC brought women’s socio-economic issues into mainstream political discourse through their active participation in anti-CUFTA alliances and their ability to find common ground amongst participating organizations. NAC’s gendered interpretation of the free trade agreement was taken up by participating groups and public figures. Last, the Pro-Canada Network and associated anti-CUFTA social movements used a variety of tactics to pressure Canadian politicians to work toward a federal election on the issue of free trade. Though unsuccessful at stopping Canada-United States free trade, social movements opposing the deal played a significant role in framing issues and altering public perception of CUFTA. Additionally, during the struggle over CUFTA, Canadian social movements set the groundwork for coming anti-NAFTA mobilizations, which featured large labour and civil society coalitions similar to that of the Pro-Canada Network (French and Manzanarez 2004). Furthermore, this organizational framework extended beyond Canadian borders to the United States and even to Mexico as continent-spanning bonds of international solidarity developed (French and Manzanarez 2004). Though CUFTA was ultimately passed and implemented, social movements that opposed Canada-United States free trade left a hugely important legacy of collaboration, innovation, and mobilization.

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Social movements and Canada-United States free trade (Hamelin)

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