**CHAPTER 6**

**Wildcat Workers in the 1960s: The Unruly Face of Class Struggle***

The wildcat strike might be regarded as the trade union equivalent of the students’ sit-in.


---

Workers and their unions appeared relatively secure as they entered the 1960s. With the apparent attainment of collective bargaining rights secured at the end of the 1940s, an historic breakthrough appeared to have been realised in what was championed as a new era of ‘industrial pluralism’. The Cold War vanquishing of the communists in the labour movement seemed to secure trade unions a measure of respectability, although, to be sure, there were always rough patches in the accord reached among employers, workers’ organisations, and the state in the immediate post-World War II period. With fractious components of the Canadian workers’ movement coming together in the Canadian Labour Congress in 1956, old divides separating craft and industrial unions were proclaimed to have been overcome, and there were signs that an awakening trade unionism in Quebec could well link arms with its counterparts across the country. Combined with the general climate of post-World War II affluence, in which employment possibilities were strong and employers’ capacities to offer concessions seemingly expansive, the times seemed propitious for Canadian workers. The prospects for trade unions to continue their upward trajectory appeared good.

Few recognised the contradictions at the heart of labour’s new found security. Older trade unionists and most labour leaders, for instance, knew well

---

*‘Wildcat Workers in the 1960s: The Unruly Face of Class Struggle’, in *Labouring Canada: Class, Race, and Gender in Canadian Working-Class History*, edited by Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2008), 373–94.
that it had taken a century to establish a state-monitored system of industrial relations that recognised workers’ legal rights to join unions and bargain collectively with businesses and their management. Workers’ leaders, then, were hardly in a position to guard against the ways in which the post-war settlement would move trade unions in increasingly legalistic directions, nor were they, understandably, all that concerned with problems that would be posed for workers and their organisations as the labour movement necessarily grew more and more bureaucratised. Basking in the warm glow of working-class accomplishment, barely a labour eyebrow was raised in recognition that what the state gave it could also, when pressures were brought to bear, take away. It would take decades before such concerns surfaced. They would not really be discernible until the fiscal crisis of the Canadian state manifested itself blatantly in the mid-1970s, and Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s Liberals imposed wage and price controls, initiating a legislative assault on trade-union freedoms that would be picked up with a vengeance by Conservative, even New Democratic Party, governments in the 1980s and 1990s. Masking the cracks in the edifice of the post-war settlement were a host of 1960s developments. These included the expanding infrastructure of ‘social safety net provisioning’, which encompassed tremendous growth and stabilisation of health and education programmes and facilities; state commitment to principles of universality in family allowances and unemployment insurance; and a range of initiatives that took aim at the reduction of poverty or targeted youth as specific beneficiaries of state largesse, training, and aid.1

But the emergence of resentment and grievance in the arena of class struggle did nevertheless emerge in the 1960s.2 In particular, it surfaced with a vengeance in 1964–6. This was at precisely the same point that protest was also emerging in other quarters. Radical nationalist agitation was developing in Quebec. Students were gravitating toward both countercultural alternative and the politics of challenge and dissent. Women were beginning to voice their discontents with a status quo that kept them confined to the constrained possibilities of a feminine sphere. Not surprisingly, as was the case elsewhere, the young led the way. Their vehicle of protest, driven by a rage and violence that was itself an expression of the frustrations of alienation and marginalisation

---

1 As an introduction to the unravelling of the post-war settlement and the contours of contemporary class struggle unfolding in its wake, see Panitch and Swartz 1993; Reshef and Rastin 2003; Palmer 2005, pp. 334–46; High 2003.
2 For a preface to the class confrontation of the decade see MacDowell 1971; Gindin 1995, pp. 139–66; Roberts 1990, pp. 91–104.