



## Farewell, Madeleine Parent

*By Maryellen Symons*

Madeleine Parent, a heroine of the struggle for equality and justice, died in Montreal on March 12, 2012, at the age of 93. Daughter of a comfortable middle-class family in Montreal, she demonstrated a clear sense of social justice from an early age. As a boarder at a private school, Parent was struck by the different treatment given to her and her classmates and to the girls from impoverished families who worked as servants at the school. Going on to McGill University — an unusual choice for a francophone and a Catholic — Parent studied sociology and joined in efforts to make bursaries available for students from low-income families.

After graduating from McGill, Parent went to work as a labour organizer. She was especially interested in organizing female textile workers, whom many considered not worth bothering with. She and her partner, Kent Rowley, organized 6,000 mostly female workers in the Dominion Textile cotton mills in Valleyfield and Montreal. After a 100-day strike, the workers succeeded in getting collective bargaining rights for the first time.

Parent's activities earned her the hatred of Maurice Duplessis, the anti-union premier of Quebec. She was arrested five times and was convicted of seditious conspiracy in 1948, but was acquitted in a new trial in 1955 and spared a two-year prison sentence.

Unions in Canada at that time were largely controlled by American unions. In 1952, the American leaders of the textile union signed an agreement with Dominion Textile that reflected Duplessis's demands and essentially sold out the workers. The Quebec organizers, including Parent, were fired. Parent joined a movement to repatriate American-based unions. Its work succeeded; the percentage of union workers in Canada who contributed to American unions fell from 70% in 1968 to 30% in 1998. However, it had become difficult for Parent to organize in Quebec, so in 1968, she moved to Ontario and rejoined Kent Rowley, who had moved there 15 years earlier.

Madeleine Parent was a founding member of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and represented Quebec on NAC for eight years. In 1983, Parent retired from union work and returned to Quebec. She continued to be active in the Fédération des femmes du Québec and to work for the rights of immigrant workers and of women, especially Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and those from minority communities, for as long as her declining health allowed.

The Southwest borough of Montreal plans to build a park in Madeleine Parent's honour.

For more on Madeleine Parent, see the links below (or just type her name into your favourite search engine). The first link will take you to an archived interview between Madeleine Parent and Barbara Frum on CBC's *As It Happens*, where you can get a sense of Parent's dedication and her lively spirit.

<http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/economy-business/labour-unions/sewing-seeds-clothing-workers-fight-for-better-conditions/madeleine-parent-discusses-puretex-strike.html>  
<http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/Obituary+Madeleine+Parent+pioneering+feminist+union+activist/6297017/story.html>  
<http://www.thestar.com/printarticle/1147106>  
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/030001-1112-e.html>  
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2012/03/12/quebec-madeleine-parent-obit.html>  
<http://www.ledevoir.com/societe/actualites-en-societe/344848/1-infatigable-militante-madeleine-parent-s-eteint>  
[http://www.cupw.ca/index.cfm/ci\\_id/13944/la\\_id/1](http://www.cupw.ca/index.cfm/ci_id/13944/la_id/1)