

# Stickin' with the Union

*A slice of labour history told by a canny organizer.*

PAUL WEINBERG

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## One Day Longer: A Memoir

Lynn Williams

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SOMETIMES OLD AGE CAN MAKE ONE CRANKY and radical in a positive way. That may be the explanation for Lynn Williams's recent pre-Occupy Wall Street pronouncements about the competition in the world between "greed" and "common sense" before a Las Vegas convention of the United Steelworkers of America, where he served two terms as the first Canadian-born international president between 1983 and 1994.

But in *One Day Longer: A Memoir*, Williams is the establishment guy clamping down upon grassroots insurgencies in his union and the CCF/NDP—of which he has been a member since the age of 16. He participated in the decision by the Ontario New Democrats in 1972 to expel the Waffle, a group of younger party activists keen on greater control by Canadians of their natural resources and more women in leadership positions. "It was a tough meeting. Larry [Sefton, a top Steelworker official] made it clear where the Steelworkers stood and that there would be no change in that position." Incidentally, Waffle co-founder Mel Watkins has recounted that it was the Waffle's support of the Canadianization of unions that probably sealed its fate.

Williams seems determined in his new book to set the record straight. He also complained in the same convention speech that too many books on labour have been authored "by academics and ideologists of one kind or another."

The Steelworkers are a bit of an anomaly these days as one of the few large unions, public or private, in Canada, headquartered in the United States but with an autonomous national Canadian office. Williams himself played a major role in ensuring that a split along national lines did not happen in the USW, as was the case in the Detroit-based United Autoworkers where Robert White led the successfully breakaway Canadian Auto Workers in 1985. More than a decade earlier, Williams was director of USW District 6 in Ontario when he was asked to join the U.S.-dominated establishment slate led by Lloyd McBride. The concern in Pittsburgh was that a rank-and-file insurgency led by District 31 director Ed Sadlowski (representing Chicago and northwest Indiana in the heart of the

American steel industry) would sweep the 1977 election for the top officers' positions and thereby take over the international union. Sadlowski was pushing for the direct ratification of contracts by the union members themselves in a formal vote in the locals. (At that time, the union local president who had negotiated an agreement with a company management did not have to go back to his constituents on the shop floor for any formal endorsement.) Sadlowski, who represented a younger 1960s generation of Steelworker, might have won that election were it not for the presence of Williams on the McBride ticket, which managed to garner sufficient Canadian votes to win in the end.

Closer to home, the major threat on the Canadian side came from young, charismatic Dave Patterson, who was a union local president at the Inco mining operation in Sudbury. In 1978 and '79 he led a lengthy nine-month strike against this employer despite the opposition of then District 6 director Stu Cooke. Patterson defeated Cooke and took over the Ontario division of the USW in 1981. However, Williams, sitting on the USW's governing board in Pittsburgh, made it very difficult for Patterson to do his job, according to former Steelworker educator D'Arcy Martin in his 1995 book, *Thinking Union: Activism and Education in Canada's Labour Movement*. The staff in Patterson's Toronto office were politically tied to Williams whose Pittsburgh office provided direct services to the Ontario members, thus bypassing Patterson.

Williams's book is comprehensive and lively, but leaves out a lot of nuance and political context in his account. Because there are so few books written and published on labour, this can be a serious shortfall. Williams says little in his book about Patterson except to suggest ruefully that he might have done more to "encourage the development of [Patterson's] talents."

The title for Williams's book, *One Day Longer*, comes from the determination of striking workers "to hold out as long as it takes in order to have their demands met." The opening chapter is eloquent about his growing up in Sarnia as the son of a clergyman and a mentally disturbed mother in an impoverished working class community during the Great Depression. The young Williams had little interest in pursuing a religious career; nor was he enamoured of the paternalism of charities that he argued provided, in a demeaning manner, the barest of necessities for the most disadvantaged in society. "I didn't want to help people through charity, as the Y did. Nor did I want any kind of research job, which would tie me to a desk preparing charts and compiling data. I wanted to be in the field, building and organizing."

A stint in the Canadian Navy near the end of World War Two provided Williams with insight into the authoritarian nature of the workplace. "It

was an early lesson about the relationship between supervisors and workers, how non-productive it can be when supervisors pay little attention to what is really happening and ignore the opinions of those whom they are supervising," he wrote.

Actually, Williams in his professional union life has had very little practical experience with boring or dangerous low-paying jobs with little or no benefits. While on naval leave and with little money on hand at the time, Williams did end up working at a Hamilton steel company where one of the responsibilities involved manoeuvring a wheelbarrow filled to the brim with manganese down a plank of wood off a boxcar without spilling the ingredients. He does reveal some lack of success in this assigned task, but is less forthcoming about how long he actually stayed in the plant. Later, in one contentious electoral contest, which he ultimately won at the Steelworkers, he was derisively called a pencil pusher by his opponent.

But this, of course, is a bad rap because many progressive political and union leaders came out of middle or upper class backgrounds and have achieved a great deal. And the Steelworkers were at first not especially welcoming to young middle class university kids knocking on their doors for employment. Nonetheless, Williams was persistent, honing his organizing skills in the meantime in an exciting campaign to unionize Eaton's employees in Toronto in the late 1940s. The powerful department store chain was too tough a nut to crack but he and the organizing team, under the umbrella of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, had more success in another store in Windsor.

To the chagrin of his wife, Audrey, and their young family, Williams's union-organizing gigs with the Steelworkers meant a lot of moving from community to community to keep up with the demand for his skills, especially in the Cold War period of the 1950s and '60s. He readily admits without embarrassment that the Steelworkers rode on a wave of anti-communist emotion to replace in union local elections two well-established labour organizations, the United Electrical workers in factories in the Niagara Peninsula and Mine Mill in the Sudbury area mine. Undoubtedly, both had links to the Communist Party of Canada, but at the same time, the Steelworkers' rivals had deep community roots, especially in Sudbury. And so the conflict ultimately split friends and families for a period of time. Williams concedes that point, describing one campaign as "constant, vigorous, contentious, and sometimes threatening."

Nevertheless, you have to respect Williams's history and fierce loyalty to social democratic values, even as centrist provincial NDP governments seem to have lost sight of their social justice roots. But on occasion his assertions about the internal politics of the USW must be taken with a grain of salt. LR

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