

## **Follow the Black Cat**

How to Bring History Back to People Who Flunked That Class

Graphic History Collective, *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019), large format, 60 pages, \$14.95 (soft cover).

***By Ron Verzuh***

I just barely squeaked through my high school history class. I liked it, but I wasn't good at memorizing dates and I had questions about the great man approach that the curriculum dictated. I ended up passing because I wrote a paper on the history of rock 'n' roll. Apparently, that at least showed some interest in exploring the past even if it was a bit too Rolling Stones for my stodgy teacher. Still, it did the job and I was forever smitten by history.

It helped that I could relate to the idea of history through the medium of music rather than a ponderously dry school textbook. Comic books like Prince Valiant and the adventures of the Vikings also helped. So it is with some enthusiasm that I welcome another in the growing list of titles from the Graphic History Collective. [A disclaimer: I was a contributor to one of the books.]

In this latest book, readers are guided through the many strikes that chart the history of the labour movement from 1829 when Cree boatmen refused to work for the Hudson's Bay Company to 2018 when postal workers launched rotating strikes to protest long hours and poor working conditions. In all, the book calculates at least 113 strikes with brief explanations of the issues at stake.

Of course, what makes a comic book uniquely different from other history books and often more accessible are the graphics themselves. Here we can enjoy the contrasting styles of Kara Sievewright, Gord Hill, David Lester, Orion Keresztesi, and Althea Balme. Each artist covers a specific period. For example in the introduction we get an outline of the strike as a weapon, including the general strike that occurred in Winnipeg in 1919. Appropriately, the artist focuses on a donut shop. The fast food industry is where young workers are rising up today across North America using the strike to press their demands.

Chapter 1 covers the early years, revealing some of the reasons why unions made sense to a working class that corporations were exploiting and governments were refusing to defend. Chapter 2 covers the first half of the 20th century, highlighting the death of militant socialist Albert "Ginger" Goodwin, miners' strikes in several parts of the country, and the terrible impact the Great Depression had on working people. Chapter 3 runs from the 1940s to the 1970s with references to legalizing collective bargaining, the strike wave of the post-war years, attempts to undermine unions under Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis, and wildcat strikes to protest political repression. Chapter 4 takes us to the present, revisiting the Operation Solidarity movement in British Columbia, the Days of Action in Ontario, and the rise of public sector unionism.

Throughout it all we have the guiding paw of Sabo Cat. That's the black cat that songwriter and cartoonist Ralph Chaplin created for the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies). As the book's introduction explains, "the Sabo Cat is a

symbol for direct action and sabotage that has come to be synonymous with the strike.” (viii).

Chaplin, by the way, wrote the labour movement anthem *Solidarity Forever*, which is still sung at labour events today. His work also inspired the title of this book. For more, read his autobiography *Wobbly: the Rough and Tumble Story of an American Radical* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

Readers who want more detail on each of the strikes covered here will need to do more homework. For that purpose, the book includes notes and a bibliography. Another resource for exploring labour’s story is the local newspaper. Incidentally, this no longer requires painful hours in front of microfilm readers since several online archives now exist. But for those who are reminded of an unsavoury high school history experience, *Direct Action* offers a shorthand sketch of the struggle for workers’ rights in Canada.

The battle to keep history alive in high schools is ongoing. It is an even bigger struggle to get labour history into university where instructors hide it inside business courses. Labour history associations in Wisconsin and Connecticut have made valiant efforts, but the hill is steep. Perhaps one way forward is to get books like this into the hands of policy makers.

Only when citizens know the historical background of the current situation – right to work movements, anti-union media, corporate efforts to destroy unions, a constant right-wing attack on the movement – will we reverse destructive trends designed to undermine progressive change in the workplace and society. Follow the Sabo Cat.

-END-

*Ron Verzuh is a writer, historian, and documentary filmmaker.*