

“What Has This to Do with Working Class Women?”: Birth Control and the Canadian Left, 1900-1939*

by Angus McLAREN**

Writing to the Alberta Department of Public Health in 1937, A. R. Kaufman, the “father” of the Canadian birth control movement, asserted that only a reduction in the birth rate could stave off social disorder: “The writer feels that Canada must choose between birth control and revolution, as some day the funds for relief and the various social services may be lacking and needy people will likely fight and steal before they starve.”¹ Kaufman, a wealthy manufacturer, provided the funds to begin both the widespread diffusion of contraceptive materials in Canada and the establishment of birth control clinics in Toronto and Windsor. No detailed history of the early birth control movement in Canada has as yet been written. The few sketches of the campaign that exist focus on the activities of the group of middle-class philanthropists headed by Kaufman who, in part for conservative social purposes, laid the basis in the depths of the 1930s depression for what was to become the Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada.² Such accounts have, intentionally or not, glossed over the fact that the discussion of restriction of family size did not have to await the enlightened interest of respectable doctors, social workers and business leaders.

From the turn of the century the issues of Malthusian or neo-Malthusian solutions to the economic problems posed by capitalism had been hotly debated in the publications of the Canadian Left. The fact that the discussion of the social and political ramifications of birth control in

* For comments and suggestions I would like to thank David Bercuson, Brian Dip-
pie, Michael Fellman, Gene Homel, Arlene Tigar McLaren, Ian MacPherson and Veronica
Strong-Boag.

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¹ Library of Congress, Margaret Sanger Papers (hereafter Sanger Papers), vol. 18,
A. R. Kaufman to Alberta Department of Public Health, 9 September 1937.

² See for example Ian BAIN, “The Development of Family Planning in Canada”,
Canadian Journal of Public Health, 5 (1964): 334-40, and Raymond BOUTIN, “The History
of the Family Planning Movement in Canada”, in *Family Planning and Social Work*, ed.:
Cenovia ADDY (Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada, 1976), pp. 16-29. Kaufman’s work is
placed in an international context in James REED, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The
Birth Control Movement and American Society since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978),
part IV.

Canada first found prominence in the pages of reformist periodicals does not mean, of course, that only their restricted readership was interested in the issue. Family size in all segments of Canadian society was declining after World War I and most middle-class Canadians of the 1920s were aware of the propagandizing activities in favour of contraception carried out in Britain by Marie Stopes and in the United States by Margaret Sanger. But to find public defenders of birth control prior to the 1930s *within* Canada one had to turn to the writers on the Left. The respectable avoided the question. The availability of American and British literature on the subject combined with the assumption that Canadian legal statutes outlawed the public defence of artificial restriction of family size effectively retarded the appearance of a native, middle-class, birth control lobby. It was thus by the Left that, *faute de mieux*, the defence of birth control was assumed and made part of a general critique of capitalist society. The intent of this paper is to examine the relevant literature emanating from the Left because only by locating the beginnings of the birth control discussion in its specific ideological context can one begin to reconstruct an accurate picture of Canadian attitudes towards fertility.

The response of the Canadian Left to the issue of birth control was not a simple one. Few of its statements on the subject were free of ambiguities or outright contradictions. Such confusions were understandable. The idea of the social necessity of restricting fertility to ensure the well-being of the individual family was inextricably linked in nineteenth-century minds to the conservative doctrines of Malthus. As a consequence European and North American socialists were not unnaturally suspicious of any discussion of birth control which could imply that poverty was a result of personal rather than societal failings. Such suspicions were confirmed when from the 1870s on the English Malthusian League — the first public organization to defend the morality of artificial restriction of family size — persisted in parading its hostility to labour. Most leaders of the Left continued to harbour doubts about the wisdom of even broaching the population question well on into the twentieth century.³ But by the early 1900s the clear evidence that thousands of working-class families were seeking to limit pregnancies forced some left-wing commentators to take a more discriminating view of the whole question. Sympathy for the working class appeared to require that, at the very least, radicals had to defend the right of ordinary working people to decide for themselves the size of their families despite the dictates, on the one hand, of neo-Malthusians who insisted that *only* by the implementation of fertility control could prosperity be attained and, on the other, of populationists who damned all family planning as irreligious, unnatural and unpatriotic.

In what follows it will be argued that in looking at the response of the Canadian Left to the issue of birth control it is possible to detect three

³ On birth control and the Left in Britain see Angus McLAREN, *Birth Control in Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); in America see Linda GORDON, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York: Grossman, 1976); in France see Francis RONSIN, "La classe ouvrière et le néo-malthusianisme; l'exemple français avant 1914", *Le Mouvement social*, 106 (1979): 85-117.

discreet schools of thought. First, that of individual libertarians or anarchists who defended birth control primarily on the basis of the right of the individual to control his or her own life. Secondly, that of the various Canadian socialists who perceived the emergence of the birth control issue as yet one more symptom of the tensions produced by a society riven by economic and social inequalities. Thirdly, that of the Communist Party which remained truest to the nineteenth-century Left's suspicion that even addressing the birth control question might detract from the class struggle. Such an analysis, more than simply broadening our knowledge of the early history of the single issue of family limitation in Canada, also casts a fresh light on the history of the Canadian Left and its attitudes towards women, family, and the forces of social control.

I

To outsiders at the turn of the century, impressed by an apparently boundless frontier and the legendary fertility of the Québécois, Canada appeared to be the last place in which one would expect birth control to become an issue. Yet well before World War I there was growing evidence that many Canadians were artificially restricting family size.⁴ Respectable commentators bewailed what in the main they took to be a sign of the nation's weakness. To find reasoned apologies for the practice it is necessary to turn to radical publications. Anarchists in Europe and America were amongst the first on the Left to be attracted to the birth control issue. Their interests were kindled for two reasons: contraception appeared to offer the individual a way of freeing himself from both poverty and the morality inculcated by Christianity; and it could, so some argued, be employed by the masses as a means to restrict the labour supply and thus formed part of the "General Strike".

Possibly the first written defences of birth control originating from Canada were based on the former libertarian argument and advanced by R. B. Kerr, a Scottish lawyer, active in British Columbia between 1893 and 1922.⁵ A free thinker, Kerr was apparently drawn to birth control because, like many public defenders of the practice, he saw it as a weapon to be turned against the churches. At the turn of the century Kerr and his wife, Dora Forster, both contributed to the American anarchist, anti-clerical journal *Lucifer*, edited by Moses Harmon. The scientism and sex radicalism or free love of *Lucifer* spilled over in the first decade of the twentieth century into a form of popular eugenics. Indeed *Lucifer* in 1907 became the *American Journal of Eugenics*.⁶ Kerr's career followed a sim-

⁴ Angus McLAREN, "Birth Control and Abortion in Canada, 1870-1920", *Canadian Historical Review*, 59 (1978): 319-40; Wendy MITCHINSON, "Historical Attitudes Towards Women and Childbirth", *Atlantis*, 4, 2 (1979): 13-34.

⁵ On Kerr see Rosanna LEDBETTER, *A History of the Malthusian League* (Dayton, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1976).

⁶ Hal D. SEARS, *The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America* (Lawrence, Kansas: Regents Press, 1977); see also the Canadian view of Moses Harmon in the *Winnipeg Voice*, 12 May 1911, p. 3.

ilar pattern. Writing from British Columbia he devoted himself to criticizing the socially conservative doctrines of the only existing birth control journal in the English-speaking world, the *Malthusian* of London. He defended the working class against the traditional charges levelled against it of disinterest in controlling family size and opposed any plan of attempting to force birth control measures on the public.⁷ He upbraided the Malthusian League for its concern to appear respectable and vaunted his own radicalism. His distaste for the Malthusian League, which never in any event enjoyed any influence in Canada, stemmed from his impatience with its concern for preserving respectability, a concern which took the form of a defence of the tenets of *laissez-faire* capitalism and a dislike for popular birth control propaganda. A more active and open discussion was necessary in Canada. For Kerr such activism manifested itself in discussions of free love and pornography and attacks on imperialism, racism, "all superstitions of an imperial and patriotic nature", and America, the puritan police state which prosecuted Margaret Sanger.⁸

But at times a non-libertarian tone crept into Kerr's work as in his use of American eugenic ideas to defend selective breeding and his curious suggestion during World War I that millions of Germans be captured and brainwashed into accepting the benefits of birth control.⁹ In 1922 Kerr returned to Britain to edit *New Generation* which replaced the *Malthusian* as the mouthpiece of the Malthusian League. Kerr's importance in the beginning of the discussion of birth control in Canada was that he was the first to advance the argument of individual interests in defence of family limitation. Setting aside the old Malthusian argument that the workers could, as a *class*, improve their situation by restriction of fertility, Kerr retorted: "It is useless to tell a man that if he and ten million others will have small families, he will gain something. The thing to do is to show him how *he* will gain by *having a small family himself*; no matter what the others do."¹⁰ In 1907 Kerr continued his attack on the academic approach of the *Malthusian* and suggested that attempts be made to have the government provide "preventives". "A knowledge of preventives is an important part of popular education and should be furnished by the State."¹¹

This libertarian apology of birth control which Kerr adopted before World War I was also propounded in Canada in the 1920s by the Amer-

⁷ R. B. Kerr to the *Malthusian*, November 1907, p. 94; December 1917, pp. 98-99. The Malthusian League, with the *Malthusian* as its mouthpiece, was established in Britain by the Drysdale family following the sensational trial in 1877 of the secularists Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant for selling a birth control tract. Charles Watts, the publisher of the tract (Charles KNOWLTON's *Fruits of Philosophy* which originally appeared in the United States in 1832) claimed to have been unaware of the book's contents, broke relations with Bradlaugh, and left for Toronto where he edited *Secular Thought* in the late 1880s. See LEDBETTER, *A History*, pp. 29-32; *Toronto Daily Globe*, 19, 22 and 29 June 1877.

⁸ R. B. Kerr to the *Malthusian*, January 1909, pp. 1-2; August 1910, p. 67; December 1910, pp. 103-4; July 1912, p. 51; April 1915, p. 29; June 1917, p. 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, December 1908, p. 95 and January 1914, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, September 1906, p. 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, October 1907, pp. 74-75.

ican anarchist Emma Goldman¹². Speaking in Toronto in 1927 she particularly stressed the right of the individual woman to control her own body. Birth control offered a way towards the avoidance of abortions and broken marriages. Indeed Goldman argued that contraception promised to provide a firmer basis for marriage. With fewer but healthier babies the relationship of the spouses could be more equal, divorce would decline. The working classes as a whole would benefit; the struggle against capitalism would be more effective once the labourer was freed from the shackles of the overly large family.¹³ In Goldman's statements there was thus an advance made from the individualist anarchism of Kerr to what might be called an anarcho-syndicalist position. This stress on a class analysis was in turn taken up by the socialist Left who likewise viewed birth control from a class vantage point.

In moving from the anarchists' interest in birth control to that of the socialists it soon becomes apparent it was not so much the rights of the individual as it was the question of the relationship of family limitation to labour's struggle against capitalism which drew their attention. It followed that publications that focused mainly on union matters and were not interested in or did not recognize the larger confrontation — papers such as *Canadian Labour Press*, *New Democracy*, *Workers' Weekly*, *Machinist Bulletin*, and *Nova Scotia Miner* — rarely if ever broached the subject. But in the politically oriented publications birth control was frequently alluded to. For the purposes of this paper the non-Communist Left, from the syndicalist One Big Union to the Marxist Socialist Party to the agrarian-socialist CCF, can be lumped together.¹⁴ Their responses to the issue of family limitation reflected in the main the same concerns: a suspicion that capitalists were turning the population question to their own purposes, a hostility towards an encroachment on working-class family life, and a growing concern for the needs of working-class women.

¹² Emma GOLDMAN, *Living My Life* (Garden City, N.J.: Garden City Publishing Co., 1934), pp. 986-90; Richard DRINNAN, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Berkeley, California; Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 260-65.

¹³ *Toronto Star*, 27 April 1927, p. 28; also 28 April 1927, p. 17. Goldman had lectured on birth control since 1910 and helped introduce Margaret Sanger to the subject. The activities of both were reported in the Canadian press and the address of Sanger's American Birth Control League to which queries could be sent was prominently carried on the front page of the *One Big Union Bulletin*, 12 February 1925. Goldman's talk was chaired by Mrs Alice Loeb, an active birth control propagandist who travelled to Germany to join the World League for Sexual Reform and offered her services in 1929 to prepare for Margaret Sanger's tour of Canada. See Sanger Papers, vol. 17, Alice Loeb to Margaret Sanger, 5 June 1929.

¹⁴ None of the histories of the Canadian Left deals extensively with attitudes towards population but for overviews see D. J. BERCUSON, *Fools and Wise Men. The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw Hill Ryerson, 1978); Gad HOROWITZ, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968); A. R. McCORMACK, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Norman PENNER, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Martin ROBIN, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour* (Kingston: Queen's University, 1968); Walter D. YOUNG, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National C.C.F., 1932-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

The first reason for the defence of birth control by the mainstream Canadian Left was a consequence of its suspicion that business, the military, and the churches all sought to maintain the existing status *quo* by inciting the labourer to reproduce recklessly. This charge was levelled in publications such as the *B.C. Federationist* and the *One Big Union Bulletin* in which the discussion of the evils of capitalism was broadened to include, in addition to economic exploitation, the sexual exploitation of the working class manifested in postponed marriages, prostitution and venereal disease. How, these papers asked, could imperialists such as Kipling or Roosevelt express concern for the fall of the birth rate and the degeneration of the white race when the economic system these men sustained made marriage impossible.¹⁵ The president popularized in North America the fear that birth control would spell the end of western civilization, especially if adopted by the masses. Mrs B. Merrill Burns, Provincial Secretary of the Socialist Party of British Columbia, in a discussion of "Woman and the Social Problem" that took place in 1904 responded to Roosevelt's bogey of race suicide.

... do not Presidents and Bishops complain most bitterly today that women are refusing to fulfill their manifest mission and that the "suicide of the race" is threatened. It may be that under an administration of justice and wisdom it will be worth while perpetuating the race. Who can blame women for feeling that it is no credit to them to supply slaves for a wage market.

Burns was not so much calling for women to lower their fertility as she was defending their right to take whatever actions might be necessary to survive in a capitalist system. Perhaps under socialism, which would provide the right supportive milieu, births would increase but in the existing society which had undermined the family one had to expect this "unconscious revolt against maternity so debased".¹⁶

As Burns' statement indicated, a central preoccupation of socialists was how the restriction of the birth rate might influence not simply individual families but the actual numbers of the working class. The labour movement was already aroused by the evidence that Canadian business was relying on imported labour — Asians in British Columbia, the child migrants of Dr Barnardo and the Salvation Army in the east, the eastern Europeans on the prairies — to weaken the working-class movement by increasing the size of the labour pool. Did not business, asked some socialists, praise the large family for the same reason that it applauded every sort of migrant labour scheme — because both ensured a supply of cheap manpower? Accordingly in the same papers that carried articles for restriction of immigration appeared articles in favour of birth control. A contributor to the *One Big Union Bulletin* asserted that it was well known that the upper classes wanted the workers to breed.

They are anxious that the workers become even more productive in order that the labour market may be well stocked with slaves and also that the heavy family ties may render the worker incapable of real effective resistance to

¹⁵ *B.C. Federationist*, 22 June 1912, p. 1.

¹⁶ *Western Clarion*, 13 August 1904, p. 1.

capitalist encroachments ... there is no crime in the calendar more serious than the practice or advocacy of birth control among the working class.¹⁷

The syndicalist press in particular supported the strategy of what in France was referred to as the *grève du ventre* — the birth strike — as part of a direct campaign to cripple capitalism.¹⁸ Birth control was thus defended on the grounds of offering both political and economic benefits. Last but not least it was presented as a unique tactic inasmuch as it meant that reproduction which traditionally was viewed as holding women back could now be seen as a powerful force which they alone could employ. Women, argued Florence Rowe, could refuse to provide children as cannon fodder for the army or oil for the industrial machine. "One of the most efficient weapons in the hands of women is not to produce the raw material. Why should women of the working class spend their lives in bearing and rearing "raw material" that the women of the leisured classes may continue to be leisured?"¹⁹

The socialist defenders of birth control further argued that the Establishment wanted large families to man both its factories *and* its armies. Before and after World War I the syndicalist and Marxist press was especially hostile to the military and its purported use of workers as "cannon fodder". Even the Boy Scouts were held up for derision as a paramilitary organization by leftist papers and in 1923 the *One Big Union Bulletin* made concerted assaults on the society at the time of Baden Powell's western tour.²⁰ Just as the "birth strike" was advanced as a response to attempts to dilute labour, birth control was proposed as a means to deprive generals of their recruits. The Women's Labour League which attacked high school military training in the 1920s was demanding the provision of birth control information by the government in the 1930s.²¹ Indivisibly linking the military and the pronatalists the *One Big Union Bulletin* headlined a report of a populationist speech, "'Be Ye Fruitful and Multiply' Japanese Butcher Urges Workers to Raise Large Families For Future Cannon Fodder."²²

Even the churches could, by castigating the restriction of family size, draw down on themselves the same sorts of criticisms the Left doled out to the military. Canadian socialists were rarely anticlerical but priestly intrusions into the intimate area of family life were resented. For example in 1918 the *B.C. Federationist* reported that the local clergy attributed the destruction of the family, symbolized by its reduction in size,

¹⁷ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 25 October 1923, p. 4; and *Western Clarion*, May 1918, pp. 7-8.

¹⁸ As bizarre as the idea of a "birth strike" might appear, belief in its efficacy was not restricted to the Left: the *Vancouver Daily World* reported (15 March 1919, p. 11) Dean Inge of England predicting that the policy of "race suicide" launched by the working classes would result in the creation of an "aristocracy of labour" which would use taxation to plunder the upper classes.

¹⁹ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 11 December 1924, p. 2.

²⁰ *B.C. Federationist*, 22 November 1912, p. 5; *One Big Union Bulletin*, 30 March 1922, p. 2; 5 April 1923, p. 1; 3 May 1923, p. 4.

²¹ *Industrial Banner*, 2 July 1920, p. 3.

²² *One Big Union Bulletin*, 20 July 1922, p. 1.

to the pernicious influences of socialism — in their words, “internationalism”. The paper’s response was to reply that whether the worker had a small family or lived in “prolific squalor” was a matter which could only concern himself.²³ Protestant socialists were even more forthcoming in attributing to the Catholic Church the attempt to keep workers in moral subjection. “They have ruled us through our ignorance”, asserted Florence Rowe, “but as knowledge grows the power of any superstition dies.”²⁴ In a similarly anti-Catholic vein in 1931 the *One Big Union Bulletin* reprinted an essay ridiculing the Pope’s recent encyclical on marriage and the family.

The worker’s family, struggling to give one or two children a decent upbringing, will grin at the notion of having sinned by having prevented a dozen hungry ones from tumbling about its feet. The parents who gave one or two dear sons to be torn to pieces by machine guns and explosives or to be poisoned by torturing gases scarcely can be made to regret that they did not have nine to give. ... unemployed fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters of starving and freezing families can scarcely be expected to beat their breasts in sorrow for the unborn, however prevented.²⁵

The working-class family’s recourse to birth control was defended by the Left as a legitimate right; the opposition of conservatives to such practices was taken to symbolize yet another attempt by the upper classes to meddle in the affairs of the lower. The anger of the Left aroused by such interference was increased by the knowledge that the wealthy had access to contraceptive information which the law denied to the poor. The argument advanced by Mrs Dorothy Steeves, CCF Member of the B.C. Legislature, in demanding in 1936 the provision by the government of birth control clinics was that only in this way could contraceptive information “be taken out of the realm of privilege”.²⁶ Her colleague Dr Lyle Telford supported her contention in asserting that the local hospital’s provision of such information was insufficient and inequitable: “But they decide there who should have the advice and who shouldn’t. We haven’t the right to refuse it to any reasonable person.”²⁷ The response of the Minister of Health was to retreat to the realm of rhetoric and denounce birth control in language that had not changed since the time of Teddy Roosevelt as

²³ *B.C. Federationist*, 27 December 1918, p. 2.

²⁴ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 6 November 1924, p. 2. See also Flora MacDonald Denison’s response to the Church’s fear of race suicide, “Better to look after the children that are here than to fuss too much about the ones that will never exist.” Cited in Deborah GORHAM, “Flora MacDonald Denison: Canadian Feminist”, in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880-1920s*, ed.: Linda KEALEY (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1979), p. 66.

²⁵ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 24 January 1931, p. 5.

²⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1936, p. 1, and 17 March 1936, p. 1.

²⁷ *Victoria Daily Times*, 3 December 1937, p. 6. Dr Telford (CCF Member of the Legislative Assembly for Vancouver East in 1937 and mayor of Vancouver from 1938 to 1940) established a private birth control clinic in the early thirties. In 1932 he wrote Marie Stopes, the British birth control advocate, asking for contraceptive literature and including a copy of his own pamphlet *Birth Control* which defended the practice as being in the interests of women’s rights, healthy marriages, full employment, rational behaviour and race betterment. British Museum, 58574, Marie Stopes Papers, vol. 128, Dr Lyle Telford to Marie Stopes, 24 March 1932.

"a cancer that is sapping the very lifeblood of our society".²⁸ It was this sort of pontificating on the workers' duty to reproduce that the Left could not let pass unchallenged. When in 1926 the *Survey*, a middle-class magazine, commented on the need for a high birth rate, the *One Big Union Bulletin* retorted typically: "Speaking for the workers, we ask the *Survey* to kindly mind its own business, but if it must dabble among the diapers to confine its obstetrical curiosity to Riverside Drive."²⁹

Up to this point the defence of birth control offered by the Left could be judged to be primarily one based on negative arguments. Since business, the military, and the churches all seemed to want larger families, birth control had to be supported. There was of course also the right of the individual to live his or her own life as might be seen fit, an argument that appealed more to the libertarian than to the socialist who stressed class solidarity. For more positive statements by the Left in defence of birth control it is necessary to turn to its discussion of women.

Canadian socialist publications were among the first to support the women's movement although their backing of the suffrage cause was not always unhesitating. The more radical periodicals at times portrayed the suffragettes as middle-class women of leisure who refused to acknowledge the primacy of class divisions. The discussion of a propertied woman's vote raised the spectre of the extension of the franchise being used simply to shore up the existing social system. When during World War I so many suffragettes threw themselves avidly into the war effort the suspicions of many socialists of the conservative social views of "advanced" women were amply confirmed.³⁰ The issue of the vote may have been downplayed in many left-wing publications but these same papers provided a forum for airing the needs of working women in the areas of health, employment and housing. It was in this context of birth control's role in progressive social change that feminist arguments in favour of family limitation surfaced. The most persuasive came from the pen of Florence Rowe writing in the *One Big Union Bulletin* in the 1920s. Even at this date, to judge by her line of attack, she still met opponents within the Left.

You ask me: "What has this to do with working class women?" I answer, "it has much to do with them. Is it not from our children that the ranks of labour are recruited? Is it not our sons who are the rank and file of the army and navy? Is it not our sons who are the great sad army of unemployed, gradually becoming, as the years roll on, the great army of the unemployable, for to be continually 'out of work' and obliged to take the quantity and quality of food decided on by someone else is one of the most demoralizing things I know of. It embitters the spirit and lowers the mentality.

Sister women, mothers who think, turn this matter over in your minds. Refuse the undignified position that either Abraham or Paul or the later creations of man's mind, the prayer book, gave you. Look at life as it really is for us of the working class."

The question of the scientific regulation of human births is not offered as the "complete solution" but it is one that has deep significance. Nothing

²⁸ *Victoria Daily Times*, 20 November 1940, p. 12.

²⁹ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 11 March 1926, p. 1.

³⁰ See for example the *Western Clarion*, 27 September 1913, p. 1; 20 December 1913, p. 4; May 1916, p. 8; March 1917, p. 8; June 1917, p. 12.

is unrelated, and when seriously studying the problems of the working class this side of life may well be considered in its relation to the ever-growing, more acute class struggle.³¹

Starting with the classical syndicalist arguments in favour of the "birth strike" Rowe proceeded to provide a domestic rationale for family planning that spoke more directly to the needs of women. No matter what its social effects might be, birth control promised to ease the burden of motherhood by sparing women repeated unwanted pregnancies. The state therefore had an obligation, if it had any concern for the physical and psychological well-being of its citizens, to provide to "those married people with sufficient intelligence and love for each other and their children to desire it, the information as how to limit the family without injuring the health or happiness of either".³² Having asserted that contraceptive knowledge could make existing marriages happier, Rowe added the feminist insight that the goal of radicals was to subject the existing family structure to scrutiny, not simply to shore it up. It was in this light that she criticized the Mothers Allowance Act. Others on the Left sneered at the paltry sums provided by this legislation; what Rowe held up for contempt was the assumption that given sufficient payment women would accept the humiliating fate of being relegated to the task of mindless breeding.³³

The feminism espoused by Rowe stressed the need for working women to express their social and sexual solidarity. Wealthy women, she wrote, already restricted their births and it was time for working women to instruct each other in such methods and demand the aid of the state: "The women to prevent their daughters' lives being absorbed in the same dolorous way, will insist that a Department of Birth Control be added to the Department of Public Health."³⁴ Women should find joy in pregnancy. Since this could not be expected in capitalist society, it was the duty of mature women to protect the young. Putting her beliefs into practice Rowe advertised the fact that at the Plebs Hall in Winnipeg she was available each day for consultations "on any matter effecting the welfare of girls or women".³⁵

Such feminist arguments were not restricted to women. Speaking at the Royal Theatre in Vancouver in 1919, J. S. Woodsworth, after defending women's political rights and the concept of companionate marriage in which the wife would be regarded by the husband as a "pal", turned to the question of limitation of family size. He castigated the Catholic defence of celibacy as "the most abominable doctrine ever taught"; what was needed in place of such old-fashioned doctrines was more sex

³¹ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 6 November 1924, p. 2. For American women socialists see Neil K. BAsEN, "Kate Richard O'Hare: the 'First Lady' of American Socialism, 1901-1917", *Labor History*, 21 (1980): 194-96.

³² *One Big Union Bulletin*, 6 November 1924, p. 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25 June 1925, p. 2; and see also Rose Henderson's article in *ibid.*, 3 February 1927, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 April 1925, p. 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1925, p. 2.

education, in which birth control would have to find a place. The reporter of the *B.C. Federationist* quoted Woodsworth: "The speaker in conclusion strongly condemned the position taken by law and custom with regard to birth control. In the new social order he believed that the prospective mother would be allowed to say whether she wished her child to be brought into the world or not."³⁶

Of all the varieties of the Canadian Left it was agrarian socialism that provided a milieu in which women were most successful in establishing their own organizations and making their needs known. It is thus not surprising that it was from the women's sections of the United Farmers movements that by the end of the 1920s came the first public resolutions calling on the government to involve itself in the provision of contraceptive information.³⁷ In June 1929 the women's branch of the Saskatchewan section of the United Farmers of Canada passed the following resolution:

Whereas we believe that the intelligent use of contraceptives is one of the most important steps towards solving the economic problems of farmers and other working classes, and Whereas we believe that Birth Control is the only humanitarian way of preventing a mother from being overburdened and broken in health with too numerous progeny. ... Therefore be it resolved that the Women's Section of the U.F.C., in convention assembled, do forthwith advise our Government to raise the ban on safe, sane and hygienic contraceptives.³⁸

The UFC further called for the setting up of clinics in which trained doctors would disseminate the necessary information. The Seventh Labour Women's Social and Economic Conference which met in Winnipeg's West End Labour Hall in March of 1930 also debated the issues of sterilization, companionate marriage, and women's employment. The secretary of the organization, Miss Beatrice Brigden, chided those who were slow to recognize the importance of the discussion of family limitation. "We may as well face the facts. There is nothing in the world too private or too sacred to remain closed to investigation. ... Today she [the woman] can enjoy the privilege of voluntary motherhood." Commenting on the conference's attempt to grapple with the issue, the *Alberta Labour News* cited the *Australian Worker* to the effect that in the southern hemisphere "wise regulation" was already in force.³⁹

With the addition of the socialist-feminist argument it was possible by the 1930s to piece together from the writings of the Canadian Left a fairly well-developed defence of birth control. The phrase "piece together" is used purposefully because it would be misleading to suggest that the ques-

³⁶ *B.C. Federationist*, 21 March 1919, p. 3. The more prominent role played by women and women's issues in the North American birth control debate as compared to the British was commented on by James D. Campbell of Winnipeg who claimed that one reason he left England for Canada was his impatience with the male-dominated Malthusian League. Campbell to the *Malthusian*, August 1923, p. 97.

³⁷ As early as 1922 the United Farmers of Alberta Women declared their interest in "Education, Child Welfare, Public Health, (not forgetting Birth Control) and Citizenship...", *United Farmers of Alberta*, 15 July 1922, p. 10.

³⁸ *New Generation*, March 1930, p. 36.

³⁹ *Winnipeg Free Press*, 31 March 1930, p. 1; *Alberta Labour News*, 12 April 1930, p. 2. Brigden had earlier been a moral hygiene lecturer for the WCTU.

tion of family limitation was in itself a central preoccupation of socialists. What primarily concerned them was social change; birth control was perceived to be of importance only because some socialists saw it playing a positive role in advancing such change. In a sense the support that birth control found on the Left was equivocal; the same could be said of that proffered by later generations of professional family planners preoccupied by eugenics, child welfare and the stability of both the family unit and the nation state. Traces of all these notions appeared in publications of the Left but the emphasis was distinctly different. The Left had elaborated a radical analysis of birth control which sprang from a critique, not a defence, of the existing social system, an analysis which was based on a concern for individual rights and social obligations, not on eugenic and Malthusian preoccupations.

II

Because the Depression of the 1930s placed enormous pressures on the working-class family it was only to be expected that the leftist press would at the very least tacitly accept the necessity of fertility control. Having said this it is necessary to note that the issue continued to elicit ambivalent responses in some sections of the Left and especially in the Communist press. Opposition to the advocacy of birth control as a social panacea was more widespread than mere attacks on the individual family's recourse to contraception, but the line separating the two issues was often blurred. Even papers such as the *One Big Union Bulletin* which carried many of the most articulate defences of family limitation included criticisms of its proponents from time to time. Such arguments might be embedded in general essays critical of feminist issues which could detract from the class struggle. Working-class women in particular were warned to avoid such "will-o-the-wisp" movements.⁴⁰

Coming closer to the issue, January Mortimer argued in "The Maternal Instinct" that it was capitalism which was depriving women of their right to be fertile.⁴¹ And it was capitalism, claimed an article from the *Socialist Standard* reprinted by the *One Big Union Bulletin* in 1930, that was using birth control both to control the labour supply and shift the responsibility of poverty on to the worker. The author did not totally condemn recourse to contraception: "There are human problems for which birth control may provide the solution, just as there are good reasons why some people should avoid alcohol." What capitalists were doing, however, was using the population issue to transfer to the working class the responsibility for the social system's inadequacies. Nominally sympathetic philanthropists were constantly telling workers not to have sex, not to drink, not to go to movies but rather spend their leisure time in parks and playing fields so that they would be fresh and productive on Monday morn-

⁴⁰ See for example the *One Big Union Bulletin*, 22 November 1919, p. 1; 30 July 1921, p. 4; 24 September 1921, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 13 November 1920, p. 2; and *Winnipeg Voice*, 22 February 1918, p. 2.

ing. Thus what capitalist apologists presented as a means of improving the life of the working-class family had as its real goal that of lowering the employers' costs while increasing the social subordination of employees. "We are to be born, educated, married; rationed in children and alcohol, our whole lives carefully supervised." The advocacy of birth control had to be judged a diversion. "The world is rich enough if the workers would but rid it of the out-of-date capitalist system. But we find our work for Socialism impeded by the muddle-headed enthusiasts who preach salvation through prohibition, birth control, industrial psychology and what not." The "smoke-screen" thrown up by such propagandists, intentionally or not, hid from the worker's gaze the real problems posed by capitalism.⁴² "Ithuriel" writing in the *One Big Union Bulletin* in 1931 repeated the charge that it was only the existence of capitalism which made the artificial restriction of fertility necessary. "Economically, socially, psychologically, and physically the practise is unsound and should be unnecessary." Business once needed labour and so lauded large families; when a large population was no longer required capitalists vaunted recourse to family limitation. The fact that some churchmen had come out in favour of birth control only confirmed Ithuriel's view that the campaign was orchestrated by the upper classes. Once more the churches were "down on their bellies grovelling to their money masters".⁴³

The argument that the upper classes were seeking to tailor the reproductive habits of labour to fit the needs of capitalism was given some credence when doctors in the 1930s preached the necessity of the sterilization of the "unfit". The decade which saw the passage of race laws in Nazi Germany also witnessed the passage of bills in British Columbia and Alberta permitting the forcible sterilization of the mentally ill. The general trend of the argument in favour of such extreme measures to attain social control was recognized by the Left as a growing menace. When C. F. Neelands of the Ontario Reformatory at Guelph called in 1931 for the sterilization of the unfit and the anti-social the *One Big Union Bulletin* likened such measures to "the ways of the savage", yet another means of "appeasing and controlling only the slaves such as we have today".⁴⁴ The capitalist declared to be "moral" whatever act he needed to carry out to ensure his continued control. Similarly John D. Hutton, a leading eugenicist was quoted at length by the CCF paper, the *Canadian Tribune*: "Who are the feeble-minded? They are people with the mental capacities and abilities of children. In the cities they tend to drift towards the slums. Indeed slums are largely the product of the segregating of the subnormals. ... For their benefit as well as for our own we should control their reproduction." But to set up the argument in such a fashion, protested the *Tribune*, was to imply poverty had biological, not social causes and was

⁴² *Socialist Standard* article reprinted in *One Big Union Bulletin*, 21 August 1930, p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9 April 1931, p. 2. As part of the attack on the bogey of "over-population" the *One Big Union Bulletin* (18 January 1923, p. 3) also reprinted Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" in which the sardonic suggestion is made that unwanted babies can always be stewed, roasted, baked or boiled.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1931, p. 2.

simply a more sophisticated way in which to assert that the poor were innately inferior.⁴⁵

In the final analysis, however, the basic source of much of the working-class movement's hostility to the advocacy of birth control was the belief held by many males that contraception was an unnatural, modern, middle-class practice which would only result in depriving the worker of the joys of heading the traditionally large, healthy family. In a perceptive 1929 article entitled "Sex and the Workers" a commentator observed that the popular idea that all workers once enjoyed such a patriarchal existence was a myth and in Jim Thompson's words "the majority of workers are homesick for a home they never had". If it was a myth, it was a powerful one that would make many male workers as hostile to those "meddlers" who preached the benefit of birth control as to those who opposed it.⁴⁶

These suspicions that birth control could distract the workers from the central issue of the class struggle were most vehemently voiced by the Communist press. The Communist Party of Canada's response to the question was the product of a number of conflicting preoccupations which changed over time. During the 1920s and 1930s the CPC stolidly followed the Comintern line and took as its first duty the defence of the Russian socialist experiment.⁴⁷ For many Canadians on the Communist and non-Communist Left the most dramatic aspect of the USSR's attempt to create a new society was the restructuring of family life, accompanied after 1920 by the legitimization of abortion and the provision of birth control information. These changes were immediately hailed by the Socialist Party's *Western Clarion* in 1920.⁴⁸ In 1927 the syndicalist publication, the *One Big Union Bulletin*, ran a long article by Freda Uteley on "How Women Live in Russia" which noted the great strides made in providing maternity benefits and advice on birth control. The latter was done in consultation centres as part of the "struggle against abortion", but Uteley concluded that the hope harboured by some that socialism could eventually make unnecessary any family limitation "seems a little naive".⁴⁹ Similarly in 1936 *C.C.F. News* carried the reports of Dr and Mrs Victor, recent visitors

⁴⁵ *Canadian Tribune*, 27 April 1940, p. 2.

⁴⁶ *Industrial Worker* article reprinted in the *One Big Union Bulletin*, 12 September 1929, p. 7. For comments on differing male and female attitudes towards birth control in the thirties, see also Sara Diamond's interview with the early birth control activist Vivian Dowdy, "Women and Birth Control" (Simon Fraser University Reserve Library, Tape 2405B).

⁴⁷ Irving ABELLA, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The C.I.O., the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); Ivan AVAKUMOVIC, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).

⁴⁸ *Western Clarion*, 1 November 1920, p. 7. See also *United Farmers of Alberta*, 2 March 1931, p. 16.

⁴⁹ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 17 November 1927, p. 2. See also Richard STITES, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 264, 355, 386-87; Gail WARSHOVSKY LAPIDUS, *Women in Soviet Society: Equality, Development and Social Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 60-61, 112-13; Peter G. FILENE, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 141-42.

to Russia, who commented on Russian women's concern for the provision of family limitation information.⁵⁰ Given the liberal attitude of the Soviets towards birth control and the lively interest taken in such policies by progressives in the west it might have been expected that the CPC would have looked kindly upon family limitation. To do so, however, would have run counter to a basic tenet of the party, the avoidance of any issue which could divert attention from the class struggle.⁵¹ It is true that the Women's Labour League which came under the party's domination in the 1920s interested itself in birth control and had as its slogans, "Protection of Motherhood" and "Care of Motherhood". But when the party's line hardened in 1929 these mottos were attacked as "sentimental bourgeois slogans". The Sixth Convention of the CPC held that "no propaganda on Birth Control, as a remedy of economic evils, be permissible and whatever articles written by women proletarians with an incorrect orientation have to be published, an editorial note, correcting the same, must accompany the article."⁵²

The late twenties and early thirties was the time of the Communist Party's heroic isolation — in Canada as everywhere else in the west — and its spurning of the birth control issue was but one aspect of its efforts to keep itself undefiled from movements that aimed only at simple social reforms. This course was abandoned in the mid-thirties. With the rise of fascism the Comintern adopted a new tack calling for "Common Fronts" of all progressive elements. In 1936 the CPC, which the year before had labelled the CCF a "social fascist" organization and attacked pacifist and women's groups as diversionary, was exhorting its members to win such organizations to an alliance to defend the Soviet Union. In particular female members were called upon "to strive to promote the coming together of all existing women's organizations without distinction against war and reaction".⁵³ So birth control was now taken up for discussion by the CPC as just such a movement in which Communists could woo the interests of working, farming and middle-class women. In 1936 and 1937 the *Daily Clarion* ran a whole series of articles on birth control. The speeches of the British birth control advocate Edith How-Martyn were reported, the radical past of Margaret Sanger noted, medical advice on contraceptives provided, and the acquittal of the Canadian birth control activist Dorothea Palmer — "staunch progressive and friend of the people" — applauded.⁵⁴ In the summer of 1936 the Vancouver chapter of

⁵⁰ *C.C.F. News*, 15 October 1936, p. 4. On the threats posed by Communism to the Canadian family see *Canadian Labour Press* supplement, "Communism and Your Home", 15 May 1936.

⁵¹ The CPC youth paper the *Young Worker* (1924-34) never mentioned birth control and only passing references to the issue were made in the party's senior publication the *Worker* (1922-36) which was replaced by the *Daily Clarion* (1936-39).

⁵² AVAKUMOVIC, *Communist Party*, pp. 34, 74, 248.

⁵³ *Eighth Dominion Convention. Communist Party of Canada, 8-12 October, 1937* (n.p., n.d.), p. 60.

⁵⁴ *Daily Clarion*, 1 August 1936, p. 3; 22 August 1936, p. 5; 29 August 1936, p. 4; 21 November 1936, p. 5; 11 December 1936, p. 3; 3 March 1937, p. 4; 23 March 1937, p. 3; 6 November 1937, p. 6; 13 November 1937, p. 4.

the Women's Labour League launched a petition demanding birth control clinics which began:

Whereas: With the widespread unemployment, the burden of caring for the home and children falls principally upon the shoulders of the working class mothers who oftentimes, rather than bring other children into the world, with small prospects of proper food, clothing and attention, resort to the most crude and dangerous means in order to procure abortions, with all its widespread evils, as thousands of women are suffering due to the lack of proper knowledge of Birth Control ... [the government is asked to provide such information.]⁵⁵

Finally, at the Eighth Dominion Convention of the CPC in 1937 a call was made for "increased health services such as hospitalization, more clinics including birth control clinics, welfare services, etc."⁵⁶

This proved to be the climax of the CPC's involvement in the birth control campaign. Ironically enough the acceptance by the CPC of the legitimacy of the issue of family limitation took place at the very time when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in an effort to build Russia's population, was cutting back access to abortion and contraception. Not for the first nor for the last time the CPC was faced with the dilemma of having to provide an apology for a Soviet policy which weakened the party's credibility in Canada. Many Canadian women Communists were shocked by what they regarded as the regressive steps taken by the Soviet Union in the matter of abortion. That their protests were heard was made clear by a number of articles on the women's page of the *Daily Clarion* in which tortuous arguments were presented to prove that the right to fertility control had to be fought for in a capitalist but not in a socialist state. In July 1936 Jessica Smith conceded that a "great deal of confusion in Canada" existed concerning the revisions made in Soviet family law. Such problems could be cleared up, she asserted, once one recognized that abortion had been needed in 1920 in Russia but not in 1936 now that Soviet women were "free" and enjoyed child care, maternity benefits, and freedom from the stigma of bearing illegitimate children. Such benefits were not enjoyed in Canada and so the struggle for birth control and abortion was warranted. In Russia which was building up its population, not in preparation for war but for peace, such campaigns were unnecessary. "Why then", concluded Smith, "should not the Soviet woman be encouraged in the motherhood that most women desire?"⁵⁷ A week later the paper carried an article from N. Krupskaya which made many of the same arguments based on women's "natural needs" and in addition advanced the tendentious assertion that it was the ordinary Russian women themselves who sought to curb their own access to abortion: "Acceding to large numbers of requests from working women regarding the harmfulness of abortions, the Government of the U.S.S.R., with the

⁵⁵ Sanger Papers, vol. 18, Copy of the petition sent by Edith How-Martyn to Margaret Sanger, 4 August 1936. See also *Daily Clarion*, 29 August 1936, p. 4; *Vancouver Sun*, 13 February 1936, p. 1; *B.C. Workers News*, 15 March 1935, p. 1.

⁵⁶ *Eighth Convention*, p. 57.

⁵⁷ *Daily Clarion*, 4 July 1936, p. 8.

aim of protecting the health of working women, has prepared a draft law on the prohibition of abortions."⁵⁸

Even the pronouncements of Lenin's widow did not still the concerns of Canadian women and in October the *Daily Clarion* headed Anne Rivington's essay with the assertion, "Does the New Law Against Abortion Mean That a Woman is Again Nothing But a Breeder of Children? No, Emphatically No!"⁵⁹ The most notable part of Rivington's column was not her defence of Soviet law which was simply a recapitulation of the arguments of earlier commentators; what stood out in the article was the obvious fear that many rank and file members were refusing to accept the party line on this intimate issue.

The inability of the leaders of the party to square the growing interest of Canadians in family limitation with the increasing restrictions on such practices in the Soviet Union appears to have been one reason why from 1938 on the discussion of birth control was dropped from the CPC press. It would seem that a second reason was that the CPC in an effort to woo the broadest cross-section of the public, abandoned a subject which some might consider too sensitive. As the threat of fascism grew, the content of the woman's page of the *Daily Clarion* became, strangely enough, ever more frivolous with more and more articles devoted to food and fashion.⁶⁰

III

What was in effect a left-wing monopoly of the discussion of birth control was broken in the 1930s by the emergence in Canada of a socially conservative neo-Malthusian movement. The purpose of this paper has been to present the reasons why the Left was drawn to the discussion of family limitation at a time when the topic was still a tabooed subject. They were the Left's suspicion of the upper classes turning the population issue to their own purposes, the Left's hostility to meddling by outsiders in the family life of the working class, the Left's concern for the living standards of working-class women, and particularly in the case of the Communist Party, the Left's responsiveness to attitudes taken towards birth control by socialists abroad. An explanation of why the issue of birth control which had been raised by the working-class movement should have been taken over in the 1930s by more conservative elements has to await further analysis.

What can be concluded from this attempt to rescue from obscurity certain specific linkages of sex and politics in the Canadian past? The complexity of attitudes of those on the Left towards the issue of birth control clearly prevents one from attempting to impose too categorical an

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11 July 1936, p. 3; 18 July 1936, p. 5; and 19 October 1936, p. 3. On the latter date the *Clarion* published the photo of an American abortionist with the caption, "U.S.S.R. Abortion Law Solved All this."

⁵⁹ *Daily Clarion*, 3 October 1936, p. 5.

⁶⁰ For a comparison with events in the United States see Robert SHAFER, "Women and the Communist Party, U.S.A.", *Socialist Review*, 9 (May-June 1979): 73-118.

interpretation on the data but some broad generalizations can be drawn. The first is that there was clearly no inherent reason why birth control should have found its first Canadian defenders on the Left. Indeed given the fact that it drew heavily on the optimistic doctrines of such works as Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (1879), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* (1894), in which degenerate capitalism was condemned for holding back population growth, its initial hostility to neo-Malthusianism was to be expected.⁶¹ The stress on the moral superiority of reformers would prevent many from broaching the tabooed birth control issue and lead some to doubt the revolutionary credentials of those who did. Tom Cassidy, for example, an active propagandist for the One Big Union who included in his public lectures defences of abortion and birth control, found himself and Catherine Rose accused by the executive in 1923 of being "egotistical enough to consider the vindication of their moral standards of greater importance than the development of the movement".⁶² But this very moralism, if turned to the purposes of exalting the importance of the bearing and rearing of children, could also lead in a roundabout fashion to an acceptance of the legitimacy of the restriction of fertility. Such was the path taken by Beatrice Brigden and Florence Rowe.

The second point to be drawn from an analysis of the birth control debate is that it reveals the importance attributed by the Left both to the state and to women. There were early libertarian defenders of contraception in Canada such as Emma Goldman and R. B. Kerr but what is most striking about the discussion of the population issue in the twenties and thirties was the collectivist spirit which so strongly coloured the Left's analysis. This explains in part why there were so few concrete proposals for the provision of birth control services by the labour and farming movements themselves. Birth control was but one more area in which the Left asserted that the state had ultimately to step in to provide necessary information and material.

The attribution to the state of such responsibilities was in turn a function of the importance women played in leftist organizations. Indeed the response of individual movements to the issue of birth control served as a sort of litmus test of their cultural radicalism. Socialist feminists like Florence Rowe and groups such as the Women's Labour League sought to make defence of contraception a central plank in the socialist programme. "We all know that rich women can buy anything", asserted the WLL in 1935, "this [restriction of birth control] is a law for the rich and against the poor woman."⁶³ Particularly in the West progressives argued that, though women's lives would not be fully improved until after major social reforms were instituted, in the meantime the burdens of working-class families had to be alleviated. That such feminist arguments did not go un-

⁶¹ See Gene HOMEL, "Fading Beams of the Nineteenth Century: Radicalism and Early Socialism in Canada's 1890s", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 5 (1980): 7-32.

⁶² BERCUSON, *Fools*, p. 232.

⁶³ *B.C. Workers News*, 15 March 1935, p. 2.

opposed was made clear by the analysis provided above of the Communist Party's stance. The importance of asking how the various sections of the Left responded is that it provides the beginnings of a more fully fleshed view of Canadian politics in which the questions of the relationships of the sexes and the bearing of children are included.

Finally, it has to be acknowledged that on the official level no leftist movement considered the birth control issue a number one priority. Some might conclude that, recognizing such ambiguities and contradictions, it is pointless to single out the Left's position as worthy of analysis. In response it must be admitted that the attempt to place the birth control issue within the context of a political ideology did pose real problems — problems which could be skirted by those Canadians who did not approach the question from an ideologically committed point of view. But it must also be acknowledged that it was the very fact that some on the Left assumed the restriction of family size had political consequences which led them to be the first Canadian public defenders of the practice. Individual social workers, doctors, and bureaucrats within the Ministry of Health might surreptitiously interest themselves in the issue but they did not make their views known. The defence of restriction of family size was therefore to be first assumed by the Left. Equally important was the fact that in the discussion of birth control all sections of the Left were united at least in their defence of voluntarism. Whether Leftists condemned or condoned birth control, they shared a common anti-authoritarian, anti-Establishment antipathy towards middle-class meddling in the lives of labouring families.

The last question to be asked is whether the left-wing discussion of birth control had any appreciable effect on working-class fertility. Clearly economic pressures were the overriding reasons for restriction of family size and how one might gauge the impact of ideological arguments within the constellation of motivations appears impossible to determine. But to say that it is difficult to determine the importance of ideology is not the same as saying that therefore ideology is not important. Kaufman was the first to recognize this. On 3 December 1935 he wrote Margaret Sanger that he had an agent, a "quiet worker", spreading birth control propaganda amongst the Toronto organizations of the unemployed. "We find that practically all types of unemployed, whether rabid communists or otherwise, agree about 90% that birth control is necessary."⁶⁴ What concerned Kaufman was that many of these same workers also wanted to know the policy of the Soviet Union towards birth control; his reason for writing to Sanger was to ask how he might best respond. Clues that other Canadian workers did not totally divorce their views on the family from their social and political concerns are found in letters to the press. A "Nanaimo Girl" writing the *B.C. Federationist* in 1914 called on the working class to wake to the fact that repeated pregnancies produce dull, sickly children and a passive labour force. It was the wealthy who wanted a growing population, she asserted, to provide "strike breakers and militia and specials"

⁶⁴ Sanger Papers, vol. 17, A. R. Kaufman to Margaret Sanger, 3 December 1935.

and "slaves for the labour market".⁶⁵ In a less rhetorical tone "M.N." informed the readers of the *One Big Union Bulletin* in 1928 that as a "wage slave" he could only afford to raise one child. "I don't want more than one, no matter what big business or its supporters may think." He did not want to raise children to be soldiers, he did not believe in the threat of the "Yellow Peril", he did not accept Canada's need for added population to increase development. Yet following this litany of socialist arguments in favour of family limitation "M.N." asserted that his decision was not ideologically based. Voicing what must have been the sentiments of the mass of Canadian workers he declared, "I am advocating nothing. I just see my own advantage in the struggle for life."⁶⁶

RÉSUMÉ.

Les études consacrées au mouvement canadien du contrôle des naissances ont jusqu'alors insisté sur le rôle joué par des philanthropes appartenant aux classes moyennes; elles ont ainsi maquillé le fait que ce furent d'abord des périodiques réformistes qui soulevèrent les aspects sociaux et politiques de la limitation des naissances. Les écrits des libertaires, des socialistes et des communistes révèlent que la gauche canadienne était loin de l'unanimité dans son évaluation des bienfaits de la contraception; elle se trouvait cependant à l'unisson dans son hostilité à ce qu'elle considérait comme une immixtion des classes moyennes dans la vie des familles ouvrières. Nous nous proposons ici à la fois d'étendre nos connaissances sur l'histoire du contrôle des naissances à ses débuts et de présenter sous un nouvel éclairage les attitudes de la gauche canadienne à l'endroit de la femme, de la famille et des agents de contrôle social.

⁶⁵ *B.C. Federationist*, 16 February 1914, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 22 November 1928, p. 2.