

## **FABRIC OF RESISTANCE**

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*Presentation at the Owens Art Gallery*

*A Handmade Assembly*

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Today, I'm grateful for the opportunity to share what I've learned through my engagement with a series of garment union banners from the permanent collection of the community museum I've worked at for the last five years.

Much of the research and programming discussed in this presentation was delivered as part of my role as Programmer at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in Hamilton Ontario, Canada's only labour history museum and multidisciplinary art centre. WAHC was conceived in the late 1980's by a group of labour historians, artists, union and community activists who were committed to creating a place where workers' history could be celebrated. In 1996, WAHC purchased The Custom House, a historic building situated in Hamilton's North End, a former industrial neighbourhood that is now rapidly gentrifying. As Program and Exhibitions Specialist, I'm tasked with developing and delivering public programs to individuals and groups including families, unions, students, artists and the general public. Over any given exhibition season, the museum leads programs allowing the public to deeper engage with the ideas imbedded in the main gallery exhibition. These programs typically include anything from screenings, workshops and talks to tours and outreach programs.

In the winter of 2017, WAHC was both blessed and cursed to be short a main gallery exhibition. In the months leading up to this season, it occurred to us that an exhibition featuring our rare banner collection— which had gone un-exhibited up until this point— would be an incredible opportunity. The premise of the resulting exhibition, titled *All or None*, was based on the idea of the structure and strength of textile as a metaphor for community, care and collectivity. The exhibition focused on the iconography and use of a selection of garment union banners from our permanent collection as vehicles of communication, celebration, affiliation, and resistance. The exhibition also looked at the history of the unions and locals represented, using the images, materials and text on each banner as clues to a broader visual culture of labour, as very little scholarship about Canadian labour movement artifacts exists.

This talk explores the histories and stories behind a small selection of banners from garment workers' union locals in Canada, and the unions and workers who decades ago fuelled garment manufacturing in Canada and beyond. The banners commemorate a hidden history of collective action and organizing in a sector dominated by immigrants and women, and contain meaning about their production, design and alteration over time. This talk will also look at the ways these banners have been integrated into museum programming, and how the legacy of early 20th century union banners and archives can be found in the works of contemporary artists and artist-activists today.

While the potential of labour artifacts to inspire and inform is significant, information is scarce about these materials in Canada— at least compared to the USA, Australia and England. American websites like [laborarts.org](http://laborarts.org), archives like the Kheel Centre for Labour Relations at Cornell University, and the multiple museums and cultural spaces in England that base their mandates on people's history, social moments, and labour history, place emphasis on preserving the material history of working class life in ways that simply don't seem to happen here. The BC Labour Heritage Centre, and to a lesser extent WAHC typically place more emphasis on immaterial histories of working people, focussing on stories, locations of interest,

and gains made through labour struggles more than they do the art and objects of the movement.

While American and British sources have been key in giving me a broad understanding of some of the symbols and materials used to create historic banners, one of the precious few sources of information on materials of country's labour movement I came across was an article written by OCADU Professor Rosemary Donegan in the late 80s called *Iconography of Labour*. Her insights about imagery on Canadian banners could be applied to labour banners across the western world: in the 19th century, many banners tied to professions were narrative, decorative, and employed the use of universal symbols and stories that would be widely understood by working class folks. A particularly amazing example is this Clothier and Tailor's Union banner belonging to the New Brunswick Museum in St. John. The banner is painted with a nude Adam and Eve, being expelled through the garden of Eden— this biblical image was apparently popular for the earliest tailor's unions because their state of undress succinctly shows the need for clothes. Into the 20th century, opulent banners— often made by unionized workers deemed to have artistic skill, were adorned with paint, applique and embroidery, metal trims and mostly made of silk-- were less visually narrative as literacy increased among working people. They were made of materials that exuded respectability, ceremony and dignity. Eventually, text relating to a particular trade was to give way to the use of union logos, with little to no literal visual markers connecting it to its industry. In this sense, labour union flags and swag of today is branded in a way that is pure design, and as Donegan relates, CUPE, CN and TD Canada Trust all blend together in a contemporary landscape of logo design. This complicates readings of labour union banners, which while born out of a collective, radical spirit feel almost conformist in their material and graphic uniformity and neutrality of sentiment — likely in part a result of unions looking to shed associations with communism, especially moving towards the cold war years.

The majority of WAHC's banners come from this 20th century period. These banners came to us through donation from the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees Ontario Council (or UNITE) in 2003. Spanning nearly 100 years, they trace the history of garment and textile unions in Canada back from UNITE to all the previous garment unions that merged to eventually become UNITE. Once we decided to show the banners in the context of an exhibition, we knew that scant resources as a community museum prevented any conservation efforts related to banners that were in bad condition— many of the silk ones had deteriorated, so we knew we were limited to displaying the ones that had little damage or wear. In retrospect, it would have been an interesting challenge to find a method of displaying the tattered banners, as a way of emphasizing both the fact that they were made to be used, and the endangerment of this particular type of artifact.

After selecting what banners could be hung safely, each banner needed to be carefully prepared for hanging. Because WAHC is a small community museum, preparing the banners was a role I had to take on myself. While this a ton of work, it was an incredible experience in that the prep work served as a kind of echo of the work done by both the banner makers, and the industry honoured through the banners. I consulted with my former colleague Hillary Anderson at the Textile Museum of Canada where I used to work, who advised on the proper way to hang historic tapestries according to federal guidelines by attaching muslin and velcro to the top of banner using a careful running stitch, and attaching them to an armature screwed to the wall. As I did the prep work, I continued to conduct research. This process allowed me to gradually piece together nearly a century-long narrative of garment workers in Canada connecting gendered work, immigration, factory closures, technological change, campaigns, trade deals and union mergers in the age of offshore labour.

The following images will run through each of the banners in the exhibition, one by one. It seems appropriate to begin with this elaborate early banner from the 19-teens, the earliest in WAHC's collection, representing the Journeymen Tailors Union of America (JTUA), a union of skilled workers who were behind some of the first significant steps towards union organizing in the clothing industry. Tailor's unions were typically small, as most tailors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries remained outside of the union movement. In 1903, less than 18% of the estimated 900 garment workers in Toronto belonged to this union, and only a tiny portion of them were women. Fewer women were recruited because union membership carried a greater financial benefit for men; the difference between union and non-union wages for women was only 15 percent, while there are reports of the difference being as much as 50% for men. Part of the work of this union was attempting to abolish sweatshop conditions.

This banner uses symbols such as the maple leaf and shaking hands, emphasizing citizenship, solidarity, conciliation, agreement and strength in unity and is a flamboyant testament to the superior skill of the workers who had a hand in making it. Like the use of the eagle in American union banners from this period, the maple leaf shows that organized labour was invested in overt expressions of patriotism and nation building. The shaking hands' motif was adopted in banners produced for unions of other sectors in decades to come. This banner represents the period before banners became devoid of rich imagery in favour of logos, words and framing devices like scrolls.

The International Ladies Garment Workers Union represented by the banner on the left of the slide was an iconic industrial union known for their progressive activities and early strike actions. Into the 20th century, the ILG worked to improve both working and living conditions for its members through collective bargaining agreements, training programs, healthcare facilities, cooperative housing, educational opportunities and recreational initiatives. Known as a "union of immigrants," the ILG established important programs providing assistance and counselling for immigrants and conducting classes designed to help them cope with the challenges of living in a new country. The ILG was also one of few unions in the labour movement that maintained a consistent policy in support of undocumented workers. Over many decades, the union published broadsheets in the languages of its members like this Yiddish one, celebrating the inauguration of the 40 hour work week.

This banner is one of several similar banners in WAHC's collection, all from about the same time period, using the same materials and process of creation, but representing different union locals. Because the banners are made of silk, they have been vulnerable to deterioration over time, made worse by the fact that their decoration with an oil-based paint has made them difficult to store properly and prone to cracking. Like many of the oldest banners in WAHC's collection, this one is identically painted on both sides-- possibly by a regalia maker or sign painter like British banners from the same period.

The official formation of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America took place in 1914, after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, a notorious industrial disaster in New York City killed 123 women and 23 men. Most of the victims of the fire were female garment workers of Italian and Jewish descent. Before 1916, female workers were not unionized and had little to no workplace protection. The formation of the ACWA took place at a time when women were gaining greater political freedom, including the right to vote in Canada in 1921. By the 1920s, ACWA was one of the largest men's clothing unions in the United States and Canada, with several Italian, English and Yiddish speaking locals. At this time, ACWA was responsible for manufacturing close to 85% of all men's garments made in the United States. However, when the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, ACWA's union membership faltered.

Around the time this banner was made, ACWA's membership was primarily male; women represented only about 5% of ACWA's membership in the early 20th century. As the depression

neared, dual income families became more common out of necessity and female involvement in the labour movement began to increase. Women workers didn't always have the support of the trade-union movement. While early trade unionists were interested in protecting all workers, including women, some feared the competition from so-called "unskilled" female labourers who worked for lower pay.

One notable feature of this banner is a visible modification the banner, which allowed us to date it more accurately. After 1940, this union's affiliation with the American Federation of Labour would have changed after the formation of the Canadian Congress of Labour in 1940. While this banner was likely produced in the 1930s, the stitching was carefully torn out and replaced with new letters after the formation of the CC of L, illustrating the ability of these banners to mark changes to labour organizations and affiliation over time through the way textiles can be modified to reflect them, while leaving a shadow of the alternation as additional content for the viewer.

While the majority of our banners are from Toronto unions, this one represents workers in a Rayon factory in Cornwall, one of Canada's major centres for textile production in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The town's identity was tied to the cotton mills that lined the Cornwall Canal, most of which were shuttered in the late 50s and early 60s.

In the late 19th century, large numbers of French-speaking, Catholic Québécois came to Cornwall to work in the vital cotton processing industry, as did experienced textile workers from New England. By the 20th century, immigrants from Italy, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Japan and the Netherlands, people of Jewish descent, and Mohawk formed the textile industry's multi-ethnic workforce. Women represented more than half of the workforce at cotton mills during the pre-depression years, and while these numbers decreased during the depression due to automation and the privileging of male workers, women filled higher-paid jobs that were traditionally the domain of men during the war years.

A period of growth occurred in the 1920s, when British-owned Courtauld's Canada Inc. opened a rayon manufacturing plant which was established in 1924 and operated until 1992. Cornwall's Textile Workers Union of America Local 799 was made up of rayon workers. This banner, made of rayon (also known as "fake silk") reflects the unionized workers it represents.

The 1959 ILGWU Union Label was officially launched after it was mandatory in the dress industry in 1956. These labels not only indicated to consumers that a garment was union-made, but also used a system code of letters and serial numbers to easily identify the employers involved in a garment's manufacture. In the 1970s, the use of the union label became re-emphasized during a steep increase in imported goods on both American and Canadian markets. TV ads encouraging the public to "look for the union label" were associated with working and manufacturing conditions that were beneficial to the worker, the economy, and the country.

This small banner presents a Canadian take on the ILGWU's label campaign, displaying bilingual text and a connection to the Canadian Labour Congress. This banner was likely produced in Quebec in the 1960s, a period of growth in the Canadian apparel industry, specifically in Quebec, and increased use of the union label. One of the most notable aspects of this banner is that it is one of the earliest in our collection that was screen printed onto synthetic fabric. This change represents, and foreshadows ones of the ways that protest materials and banners are created today— screen printing remains a favourite way of creating placards, banners and wearable items for contemporary artists and activists.

With this flag, we come full circle back to UNITE, the union behind our donation of banners. They were formed in 1995 through the merger of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile

Workers Union (ACTWU) and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). It is worth mentioning that since this flag was made, UNITE has merged with another union to become UNITE HERE— a joint union between textiles and hotel and hospitality workers. A cornerstone of their activity as a union is organizing workers in lower wage industries, and advocating for making them middle class. This flag was digitally printed, reflecting the shift of unions away from one of a kind or limited run banners and towards mass produced “swag” distributed to many members of a union, for increased parade visibility-- a way to create a visual mass ironically, as the number of unionized workers continues to fall.

Each of these artifacts represents a time and place, and an industry that has lost its presence in the North American landscape of work due to the increasing import of garments made overseas, specifically in the wake of free trade agreements. These banners pose a worthwhile question— what might the millennial generation take from these banners? While they hold the radical and utopian promise of collectivity and mutual aid, the banner’s messaging is very rarely explicit. While these banners are clearly marked by union local and trade, how might a young worker coming of age in an era of Uber, Amazon, the gig economy and involuntary self employment relate them to their own lives. According to StatsCan, between 1981 and 2014 union membership has fallen from 38 per cent to 29 per cent of Canadian workers. In the United States, only around 4 percent of workers aged 16 to 24 and 9 percent of workers aged 25 to 34 belong to a union. What outside an admiration for the craftspersonship of the banners might someone of a younger generation take from them— whether they be members of the general public, or artists interested in the banner as a form, and for whom art and activism are not mutually exclusive.

This is a question that can be unpacked through both intergenerational and youth programming at WAHC, and through engagement with contemporary artists interested in the power of banners to document and centre marginal histories, and create new texts. Both artists and the public seem less interested in expressing their identities as workers in their own handmade banners than exploring other areas that are work adjacent, including global feminist movements, anti-capitalism, and histories where labour and other social movements intersect. Today, celebration, affiliation and struggle are less tied up in one’s working life, and more the product of intersectional identities, radical heritage, and community, all conveyed through cloth and hand making.

Banner making programs at WAHC have been a fascinating way to understand how diverse publics draw inspiration from labour union banners in order to honour, celebrate and affiliate, as well as make collective declarations or demands. A series of programs connected to both All or None, as well calendar dates such as labour day and women’s history month, gave visitors of all ages a chance to learn about and respond to the banners, as well as make their own

One example of such as program happened over Labour Day weekend in 2017, where visitors were treated to a behind the scenes look at our banners, including several that were not up during the All or None exhibition. Visitors came to our basement storage room, and were given an up close look at the banners, after which they made their own banner with the help of two guest artists— T.J. Charlton (who assisted visitors at a cut-stencil screen printing station), and Julia Salerno, who introduced participants to a variety of embroidery stitches to integrate into their banner designs.

The banners created came from diverse impulses, and drew on traditional methods of adorning labour union banners, such as painting and embroidery. One participant, Henry, a unionist and lifelong activist made a screen printed banner representing his union— a union of retired public sector workers wanting to stay connected to the labour movement. He hung the banner in the union’s tent in a public park following Hamilton’s labour day parade. Another participant named

Nicholas created a small banner-shaped patch commemorating the women's suffrage movement, embroidering green white and violet colour bars, onto a patch that he sewed on his denim jacket at the end of the workshop. A screen printed and painted banner made by another participant (not pictured) drew on union logo design to create a new one that took inspiration from an unlikely pair of influences— the history of iron work in her family, and superhero logos.

The following November, another program brought together a group of eight youth for a banner making workshop inspired by the work of storied farmworker organizer Dolores Huerta for Women's History Month. As a group, participants took inspiration from Huerta to make a banner honoring the legacy of female radicals and activists. They each honoured a feminist from their own country of origin including France, Ecuador, Pakistan and Egypt, making a series of compositions on a canvas patch using applique, fabric dye, embroidery and photo transfer, joining them together to create a banner that made a collective statement. For these youth, the work of known and unsung women leaders echoed the unheralded accomplishments of women in the needletrades. Their work aimed to document, honour and represent women who contributed to labour, social and political struggles around the world, giving form to the inspiration that they provide the next generation.

WAHC has taken an interest in making explicit connections between labour archives, labour heritage and the work of contemporary artists working with banners. Two artists in particular exemplify how artist-made banners can be positioned in conversation with artifacts from the labour movement. Winnipeg-born, Chicago-based artist Kandis Friesen's work was presented alongside the garment union banners in *All or None*, to serve as one example of how banners can be used in contemporary art to explore similar themes embodied in the historic banners: affiliation, collectivism, and unity. While some of the labour union banners represent diasporic communities of workers working together, Friesen's banner honours the little known history of a religious and linguistic minority through acts of quotation and hand making.

*The Cedar, The Birch and Our Hands at Full-Mast Behind the After* is a monumental wool banner created while Friesen was completing her MFA at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. This work is inspired by a small community uprising in Uzbekistan in the 1930s. The following is a quote from the artist to describe this history:

“Being one of the only communities in that Soviet Socialist Republic to not yet collectivize, the Mennonite community of Ak-Mechet in Uzbekistan had settled there after a great trek from Russia in the 1880s to resist military conscription. Facing deportation by the Soviets, the migrants refused the imposed process in an extremely rare staging of an impromptu protest. When the police came to arrest and execute the village men, the women and children piled their bodies onto the trucks, singing hymns and chanting a phrase roughly translating to Either Or! All Or None! in Russian until they left. The authorities returned the next day and honoured their demand, exiling the entire village to the desert.”

Friesen's banner combines several texts and histories: Anarchist slogans during the Russian revolution, early Mennonite writings and Soviet artists' texts. This poetic and political text is written in Low German (a language associated with Mennonite religion and culture) and transliterated into Cyrillic. The banner references the art of quilting, as well as protection and warmth. Friesen's banner, like the union banners, uses textile to convey a sense of collective voice, but through a Mennonite historical and cultural lens.

Friesen's work with banners continues to this day, most recently this past year in an exhibition called *All is well, that has not ended*, at Wedge Projects in Chicago. With these banners, Friesen continues her work using the Low German dialect, which she describes as having

become a kind of aural geography for a diasporic people. With this work, Friesen translates an immaterial form of production— a language that only exists orally— into a physical form representing the people behind the dialect and committing the language into the public record.

Right now, WAHC is in the middle of planning a solo exhibition by Michigan-based Metis artist, activist and scholar Dylan Miner. Through an ongoing project called the Wobbly Print Project, Miner has been navigating both his Metis and labour heritage through an extended engagement with a series of print blocks produced by members of the Industrial Workers of the World— a labour union committed to radical working class organizing and rooted in socialist and anarchist philosophy and practice. Dylan is slowly printing from these blocks as part of an ongoing project to give the public access to this important graphic history. This project also considers how issues of Indigenous sovereignty and the International Workers of the World intersected— the IWW always welcomed Black, Indigenous, immigrant and women workers, when this was not always the case for some early unions.

*To Build Up Invincible* was an artist's residency Miner was part of at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit in 2017. For this residency, Dylan used his research, affiliation and mentorship by Wobbly artist Carlos Cortez as a jumping off point to create a series of banners and pennants. Engaging with the local and labour history of the neighbourhood, Miner learned that MOCAD was three blocks away from a former IWW union hall. After a period of engagement with the Wayne State University archives, he used fragments of text from IWW radio broadcasts to create poetic statements and new meaning on a series of red and black banners. Combining radical politics, local histories and movements of indigenous resistance, the banners quote Detroit Wobbly history while referencing local animals of the great lakes, referencing pre-colonial, pre-nation state graphic expression. These banners served as the backdrop of a number of formal and informal public and outreach programs including the creation of a small theatre space inspired by IWW street theatre, a mobile screen printing studio, and a reading room where people could learn more about local history and anti-capitalist histories. A series of banners from the following year installed at Kalamazoo College made of wool applique, display phrases from an oratory in resistance to the Saginaw Treaty of 1819, as well as images of plants, all of which are either medicinal or edible. About this work, titled "The Land is Always," Dylan offers: "Our histories and futurities are simultaneously and fundamentally linked together," urging against the notion that the past is something to be left behind.

The only way I can think to conclude this presentation is to talk about my own experience in between the worlds of art and artifact, art and activism and past and present, while returning to the idea of how what folks today can take from the legacy of union banners and the material culture of the labour movement in an age of inequality and struggle. As a worker in a labour history museum, I have the unique privilege to live and breathe the history of social movements every day. What I've learned and accessed, whether it be people, stories or archives, has informed who I am and my work as an interdisciplinary artist, curator, educator, arts manager and organizer in my local community.

Right now, I'm working with a group of organizers and tenants in Hamilton to fight and raise awareness around displacement related to a massive transit infrastructure project that is leading to the demolition of numerous rental properties across 14 kilometres of the city along a major arterial road. This project has affected mostly Hamilton's working class and working poor residents, who face displacement from their homes and have very few options for affordable housing in a city rife real estate speculation. Just last week, I took part in a banner-making session with some tenants and fellow organizers. We made stencils and painted a banner together, shared food and got to know one another better. This harkens back to the thesis of the All or None exhibition as positioning textile as a metaphor for community and care. The

transcendental pleasure and power of hand making, whether the product of a single pair of hands or several, can be a powerful force in envisioning a better future. As objects, banners have revolutionary possibility to shape collective identity and build collective power. Their continued appearance in the public sphere show that they continue to act as vehicles for collective declarations, demands and identity, and serve as essential tools for democracy.