

GÉRARD HÉBERT

Building Industrial Relations as a Field of Study: The Life and Times of Gérard Dion

Gérard Dion's lifetime quest for healthy and sound industrial relations was a quest for equilibrium between opposite objectives, like change and security, better working conditions and world competitiveness.

THE DEVELOPMENT of industrial relations as an essential field of study during WWII resulted from three factors. The Great

Depression was one, bringing new social mechanisms to help people in difficulty. The 50-year-old trade union movement was another. In the mid-1930s it had enjoyed a second breath of life through the booming locals of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Finally, wartime regulations called for labour and management to present briefs and submissions in order to ensure war production while responding to the concerns of workers.

Back in 1900, William Lyon Mackenzie King, then a young deputy minister in Ottawa, had sensed the future importance of industrial relations and established *The Labour Gazette*. The *Gazette*, a monthly publication, carried vital information concerning the new field of study until 1978. King also drafted the first industrial relations law in North America, the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, which was adopted in 1907.

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During his eight years away from politics (1911-18), King tried to make Queen's University the Canadian counterpart of the Wisconsin School, where the famous John R. Commons was teaching and conducting research on American labour unions. Despite King's efforts, it was not until 1937 that Queen's established its Industrial Relations Section. And it took the industrial problems of the war to propel a few other Canadian universities towards the study and teaching of industrial relations. In the US, the wartime crisis saw the founding of the New York State School of Industrial and Labour Relations at Cornell University in 1945. The only other American programmes at that time were at Princeton and Wisconsin.

To avoid uncontrolled inflation during WWII, the Canadian government had imposed a nationwide wage and price freeze. Management and union representatives had to appear before the War Labour Board to present and defend their cases. Very few possessed the requisite knowledge of law and basic economics. Given the controversial pressures of management and trade unions, some objective analysis of the whole situation was needed.

In response to this situation, a handful of Canadian university professors organized industrial relations studies in their respective institutions: J.C. Cameron at Queen's, H.D. Woods at McGill, Father Emile Bouvier at Montréal, and Abbé Gérard Dion at Laval. Abbé Dion, who passed away in November of last year, enjoyed a career both typical and remarkable in the field.

Born on 5 December 1912, Gérard Dion was brought up in a number of small towns in Beauce and Frontenac counties, south of Quebec City. His father, a station master, moved his family of two boys and eight girls according to his assignments. Dion did his classical studies at Collège de Lévis from 1927. In 1935, he entered the Seminary, and was ordained a priest in 1939. He chose the priesthood, as he would later explain, in order to serve the church and the social community to which he belonged. He was not pushed or pressed by anybody but himself.

After serving one year as a teacher in Collège de Lévis, and another as a curate in Sillery, Quebec, Dion registered in the newly-formed (1938) School of Social Sciences at Laval University. His bishop had agreed, before Dion's ordination, that the young priest would eventually study social sciences. Although working for his Master's degree at Laval, which he received in 1943, he did most of his studies in industrial relations at Queen's and in the US.



Gérard Dion

The School of Industrial Relations at Laval University – whose curriculum Dion was to greatly influence – received its first students in September 1944. The Industrial Relations Section at the Université de Montréal began at about the same time.

While labour disputes had come to preoccupy the public, the only legal framework for handling them was the 1907 Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, which dealt exclusively with major industrial conflicts. The more antiquated Trade Union Act (1872) was almost totally ignored at the time, especially since the Privy Council had placed labour relations questions under provincial jurisdiction in 1925.

The Quebec government had adopted two important acts dealing with collective agreements and professional syndicates, but both were of a voluntary nature. At that time there was no such thing as union certification and mandatory collective bargaining. The US had adopted the Wagner Act – the model of all future North American labour relations – in 1935, after the Supreme Court declared the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional.

Gérard Dion took responsibility of the new Department of Industrial Relations in 1944. The curriculum included, and still includes, both personnel administration and collective (labour-management) relationships, with a special emphasis on trade unions. The

original approach was quite normative: everybody was looking for rules, ways and means to deal with the day-to-day problems. A major subject of study and source of guidance was the social doctrine of the Catholic Church. Other churches had their social doctrines, but the structure and organization of Catholic doctrine made it uniquely valuable. This source helped Dion shape his thinking on social problems, and established a clear distinction in his mind between an analytical and a normative approach.

This is not to say that regular social sciences such as economics and sociology were left aside. On the contrary, they made up the core of subjects required of all students in order to obtain a Master's degree in industrial relations. Economics occupied a favoured niche in the programme. In its infancy the subject of industrial relations was intimately connected with institutional economics.

The sociology of trade unionism was the major teaching contribution of Gérard Dion during his career at Laval, until his partial retirement in 1980. Because of his parallel activity as a consultant (mostly on a voluntary basis) to union leaders, management, government and church authorities, his thousands of former students have always remembered Abbé Dion as a university teacher whose analyses and explanations were deeply rooted in the day-to-day realities of the workplace and the union hall.

A very warm person, Dion excelled in communicating with his students, both in the lecture hall and in his office. In early 1990, students asked him to share his most basic thoughts on faith and social responsibilities. His response was a kind of spiritual and intellectual will and testament, delivered on 21 February 1990 (*Foi chrétienne et responsabilités sociales*)

In the early years of Laval's Industrial Relations programme, Dion was the department's only full-time teacher, secretary, and jack-of-all-trades. For the first decade or so, the director of the department was the deputy minister of labour. With his title of secretary (1944-47), and later associate director (1947-56), Dion gradually came to run the Department. In 1956 he became the official director, a post he held until 1963, when younger colleagues shared the job with him. He became professor emeritus on his retirement from teaching in 1980.

Closely tied to Dion's work as a professor of industrial relations were several major projects. Around September 1945, the beginning of the second year of the Department, he founded the *Bulletin des relations industrielles*, which was published monthly in both French and

English until 1950, when it was renamed *Relations industrielles/Industrial Relations*. Initially Dion was named in the Bulletin as “secrétaire de la rédaction”.¹ He became Director in September 1949, and remained until June 1990.

Dion guided the journal’s development from a monthly bulletin to an internationally respected academic journal. Since the late 1960s, when it became the official publication of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association, the number of articles in English has increased significantly. Over the years, the journal has been open to new ideas and new fields of study, but it has always remained faithful to its wide and basic orientation.² With its current acceptance rate of 25%, the Laval Journal remains a leader among international journals of industrial relations.

Queen’s University began organizing annual conferences at the very beginning of its Industrial Relations Section, in 1937. Dion did the same at Laval for French-speaking Canada as early as 1946. These annual meetings of academics and practitioners have always been extremely successful, bringing hundreds of people to the Chateau Frontenac and later to the Concorde. Dion was the principal organizer of these meetings up until the last few decades, when younger colleagues took over. Dion also served as editor of the published reports on the various conferences, known as the *Congrès des relations industrielles de l’Université Laval*. These proceedings have become a focal point of discussion and reference since their very beginnings. All Canadian universities with industrial relations sections or centres have modelled their programmes after the two pioneers in the field: Queen’s and Laval.

In 1963, Dion joined with Harry Douglas Woods of McGill to establish the Canadian Industrial Relations Association, a body that still meets annually, now with the Learned Societies of Canada. Dion wrote the first draft of the constitution of the Association. The annual meeting attracts between 50 and 100 specialists in industrial relations, mostly academics, but with a good representation of practitioners. About 50 papers are submitted each year.³ At the 1990 meeting in Victoria, Abbé Gérard Dion accepted the Association’s annual award on behalf of the Laval Journal. In his acceptance speech, Dion recounted the evolution of the journal during its 45 years of existence. On that very day, he handed responsibility for the journal to his successor: Professor Jean Sexton.

A milestone in the history of Canadian industrial relations was the

creation, in December 1966, of a Federal Task Force on the subject. It was chaired by Harry Douglas Woods from McGill University; the three other members were Professor John Crispo from the University of Toronto, Dean Alfred W.R. Carrothers of the Faculty of Law at the University of Western Ontario, and Gérard Dion. The Task Force presented its final report in December 1968 (*Canadian Industrial Relations*, 1968). An important product of the report was the bringing together of the most important federal labour laws under the Canada Labour Code of 1970. While all of the recommendations of the report were not immediately translated into legislation, many would become law in the 1970s and 1980s.

One can recognize the influence of Dion in the Task Force's discussion of questions concerning individual versus collective rights. Whether the question was strikes in essential services or ownership of grievances by individuals versus ownership by unions, Dion's philosophical and theological imprint is apparent. The principles that guided Dion throughout his life were clearly employed by the Task Force, both in identifying problems and in devising remedies.

But perhaps the greatest achievement of the Woods Task Force was the launching of an extensive academic research programme to study the problems of industrial relations. No less than 100 different research topics were commissioned by the Task Force and 23 of the studies were subsequently published. This marked the beginning of academic research on industrial relations in Canada. And again, the organization of the research topics reflects an approach familiar to Dion.

But Gérard Dion's major publication, the work of his lifetime, is a Canadian dictionary of labour relations terms: *Dictionnaire canadien des relations du travail*. It was first published in 1976, and Dion prepared a second edition 10 years later with more than 3,000 words, all carefully defined.

Meanings of terms used in industrial relations are often short-lived and quickly changing. Furthermore, some expressions have different shades of meaning in France and in Quebec. Dion took care to emphasize Canadian usage; he tried to be both reflective of the current reality, and normative in the selection of one definite meaning.⁴ A dictionary prepared by one person is a rare phenomenon. Dion received some help on certain categories of words, but he was the chief architect, the true author and the sole patient reviser of this gigantic work.

The idea began to take shape during his very first years as a professor. Then in 1972, he published a French/English glossary of terms used in industrial relations. In the Dictionary, every word is accurately defined, in short or long form, according to the subject. If appropriate, the definition contains examples, historical notes, or legal references. His definitions of words relating to general economic systems, like capitalism and socialism, are extremely well done, revealing how firmly he grasped the meaning of such complex and elusive terms. Beside the definition of each word Dion provides the Anglo-American equivalent. An English index guides the user to the correct French word. A long list of Appendices, with dates, unions, and laws, makes the book even more useful.

It is no surprise that the *Dictionnaire* Dion has become the standard handbook of practitioners, academics, and students of industrial relations across Canada, regardless of whether they happen to be French or English. It provides the basic tools of the trade and serves as a guide for further research on a specific subject. The justices of the Supreme Court of Canada refer to the *Dictionnaire* when they make awards on labour questions.

The huge project – often demanding the full-time efforts of its author – was well worth the effort, according to Dion. Through this comprehensive work he was able to realize the dreams he had formed as a young man. After the publication of the second edition, Dion would jokingly remark, “Before, I thought only a foolish person could embark on such a project; now I know for sure.”

Dion’s opinions were sought by people from all walks of life and all social strata. Throughout his career at Laval, but especially during the first 20 years, he acted as advisor to unions, managers, government, and church authorities. He was instrumental in obtaining key labour laws, but firm in his opposition to legislation he considered misguided or oppressive. Following the Asbestos strike, which received the support of almost all bishops and parish priests in Quebec (by way of after-Mass-collections on the porches of churches), Premier Maurice Duplessis launched a crusade against the unions, especially against the militant Catholic syndicates (Dion, *La grève de l’amiante* 239-63). He introduced Bill 5, which contained so many anti-union provisions that widespread opposition forced its withdrawal. Relations between Duplessis and the Faculty of Social Sciences at Laval deteriorated to the point of open hostility. The feud continued until Duplessis’ death in 1959.

During the 1950s, Dion had started, over and above his other obligations, a monthly bulletin to inform his fellow priests on various aspects of social problems, including industrial relations and political questions. The title of the bulletin was *Perspectives sociales. Ad Usum Sacerdotum*. It was in this bulletin that Dion published, in 1956, his moral analysis of electoral habits. His examination centred on the recent provincial election, in which Duplessis had triumphed through bribery and other unorthodox means.

Duplessis was a bone of contention among church men, even bishops. Some staunchly supported him, while others, like the Archbishop of Montréal, openly condemned many of his tactics and policies. Although couched in general and philosophical terms, Dion's article could only be understood as an attack on Duplessis's electoral tactics. Dion was naturally condemned by Duplessis supporters, but many hailed him as a courageous theologian and social thinker. He was admired for standing up to the powerful premier on moral grounds. This article and several others pertaining to political habits were reprinted in two books which appeared in 1960 and 1961, *Le chrétien et les élections* and *Le chrétien en démocratie*. Many people outside the field of industrial relations who had never heard of Gérard Dion came to know and admire him through this political controversy.

One of Dion's most cherished experiences was his involvement in the Joint Committee of the Textile Industry. The industry had suffered extremely strained labour relations for many years: almost every bargaining round had ended with a difficult and often violent strike. In 1967, at an Economic Council of Canada symposium, the presidents of a number of major textile companies decided to try to implement a joint council, an innovation that had seen great success elsewhere. But the unions involved were deeply suspicious of management's motives.

The presidents appealed to Dion, who chaired a meeting, to convince the union leaders that management was serious in its desire to engage in problem-solving dialogue. Dion devised a list of conditions that was acceptable to the company presidents. He then convinced the union leaders to hold at least one meeting to discuss the proposal. Despite the union leaders' initial misgivings, the meeting was successful. The Joint Committee was established and Gérard Dion was still its president when he died in November 1990.

While external pressures on the textile industry – chiefly foreign competition – certainly contributed the Committee's success, the hard

work and tactful diplomacy of Abbé Dion were crucial to the new relationship. He kept discussions at a high level of intellectual exchange and mutual respect. The textile joint committee – Dion's committee – has enjoyed the longest existence of all such joint experiments.

The success of Dion in all fields of industrial relations is reflected in the many degrees and honorary titles he has received. He was elected a member of the Royal Society of Canada in 1961, an officer of the Order of Canada in 1973, and an officer of the National Order of Quebec in 1986. He was a Killam fellow in 1975 and 1976. He received honorary doctorates from the following universities: McGill in 1975, British Columbia in 1976, St Francis Xavier (Antigonish) in 1977, Toronto in 1978, and Concordia in 1980. He received the annual award of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association in 1982, was made an honorary member of the Corporation des conseillers en relations industrielles du Québec in 1984, and received the William Dawson Medal of the Royal Society of Canada in 1987.

To summarize the character of Gérard Dion and how well his character fit the field of industrial relations one should mention first his uprightness and honesty, both morally and intellectually. He was a staunch defender of working people and trade unions throughout his life, as his strong opposition to Maurice Duplessis demonstrated. But Dion also opposed, at a later date, the national syndicates, to which he had been an adviser for many years; he did so when the CNTU started to defend Marxist principles rather than the workers themselves. For the past 10 years or so, he repeatedly noted that the most conservative groups in Canadian society may well be the trade unions. He used to say with a twinkle in his eye, "Every group, at some time, calls itself into question, including the Roman Catholic Church; but the trade unions are still refusing to do so." The latin axiom comes to mind: *amicus Plato, magis amica veritas*.

His righteousness and loyalty were deeply rooted in his religious beliefs and convictions. He was a devout and devoted Christian; but at the same time, he displayed an unlimited open-mindedness and an indefatigable esteem for intellectual freedom. As mentioned earlier, the period in which Dion began his academic career was profoundly influenced by Catholic doctrine, which caused him to value clarity of concepts, structure of reasoning and the importance of basic philosophical principles. He felt that all of these principles were especially valuable in establishing social and business ethics. To the end, his overriding concern was for working people and the poorer members of society.

When Dion died, he was working with a committee of intellectuals and practitioners preparing the centennial celebration of Pope Leo XIII's leading 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Following his death, the group took the name of Cercle Gérard Dion, to honour his memory and his devotion to Catholic social teaching.

Throughout his career, but more so in its first half, Dion pursued many social activities, which served as a complement, a laboratory, and an inspiration for his academic duties. He acted as a regular consultant – almost always for free – to all sorts of groups: cooperatives, credit unions, labour unions, and management groups. Such involvement has made Dion one of the most appreciated professors in the field. His students remember him as an excellent analyst, offering them all the needed theoretical instruments and, more importantly, a thorough and convincing knowledge of the field itself.

Dion had one very special characteristic. He was always preoccupied with helping his fellow professionals and his fellow men and women. He was the one on whom his students and former students would call when they had questions or problems. Even his life as an intellectual reveals his human and social character. His two major accomplishments stem from that preoccupation. He could have written numerous articles and many books, but he chose to devote most of his time to the Journal and to the Dictionary. Both are irreplaceable tools for professionals in industrial relations. Service in every form was his life's work.

Dion was a remarkable industrial relations professional because of his wonderful personal and human qualities. He was a happy man. He carried his happiness from his childhood and involvement in family life – he was president of l'Association des Dion d'Amérique – as well as from his solid faith in Christ. Even during the final years of his life, when he was subjected to mean and wily actions on the part of some colleagues and university administrators, he still maintained that he was a happy man.

He was also a simple man, open and helpful to any person he happened to meet. He loved everyone with dignity and heartfelt emotion, including the Sunday parishioners for whom he said Mass. His funeral, at his request, had no official ceremony nor dignitary representation, only Dion's family, his friends from the university and the industrial relations community, the clergy, and his Sunday parishioners.

He was lucid and clear-minded to the very last moments of his life. Talking to students in February 1990, he underlined the necessary equilibrium between two excesses that must always be pursued in

industrial relations: it is just as bad, he said, to spread unhealthy fears as to evoke false and impossible expectations, or to try and use hatred in order to develop solidarity.

G rard Dion's lifetime quest for healthy and sound industrial relations was a quest for equilibrium between opposite objectives, like change and security, better working conditions and world competitiveness. Reading over again *Le chr tien et les  lections* is a very enlightening experience: most of Dion's observations at that time are still valid today; one just needs to change a few names and institutions.

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- 1 The first person named as "secr taire de la r daction" was Jean-Pierre Despr s, who left the department soon after for outside work. G rard Dion was, in fact, the only director of the journal for its first 45 years of existence.
 - 2 This is in contrast to the mathematical orientation that the Cornell journal has shown but has declared, in its recent policy paper not to be its only approach, insisting more on the basic institutions of industrial relations. *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, vol. 44, No. 1 (October 1990), 3-4.
 - 3 Proceedings of the annual meetings of the Canadian Industrial Relations Association (CIRA) have been published regularly since CIRA's fifteenth meeting in 1978.
 - 4 Two reviews of the *Dictionnaire* appeared – one by Alton W.J. Craig, the other by G rard H bert – in *Relations industrielles-Industrial Relations*, vol. 41, No. 3, 1986, 644-50.
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