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‘It is a glue to movement building’: Arts, culture, labour celebrated at Workers Arts and Heritage Centre

The Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, here in Hamilton, is one place where the art, music, culture and heritage of labour and of the working classes are never ignored or understated.

By Jeff Mahoney

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“The Art of Solidarity: Labour Arts and Heritage in Canada,” is published by Between the Lines press.
Between the Lines press

How does one measure the true value of art and music in our society?

Here’s a way: If a song, a marching chant, painting or poster helps arouse one to become two and then two to become three and four and then 1,000 and if that or 10,000, collectively, can act to seize a living wage — or redress exploitation and injustice — that’s value. Measurable.

Book launch

What “The Art of Solidarity: Labour Arts and Heritage in Canada”

When Sunday, Aug. 31, 3 to 5 p.m.

Where Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, 51 Stuart St., Hamilton

The art of posters, workers’ ballads, chants and anthems, labour songs and the culture of collective resistance and solidarity, especially around the workplace and issues of inequality — are often ignored or undervalued in a society that has trouble recognizing itself in the mirror.

Of course it does. A society that teaches children the words to “God Save the King” but not how to creatively organize to protect the quality of their rights and, later, their working lives, is a society in crisis. Identity crisis.

The Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, here in Hamilton, is one place where the art, music, culture and heritage of labour and of the working classes are never ignored or undervalued. They’re too busy being celebrated and understood.

“Art of Solidarity” book contributors attend a roundtable discussion at the Workers’ Arts and Heritage Centre in June 2025.
Rob Kristofferson

The heritage centre in recent years has reached across the country to other organizations, museums, galleries, collectives to help co-ordinate and unify their work or at least share their stories.

The effort to do so began in earnest in 2016 with plans for a conference. Those plans got interrupted by COVID-19, then came to fruition with a successful interprovincial meeting here in 2023.

And now the centre is launching a book, “The Art of Solidarity: Labour Arts and Heritage in Canada,” published by Between the Lines press. It draws on the spirit of that 2023 event and the connections and energy that led to it and grew out of it.

The book, edited by Rob Kristofferson and Stephanie Ross, features essays and articles by several of its participants and others.

“We convened the national conference to begin to have a conversation about the work we were all doing,” said Ross, a labour studies professor at McMaster University. “We wanted to bring together a sharing of resources and see what would come out, with the potential for a book in mind.”

Stephanie Ross.
Supplied photo

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The book ranges widely over time periods and subject matter. It includes a look at the modern history of labour art-culture and starts with the Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts in the Greater Toronto-Hamilton-Kitchener Area, which began in 1986 and continues to this day.

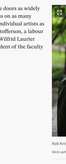
It runs through the origins and progress of the centre itself and sweeps broadly across such local and provincial initiatives as the Alberta Labour History Institute, B.C. Labour Heritage Centre, Toronto Workers’ History Project, commemoration of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, Mayworks Kjipuktuk Halifax and much more.

“The Art of Solidarity” also highlights the work of many labour artists, musicians and other culture and heritage workers in a series of artist profiles.

Part two of the book begins with an examination of the work of acclaimed conceptual artists Karl Beveridge and Carole Condé, who have been pioneers of labour and social justice-based art for more than 30 years.

Other artists featured are Arlene Mantle, Kevin Barrett; Don Bourek, Ground Zero Productions; Maria Dunn; Mik Sook Lee; and Kwentong Bayan Collective.

“We tried to open the doors as widely as we could and focus on as many organizations” and individual artists as they could, said Kristofferson, a labour studies professor at Wilfrid Laurier University and president of the faculty union there.



Rob Kristofferson.
Nick LaChance

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“But it’s the tip of the iceberg.”

The hope is, said Ross and Kristofferson, the book will lead to other projects and collaborations.

The importance of the arts and recognition of working-class heritage is ever more pressing as labour and working people adapt themselves to the times.

“It (labour art and heritage) is a glue to movement building,” said Ross.

The labour period, the role of the arts and heritage was a diminished one” by today’s standards, said Kristofferson. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the culture of labour education tended toward technical aspects of effective bargaining and grievance.

As manufacturing ebbed from dominance as a sector in the economy and of the labour force so did labour and workers advocacy adapt by drawing itself more squarely up against inequalities, abuses and underrepresentation affecting the marginalized, said Ross and Kristofferson.

Arts, culture, storytelling and self-recognition grew in prominence as tools of empowerment. “The labour arts are derived from working-class experience” in all aspects of life, not just the workplace, said Ross.

The transition has not been without growing pains for labour organizations like the centre and others represented in this book and at the 2023 conference.

Kristofferson noted the traditional sources of revenue, donation and support for such organizations as the centre began to wane as the strength of traditional jobs and the unions representing them began to wane.

“The Art of Solidarity,” an urgent, informative and important book, concludes with part three: a look ahead at workers culture in a section called “Envisioning the Future of Labour Arts and Labour Heritage.”

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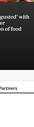
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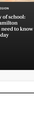
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